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## **MindWar**

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# **MINDWAR**

by

Darrell Bain

To all of our teachers, and in particular to Patricia Pass, Colleen Cargill and Linda Ward, the three in our immediate family. Teachers aren't given nearly the recognition and rewards they deserve.

## BOOK ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

The operation was designed as a direct hit to one of the most vulnerable institutions in the United States: the public school systems. In the age of terrorism, the thunderous clap of explosives, scenes of airplanes crashing into buildings, and suicide bombers were epidemic, but such events had become increasingly hard to bring to the North American continent. Explosives could be traced. Commercial aircraft were well guarded. Lone gunmen or car bombers simply couldn't cause enough casualties at one time to make a major impact on the psyche of the United States of America as 9/11 had achieved. Something better and easier to deliver was needed. Something that would make an even bigger impact.

Jamail Akmuhd thought he had the answer. He had studied the history of the precursor to the weapon he planned to use. It was developed a hundred years before in World War I when mustard gas and chlorine gas were first used on the battlefield—chemical warfare. Such weapons were refined further and became much more lethal during the long cold war between communism and democracy in the latter part of the previous century. Hideous biological and chemical weapons such as mutated smallpox, lethal viruses, and nerve gases so deadly a small amount might suffice to kill millions were developed but never used.

Jamail was well aware that the problem with most of those agents was in the delivery. Gases dissipate. Viruses mutate and die out, and vaccines may be created to negate their effect. Nerve agents were nice, Jamail had found, if only they didn't have to vaporize and be inhaled, or skin contact wasn't necessary. Fortunately, for his purposes, there was a renegade Muslim chemist from Russia on the loose who had previously worked in the development of the nerve agents for the defunct USSR. He had managed to make his way to the Middle East where his path had fortuitously crossed with Jamail's.

Jamail had more than adequate financing and the means to get into the United States. Boris Androvsky had a burning hatred of the West and was in desperate need of money in his old age. He also had knowledge of a perfect agent for terrorist warfare, one which would strike fear into the very soul of The Great Satan. The two men seemed to be made for each other.

Boris had developed a formula for a pernicious nerve agent that, when added to food or drink, became effective upon ingestion. Its tiny individual molecules were able to resist digestion long enough to reach the bloodstream and could, therefore, be carried to the brain. The molecules had a special affinity for the neurons of brain tissue. There it caused symptoms mimicking those of viral diseases such as Saint Louis Encephalitis, West Nile Virus, and the like, but this agent carried a much higher morbidity rate than the viruses. It worked by an entirely different physiological process. Andovsky had never produced more of the agent than what was necessary for his experiments while working in the USSR, nor had he brought any notes on manufacturing methods of the nerve agent out of the country with him. However, Andovsky had something just as good as a whole book of notes: a near eidetic memory. He didn't have to commit the information to paper or digital format. Or so he thought.

When the treaty that banned biological and chemical warfare was signed into law by the new Russian government, Boris Andovsky was suddenly without a job and with no means of support. His whole career had been focused on nerve agents. When the terrorists began to redouble their efforts after 9/11, he began to make cautious inquiries into several of the most prominent terrorist organizations in the Muslim world.

What Jamail really liked about Boris' nerve agent was that it was so incredibly effective that it could be efficiently concentrated for the couriers and later diluted back up to aliquots still easy to handle and transport. It was almost perfect in that it could be easily smuggled across the porous borders between Canada or Mexico by human mules. They didn't even have to know what it was, only where to leave it

once across the border. One small vial could be diluted and disguised as cologne or mouthwash and still retain sufficient strength to be again diluted to parts per tens of thousands in food or drink.

Boris and Jamail came to a meeting of minds. For the moment, they both were unknown to authorities and were able to travel without difficulty. With Jamail's money, they set up shop in a corner of a small pharmaceutical factory in Mexico that manufactured legal cough suppressant, aspirin, and other generic medicines. The company also produced some illegal non-generic drugs, which it had no license for, but underpaid inspectors and policemen were very cooperative. All the products were sloppily produced and of varying degrees of effectiveness, but the packaging was very professional and almost impossible to distinguish from the legitimate variety. Jamail simply provided enough money for space in the factory and the use of a few of their technicians. While this was going on, Jamail set up his sleeper agents in the United States. Kitchen workers were always in demand because of the turnover was so high in the low paying jobs. Within a few months, he and Boris were finished at the pharmaceutical company, the sleeper agents were ready, and the plan moved on.

Boris flew to England, quite legitimately, while Jamail made his way across the border into the United States by less approved methods; however, he arrived there nevertheless, along with his covey of mules who transported the supply of nerve agent. A few were caught, but their cargo was adequately disguised and so innocuous that it would never be analyzed even if confiscated. The very few mules who were caught dropped their cargo to the ground and left it to mingle with the rest of the detritus littering both sides of the border.

The last stage of Jamail's journey took him to Houston, Texas where he quickly became lost among its multiethnic population and met with his mules. He collected the concentrated nerve agent from them and cautiously began his travels, contacting his sleeper agents. He passed out his supplies of the nerve agent along with instructions on how and where to use it on the target date. Jamail wanted it all to happen as near to that date as possible. Boris had suggested that it be insinuated into milk supplies of schools, but that proved too difficult; Jamail settled on pudding. That would work just as well, and it was almost always served once a week. He passed that bit of information on to his agents and went on his way, happy in the knowledge that the strike couldn't be halted now. *Soon, he thought. Soon, and the Great Satan will know the pain I felt when my children died under the bombs of the cursed Americans in Iraq. The pain will be repaid a hundred, a thousand times, and if I remain free, I can do the whole thing over and over again.* It was such a wonderful feeling that he even went to a mosque and prayed for the first time since he lost his family. Perhaps Allah was merciful after all!

After that, Jamail waited. Even after the first few schools were seeded and the poison ingested, it would be days before symptoms began to appear. That was what was so wonderful about it! By then, other schools would have been struck. After all, who ever inspected the pudding in schools? Just thinking about the havoc and death and the idea that he could inflict the tears and pain he had suffered upon others, caused him to hug himself in the delicious agony of anticipation. All in all, the pudding in four high schools, three middle schools, and one primary school were laced with the chemical. They were located in different cities in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Jamail could hardly wait to see how many deaths he caused.

When the first children began falling ill, he was almost beside himself. After a while, his enthusiasm waned and then vanished altogether.

The children weren't dying! In the name of Allah, why weren't they dying? They weren't even becoming seriously ill; they just became sickened enough to merit outpatient medical attention. Only some of the youngest primary school students required hospitalization. The older ones were treated by doctors in their offices and were back in school a day or two later. If it hadn't been for the fact that the same

symptoms were evident at so many different locations, terrorism wouldn't have been suspected at all; it would have been passed off as an unidentified case of mild food poisoning.

Jamail became so sleep deprived and deranged because of the failure of his great plan that he loaded his machine pistol and went on a suicidal shooting rampage at a primary school parking lot just as classes were letting out. He slaughtered a dozen children and several adults before he was gunned down by the lone policeman on duty.

Had Jamail Akmuhd stuck around to see the ultimate result of his great plan he would probably have remained alive long enough to look up Boris Androvsky and personally torture him to death. As it was, Jamail's cohorts did the job for him despite the Russian's pleas for mercy. Even though it was the old chemist's memory of the chemical formula that went slightly wrong, failure on that large a scale, which resulted in the eventual arrest of many of Jamail's cohorts, was not tolerated. He was shot five times in the belly and left in a locked room to die in agony.

## CHAPTER TWO

Sean Casey hadn't expected any resistance to his presence when he arrived at Mountain Grove Memorial Hospital. After all, he was an FBI Special Agent investigating the terrorist attack at the primary school in this little city. They should be grateful to have him here instead of questioning his motives. Damn the woman. He had been looking forward to interviewing her, hoping there would be a chance of seeing the little girl, perhaps alone. *Maybe ...* he shook the thought away. What was he thinking? Not the place for that.

"You'll be getting an official letter," Casey explained. "We're just visiting selected parents in the meantime, collecting additional information."

Pat Morrison raised her blond, untrimmed eyebrows at the FBI agent slightly. "Uh huh. And how are you deciding which parents to select? It's not a random process, I take it."

In the little conference room Memorial Hospital had provided for them, Doctor Bailey Jones smiled silently inside at the way Mrs. Morrison had jumped on the lapse. *No fooling this young lady*, he thought with a psychologist's perceptiveness. Jones was also a physician, a neurologist. He had joined the woman in the conference room at her request.

"Well, you did have a child who came down with the food poisoning. And you are a teacher at the school. That makes you a bit special. Now..."

"Other parents fit in that category. Why me?" Patricia Morrison didn't mind answering questions so much as she did the attempt by the FBI Special agent to deceive her.

"Believe me. It's just routine, Mrs. Morrison." Casey said.

Bailey noted the way the agent's face had colored a little and the pulse in his throat speed up. Dead giveaways.

"No, it's not routine. You're asking me questions because my daughter was one of the sickest children who came down with this stuff and because I'm a teacher. Why didn't you just say so?" Pat felt her irritation level being breached. *Special Agent! What's so damn special when every one of them was "Special Agent so and so?"* she wondered. She crossed her long slim legs and smoothed her skirt back out. It still didn't reach her knees. She met the FBI agent's bland countenance with a steady gaze from her blue eyes, forcing him to either stare back at her or look away. Finally, he looked away. He wasn't used to such reticence—or such astuteness.

Bailey admired her attitude. "Why don't you just tell her, Casey? It's not like you're going to endanger the country, nor is it a big secret. Anyone with a lick of sense would want to know why a few kids were sicker than others, and it's natural that teachers would be questioned. Isn't that right, Mrs. Morrison?"

That drew a smile when she answered Bailey, looking directly at him and ignoring Sean Casey. "Call me Patricia. Or better still, Pat. I don't like formality. And, of course, I want to know why. So would Melissa Johnson, for that matter. We both teach second grade. Her little boy got real sick, too, just like Amber did. They're the same age."

Bailey gave her a smile back with his nod, thinking to himself what a pretty young woman she was, her blond hair tumbling in casual waves to her shoulders and her face enhanced with the slightest amount of makeup. The only thing that even partially marred her beauty was the noticeable tiredness on her face



from long hours spent at the hospital with her daughter. For the first time, he noticed the lack of a ring on her finger.

Special Agent Casey simply looked disgusted. His official face couldn't hide that emotion. "Maybe psychologists know more about this than the FBI," he commented sarcastically.

Bailey switched his smile to the agent, though he wasn't feeling particularly friendly toward the man. He disliked bureaucracy and secretiveness as much in investigative agencies as he did in medicine. "In this case, perhaps I do. Did I mention when I introduced myself that I'm a physician as well as psychologist?"

"Are you in charge of Amber's case?"

"I've been appointed Charge Physician for all the cases at Memorial Hospital. Look, Agent Casey, all Ms.... all Pat is asking for is honesty. Be straight with her, and you won't have a problem."

"I have my orders," Casey said tightly.

"Then allow me," Bailey said and began speaking without waiting for permission. "Pat, we—and the infection control specialists—have pretty well settled on pudding as the causative agent. Perhaps they ate more than others?"

"I could ask the children but I rather doubt it. They usually eat their own desserts," Pat said.

"Then it's probably just their age. Less body mass for the same amount of poison ingested. That's what we think," Bailey said.

"Doctor Jones, is ... have you found any more out about what the disease is?"

"Not exactly, other than the pudding was contaminated by an odd chemical. I think you can rest easy, though. I looked at Amber's chart before escorting Mister Casey here. She's doing well and should make a full recovery."

"That's Special Agent Casey, Doctor Jones."

Bailey made a cynical tilt to one side of his mouth. "As you wish. However, I've always failed to understand why you're all called Special Agents—other than by order of Mister Hoover. It would seem the designation would distract from the truly special ones."

"We're all special," Casey argued, not very convincingly.

Pat laughed at the doctor voicing the identical idea that had entered her mind, but seeing the look on Casey's face, she stifled it. *No sense in really antagonizing the man*, she thought. "Special Agent Casey, I have no objection to answering reasonable questions. After all, I'm as anxious as anyone else to find out all we can about this thing. Amber was very sick for a time there."

"Yes, it seems as if the younger the child, the more serious the symptoms were," Bailey commented.

Casey didn't add anything. He took out his recorder, went through the formalities of ascent from the subject, time, date and place, and then began.

"Doctor Jones is correct in the assumption that pudding was the causative agent. Or rather contaminated pudding. What we need to know is how much your child ate, what unusual occurrences..."

"Amber," Pat interrupted him sharply.

"Yes, Amber. How much did she eat, and did she do it all at once?"

"It was all at once. Are you a doctor? Those seem like medical questions to me."

"We want to compare how the terrorists did it at the other schools, too."

Pat sighed. "Okay, go ahead."

"Fine. Now, how long afterward was it that your child, Amber, began developing symptoms?"

"I noticed the next morning when I woke her up at six. She was a couple of days ahead of the most of the other kids."

"Good. She's how old?"

"All that's in her chart," Bailey said impatiently. "I told you that you could have access to it."

"I have to follow set procedures, doctor, just as I imagine you have to in your line of work." He turned back to Pat. "Could you tell me what else she had with the meal and..." He went on to solicit an interminable amount of information, most of which Bailey couldn't see the point of.

"I think that will be all for now," Casey said a half hour later. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"You're welcome. So when will we know what the agent was?"

"When Homeland Security decides to release—that is, when we discover all the constituents of the agent and its reactions in the body. You'll be notified, as will the other parents. I may have occasion to visit you again." He nodded and left.

"That man is probably a good example of why people sometimes don't cooperate with FBI agents," Bailey said. "I'm sorry you had to go through all that."

Pat examined the doctor. She liked him already. He was on the edge of being thin and not terribly handsome, though he did have nice brown eyes and a friendly smile that compensated for his somewhat substandard appearance. Glasses in wide black frames distracted attention from his balding forehead and gave him a scholarly appearance. "It's all right. I guess bureaucrats are the same no matter which agency they work for. Did I hear you right, that you're a psychologist as well as a doctor?"

"Yes, though I limit the number of patients I see. Mostly I teach and write and do consultations. Very dull."

Pat wrinkled her brow. "I'm curious. Why were you put in charge of the cases here?"

"Probably because the administration thought it would go over well to have a psychologist as well as physician overseeing the cases of food poisoning since it's gotten out that it was indeed a terrorist attack." He grinned appealingly. "And with me, they get two for the price of one."

"Are you going to try psychoanalyzing all of us or recommend counseling?" She spoke as if she didn't think much of either option.

"I'm not a psychoanalyst, just a psychologist. And no, I won't recommend counseling unless the parents ask for it. I don't see a whole lot of need other than a few cases where the parents became hysterical. There's no cause, really, at least, not that I can see. All the kids are making a full recovery, even the young ones like Amber. I'm very glad of that, by the way. She's been a good patient."

"Thank you. When can Amber leave?"

"That's up to your regular physician, but so far as I'm concerned, tomorrow will be fine."

"Good. Our medical insurance at school doesn't cover everything. Not that anyone can understand all the paperwork and provisions anyway."

"Right you are. Our medical system has become so convoluted that the only way I see to ever fix it is to junk everything and start over, which is neither here nor there. Unless you have some questions, we need to finish up. The next set of parents will be here momentarily, and I imagine our friend Casey will be waiting, too."

"No, no questions right now. Will I see you again?"

"If you like, I can drop back by tomorrow."

"I'd like that. Thank you." She smiled sweetly at him.

"Um fine."

*My God, he's blushing!* Pat thought as she left the conference room to go back and be with her daughter. *Maybe I ought to find out if he's married or not. It's been long enough.*

## CHAPTER THREE

"It was intended to kill them all," Ray Hetrick, SAIC in charge of the investigation into the school poisoning, declared. "No doubt about that, it being a nerve agent. It's just our good luck that they never tested it in pudding. Our lab thinks the combination of some of the short chain molecules in pudding altered the chemical binding properties just enough so that it lost its lethal effectiveness. However, it did pass into the bloodstream and apparently bonded with some neurons that caused the typical symptoms of twitching and dizziness or stupor, depending on the age of the kids. Unfortunately, we failed to find the instigator before he killed himself. That just came in, by the way. From what I read, he was so pissed when the nerve agent didn't work like it was supposed to that he went berserk and shot up a schoolyard. However, he didn't bother emptying his pockets and his wallet gave us an address. If we're lucky, we may find evidence taken from his home that will lead us to other of the terrorist organizations. All of those goddamned fanatics are associated with each other these days."

"So what do we do now?" Sean Casey asked. Hetrick was winding down an hour-long debriefing of the team that had been assigned to investigate the attack.

Hetrick shrugged. "We've done about all we can, at least for now, and some of our specialists will follow up. The people in charge of national school security will take care of implementing a lot of new precautions to prevent such a thing happening again. Tests on all drinks and so forth. If they *can* prevent it, which I doubt. In the meantime, we'll ask for extra funding to try getting advance leads on any other of the terrorists who may be working on chemical agents. Schools aren't the only places where our food supply is vulnerable. They could just as well have posed as day laborers at dairy farms and began the contamination there. Or where fruit juice is processed. Or cafeterias. The possibilities are boundless. Any more questions?"

There were none.

"Okay. The task force is disbanded. You'll all receive letters of commendation that will be placed in your personnel files. You're also being given a comp day off to make up for the overtime you put in. Check back in with your assignment supervisor after you leave here to find out what you'll be doing next. Thank you."

Casey thought they might have done better had they been allowed to lean heavier on the ones, like the Morrison bitch, who had given the FBI trouble. No wonder she was divorced, a ball buster like that.

\* \* \* \*

Pat thought it was a fortunate that Melissa Gomez and she owned homes right next door to each other and each taught second grade at the big primary school in Mountain Grove, a small city in southern Arkansas. It wasn't even stretching coincidence that Melissa taught Amber and Pat taught Melissa's son Jimmy, a second grader in one of the other of the three second grade classes.

"How's Jimmy doing?" she asked when she saw Melissa driving up in her Toyota just as she had been taking Amber from her own car. The small garage was still too cluttered with unpacked boxes to maneuver her car into it, so she parked in the driveway.

Melissa's face brightened. "Oh, Jimmy came home yesterday. He's doing great. No problems at all now. Hi Amber!" She waved at Pat's daughter.

"Hello, Mrs. Gomez. I've been to the hospital! Is Jimmy home?"

"He's here, Amber, but the doctor said to keep him quiet for the weekend. You can play after school Monday. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Thank you," Pat instructed her daughter.

"Oh. Thank you, Mrs. Gomez. I forgot."

"That's all right. You get well now and I'll see you at school Monday. Okay?"

"Yes'm."

"I'd better get her into the house," Pat said. "The doctor told me the same thing. Keep her quiet for the weekend."

"I'll call you a little later after. Joe leaves on his route today," Melissa Gomez said.

Pat took Amber on into the house and to her room. After unloading her car, she prepared a quick meal, and she and Amber ate. Throughout the meal, Pat smiled fondly at her daughter who was chattering away just as if nothing had happened. She sighed, finally letting all her worry dissipate. One more crisis behind her. She wondered idly how many more she would have before her life finally settled back down. The divorce had been traumatic and expensive, more from having to pay off debts run up by Tony's gambling than anything else. She wondered briefly, not for the first time, how she could have been fooled so badly and then pushed the thought away. It was over, damn it, and there was no sense going back and reliving the experience. She gazed again at her daughter's serious brown eyes and long brown hair and thought about the fact that Amber was one of the few good things that came from the marriage.

\* \* \* \*

Pat kept a close watch on Amber for the next few weeks, looking for signs that she had been changed or damaged by the chemical she had ingested. She remembered very plainly how scared she had been when Amber's doctor had at first suspected encephalitis after the food poisoning. *The terrorist attack*, she amended mentally, *That's what the media outlets are calling it now*. Occasionally she shivered inside, thinking how close it had been.

She wondered, *Suppose they had poisoned the water instead of the milk? How many would have died? Or would any have? No one really knew since it was an unknown nerve agent that had been used, but if it had worked as it was meant to ...* Suddenly a horrible thought occurred to her. *Maybe what happened was exactly what the terrorists had intended? Was there a delayed effect not apparent yet?* She shook her head as if trying to wave away the thoughts that plagued her like a cloud of gnats. Surely not. No, it was just luck that pudding had been used, and more luck now that it was being reported that the Russian scientist who had concocted the nerve agent was dead, killed by the very ones he had been working with. Reporters were saying he had been traced through computer files found at a terrorist's home, the one who had shot up that school.

*Serves him right*, Pat thought. *Every damn terrorist on earth should be sent straight to hell!* She put the episode firmly out of her mind. She had to get on with her life. It wasn't much yet, but that would change. The divorce from that damned irresponsible Tony was in the past, too. Perhaps she would meet another man she could love and still have a good life for her and Amber. Though, for now, Amber was her first priority. She didn't even intend to date again until Amber could fully accept the presence of another man besides her father in their lives. Not that he had been around much in the last year or so before she threw him out, but still...

\* \* \* \*

Bailey Jones wasn't as completely satisfied at the outcome of the terrorist attack as everyone else seemed to be. While all the students survived, he was still puzzled at the distinctive age/severity correlation, almost a straight line when it was graphed. Why should it have attacked young children so much more severely than older ones? The first through third graders were the ones he was concerned about. Most of them had gone into a stupor-like coma for two days before gradually coming out of it. Three of the children had been very ill indeed.

He pulled up the CAT scans again. Unfortunately, there wasn't much basis for comparison; all looked more or less alike except for the one where an undiagnosed tumor had been discovered. Just like the last time he had compared them. There had only been two PET Scans taken of the children at Memorial Hospital before it was discovered that not only did the medical insurance not pay for them in this case, but the Chief of Neurology had ruled them unnecessary. Bailey had just discovered them in the files. Now he pulled those two up and examined them for the first time. They had been ordered by two different doctors.

Bailey was intrigued. Right now he dearly wished he had been placed in charge of the children right away and had ordered PET scans on each of them though he knew he probably wouldn't have done so until after examining the encephalographic studies first. By the time he'd gotten around to PET Scans, the patients were already recovering. However, if he had seen something like the images being displayed on the big screen in front of him right now, he would have become highly excited.

Positronic Emission Spectography showed physiologic images of tissue, enabling doctors to sometimes evaluate tissue function rather than just gross structure. The two PET scans had been ordered after the physicians noted that even though the stupor the children fell into resembled encephalitis in some ways, it was distinctly different in others. Like here.

The images clearly showed increased activity in the brain behind the temples on the left side, the superior temporal sulcus and just above it, a part of the brain called Broca's Area. Those were the same areas that were being intensely studied by the neuroscience community. They were occupied by mirror neurons, a special type of brain cell which mirrors not only the actions, but also the sensations and emotions of others in close proximity.

Bailey had been interested in mirror neurons ever since he had gotten his psychology degree and kept up his interest as a neurologist. They had been touted as the "empathy cells" or the "mind reading cells" by the press, though Bailey knew they were no such thing. Or if by some remote chance mirror cells enabled people to read minds, it was a very long way from being proven yet. Most of the newest research was being done with autistic children after it was discovered they had a deficit of mirror cells, which lead to their failure in understanding normal human behavior.

Of course, genetic and environmental factors interacted with mirror cells, as he knew was always the case with genetic traits, but scientists were slowly untangling the morass of what mirror cells actually did and did not do. But why had that nerve agent stimulated the portion of the brain containing mirror cells? And why had the phenomenon even been observable while the patients were unconscious, when normally mirror cells only showed activity when one person was observing another? Were the two PET scans simply flukes and perfectly normal for those two children?

It had been six months, and it was time for a psychological follow up of the children, at least for those who were willing to come in. There was certainly no requirement that they do so. Perhaps, during the evaluations, he could think of legitimate reasons for ordering PET scans on more of them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Pat, are you going to take Amber in?" Melissa Gomez asked her friend. Her dark complexioned face clearly showed her worry and confusion that arrived with the letter she had received from Doctor Jones suggesting a psychological evaluation as a follow up on the children who had been hospitalized after the terror attack. Melissa was at Pat Morrison's home the same evening she had received the letter, already sipping coffee. Pat always had some ready.

"Let me see." Pat scanned the formal letter quickly, looked up at Melissa, and handed it back. "It's the same thing I got. I hate to take Amber out of school for a day, but she's doing so well I doubt it will hurt anything."

"Jimmy's grades have improved, too," Melissa said. "He was just an average student before, but now he's making almost all outstanding."

"Hmm. I guess he's studying more. I wish I could say the same for Amber. She's reading and using the net more, but it's hardly ever related to her school subjects."

"But Jimmy's not studying more! He did at first, but now ... I think his English has improved a lot. Maybe that's it. I think maybe Joe made a mistake trying to keep him speaking both English and Spanish. Maybe it was confusing him, huh?"

"Could be," Pat conceded, but she wasn't so sure. "You know, Jimmy is much brighter than you give him credit for; he's just interested in subjects we don't teach at school, but he does pay more attention in class now. He watches me a lot. He watches the other kids too, but it seems like he's much quieter than he used to be. So is Amber, for that matter."

Melissa's brow wrinkled with thought. She knew she wasn't nearly as intelligent as her friend, but it had never made a difference between them. Besides, Joe was smart enough for both of them, and she knew she was a good teacher. Pat frequently commented on how well her students did in her friend's class when they team taught. Melissa knew she wasn't very good with math, and Pat didn't care much for the crafts classes like she did. It worked out well for them. "Do you think it means anything?"

"I'm not sure," Pat said slowly. "I think I will make an appointment, though, and see what Doctor Jones has to say."

"I guess I'll do the same for Jimmy, then. I hope nothing is wrong."

"So do I," Pat agreed. "But relax. I'm sure it's just routine."

\* \* \* \*

Pat dressed carefully, wondering why at first, but then remembering that despite Doctor Jones not being very good looking, he had impressed her in some fundamental way that made him seem attractive. Nothing had come of the second meeting with him, but she suspected it might be shyness on his part, that or the fact that he didn't want to become involved with a patient's parent. *Perhaps his appeal has something to do with how he handled that FBI agent so cleverly*, she thought. *Or perhaps it was the twinkle in his eyes behind his dark framed glasses. I've dwelt on both long enough, for all the good it'll do me.* Nevertheless, she eyed herself in the bathroom mirror to see if she still approved of the pastel blouse and pants she wore and went to dress Amber.

"Why are we going to the hospital, Mom?" Amber asked, her long-lashed brown eyes watching her as if

waiting to gauge her answer.

"To see the doctor, sweetheart. He wants to talk to you."

"But not Doctor Henry," Amber stated, as if reciting a fact.

*How did she know that?* Pat wondered. "No, you haven't met this doctor." Pat smiled winningly, glad that this would just be a talk session so far as she knew.

"Okay, Mom. It's not going to hurt. That's good. Will you fix my hair, please?"

Once again, Pat was shocked at her daughter's intuitiveness. *She must be sensing my attitude*, Pat thought. *She's getting good at that*. Pat dismissed her fears; if there was anything wrong with her daughter, Doctor Jones would let her know. He wouldn't try to disguise his opinion in a bunch of medical gobbledygook like some doctors did. At least she didn't think he would.

"There, sweetheart. Turn around now and let me see how you look," Pat said after brushing and arranging Amber's hair.

Amber turned, a little smile playing on her face, but she said nothing.

"My goodness! You're prettier than Mom! You're so pretty I'm going to have to tie you up with a big bow and put a sign on you that says 'To Mom. From your pretty daughter.'"

That finally drew a laugh from the little girl, but it died as soon as her mother's back was turned. She waited for a moment and then reached for Pat's hand. Amber smiled up at her as she took it. Anticipating what Mom would do was a fun game.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello, Pat, Amber. It's good to see you again," Bailey said. He took Pat's hand briefly, then Amber's, just as if she were an adult.

"Hi. Say hel..." Pat began to instruct Amber.

"Hello Doctor Jones," Amber said politely before she could finish.

"Your mother must have told you, Amber. We haven't met before. I've only seen your medical charts."

"Yes, sir."

"I must have mentioned your name once, though. She's developing a very good memory."

"Well, there's certainly nothing wrong with that. Have a seat." Bailey waved to a small couch with end tables and a coffee table covered with neat stacks of the latest magazines. They were meeting in his office. "Something to drink? Coke? Coffee?"

"Amber's already had her quota of soda for the day. She can have a little coffee if you have real cream to dilute it. Same for me, but I take mine black."

"Happens that I do have cream. I don't care for that artificial stuff." Bailey brought a carafe and cups with the accessories all on a tray and set them on the center table. "I'll let you fix Amber's while I do mine."

For ten minutes Bailey talked generalities, mentioning nothing pertaining to the terrorist attack half a year ago, but finally, he set his cup down and prepared to discuss the subject. "Tell you what, if Amber is agreeable, I'll spend about fifteen or twenty minutes with her and then the same amount of time with you



while my nurse finds something to keep Amber busy. After that, we'll all have a chat together. Okay?"

Pat nodded, liking the way he voiced the proposal in direct, even tones without being condescending like so many authority figures did. She thought she might have walked out if he had said okay in the manner some doctors and nurses did, "Okaayy?", as if it took baby talk to make anyone understand a simple request.

When he was ready, Bailey nodded at Pat. "We'll go into the other office now. There's reading material here or I can turn on the television if you like."

"I have a book," Pat said, pulling out one of the latest suspense novels that she liked to read when relaxing or waiting somewhere.

Bailey grinned. "You have good habits. Always take something you like to read to a doctor's office. Are you ready, Amber?"

Amber followed him into the other room without dissent. Pat crossed her legs and opened her book, thinking of all the patients she had seen in doctors' offices either staring into space or with eyes fixed blankly on a television screen. It always made her feel sorry for them. Weren't they interested in anything outside their own little world? Soon she picked up the thread of the novel and was lost in the narrative.

\* \* \* \*

"Must be a good book," Bailey said, smiling.

Pat looked up in surprise. "Already?" Then the import of the question came to her. "Oh. Yes, it's good. I like thriller novels filled with psychological suspense."

"So do I. My colleagues accuse me of taking a busman's holiday when they catch me with a psychological ones. Well, let's see what my nurse has for Amber to do." He glanced at his watch then looked quickly at Amber. She was already heading for the door leading to his nurse's office. A frown appeared on his face and quickly disappeared, but not before Pat caught it.

She waited while Bailey introduced her and Amber to the nurse, and as soon as she saw that her daughter appeared to be satisfied with the arrangement, allowed Bailey to close it behind them.

"More coffee?"

"Please."

As soon as they were seated, Pat spoke first, not liking the frown she had seen. "What did you find wrong?"

Bailey removed his glasses and rubbed his expansive forehead. He crossed his legs and forced himself to sit back in his chair and go into his psychologist's mode though he doubted it was needed with this woman.

"Don't get upset yet, Pat. Do you like Pat or Patricia best?"

"Pat."

"Okay, Pat. There's nothing drastically wrong with Amber. In fact, I'm not sure there's anything wrong with her at all."

"Then why the frown?"

"Mmm. There's something about Amber I've never seen before. It's as if she ... *anticipates* questions and actions, almost like mind reading."

"Oh, my God! I thought the same thing the other day!"

"Well, again, don't go off the deep end. Some children are naturals at guessing what adults are up to. There's another reasonable explanation for her behavior, though; at least I believe there is. Are you familiar with the term 'mirror neurons'?"

"Yes, I've read a little about them in the popular media about Sunday Supplement level, but I also subscribe to a layman's science magazine. In the last few years I've seen a number of articles about them. I didn't understand a lot of it, but the subject interested me because of the progress being made with autistic children. Over the last couple of decades, there's been a significant increase in the number being diagnosed and shuttled off to Special Education. Frankly, I think many of the doctors are wrong and it's simply lazy administrators who try to get them diagnosed and into special ed classes. And too many doctors go right along with it."

"Sad but true."

"But how do mirror neurons apply to Amber? Oh—wait a minute. I think I know. She has lots of mirror neurons. Is that it?"

"Not exactly, Pat. Or let me rephrase that. I really don't know. It could be something entirely different. However, we did PET scans on two of the children who were admitted along with Amber, and both showed increased activity in the region of the brain where the mirror neurons live."

"I remember. Broca's area?"

"Right. You should have gone into neurology instead of teaching." He laughed to show her the comment wasn't intended to be taken seriously. "Anyway, what I'm wondering is whether all of the kids developed the same thing after ingesting that chemical. I can't say for certain because I haven't received enough funding to conduct scans on them. However, the young children I've examined so far, the ones who were admitted to the hospital back then, are displaying the same type of behavior as Amber. On the other hand, I've spoken to some of the school teachers at the middle schools and high schools in other areas that were attacked, and they're not seeing nearly so much of it as we are. In fact, the high school students hardly show a discernable change at all. The middle school is where we begin to see a few signs of that kind of behavior, and by the time we get down to Amber's age group, it's very noticeable—if you're looking for it like I began doing after seeing the first few children this time."

"Oh, mercy! Is it ... is it dangerous? Or..." Pat didn't know how to continue. Too many wild thoughts were suddenly roving through her mind while she tried to remember what she had read about the peculiar neurons.

"To be perfectly honest, Pat. I simply don't know. I've categorized my findings and asked the hospital to allow me to do a lot more PET Scans. I don't know whether the funding will be approved or not because I want to do them under specific protocols that have been developed where sets of standard question/answer/action/reaction scenes have been devised. It's fairly expensive, especially when it involves as many as I've asked for."

Pat grinned wryly. "Just tell the Hospital Board or Chief of Neurology or whoever has to approve them that the hospital will be liable for a big lawsuit if they *don't* allow you to do the scans. That ought to do it."

"By golly, I may do that very thing!" The twinkle in his eyes that Pat remembered reappeared for the first time since their appointment. Seeing it again compelled Pat to go ahead with an action she had been mulling over since learning he was single.

"Listen, I know we're running out of time, but ... would it be possible to see you when you're off duty? Or would that be unethical?" She felt her body tensing, but she didn't care. She would much rather be direct and chance a refusal than never ask at all, and the man intrigued her, something most men could never do.

"Um..."

*Why he's blushing again, just like last time! Pat thought. Is he gay? Are am I missing the signals? Damn it, it's been so long I've forgotten how to go about this.*

"Uh..." Bailey cleared his throat and started over. "It sort of skirts the line, but since it's Amber and not you who's the patient, I think we could ... um ... what did you have in mind?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

Pat spotted Bailey already waiting at the local pizza parlor where they had decided to meet. He was wearing jeans and a light windbreaker, the same as she. The difference was in the color of the pullovers beneath the jacket—and the way they fit. She smiled inwardly as he tracked her movements while she came to the booth. Shy or not, men didn't differ in much in their reaction to her figure, with her generous breasts and narrow waist. He was unusual in that he stood up to greet her and waited until she slid into the booth before seating himself. She liked that.

After their meal arrived, Pat asked a question she was curious about.

"How did you come by Bailey as a first name?"

Bailey wrinkled his forehead in amusement rather than annoyance over how many times he had been asked that question. "Mom thought Jones was such a common name that she wanted to give me an unusual first name to make up for it. And since Bailey was her maiden name..."

Pat grinned over a slice of pizza covered liberally with pepperoni. "Now that makes sense. Diplomatic, too. I bet that made her father happy."

"Yes, it did. My grandmother, too. But no one is ever satisfied. Now they're agitating for me to get married and have kids."

"You've never been married?"

"I had to borrow a lot of money to get through school and then to set up my practice and ... no, that's just an excuse. Truth is, I'm not a very sociable animal and..." He broke off, embarrassed.

Pat knew what it was, though she didn't say so. The man was just shy, that was all. Unusual for a doctor. She was surprised some nurse hadn't picked him off by now; he certainly must come in contact with enough of them. She was glad now that she had asked him for a date of sorts but had been rather surprised when he suggested meeting for a pizza. Not that she minded. But she could see that she was going to have to carry the conversational ball until he became comfortable with her. *Talking about work will do it*, she thought. Aloud, she said "Are you finding anything out yet with the PET scans?" He had called her only two days after their last appointment, and after receiving a limited go ahead to proceed with the scans, he had wanted to set up an appointment for Amber first thing. Pat signed the necessary forms, and it had been done several days before. She hadn't seen him then, preferring to talk to him outside the hospital environment. She had received a form letter telling her the PET Scan revealed no pathology.

"Well, without breaking patient confidentiality, I can say I'm accumulating a lot of data. And by the way, I have you to thank for being allowed to do the scans. Or have them done, that is. That mention of liability to lawsuits was all it took with the Hospital Administrator. My chief isn't too happy with me, though. He doesn't think they're necessary."

Pat was astonished. "Even after what you saw on the other two and the way Amber and the other kids are acting?"

Bailey shrugged. "He's an old man who specialized in brain tumors. He hasn't kept up with the rest of the field the way he should have. More to the point, all the tabloid press about the so-called mind reading brain cells disgusts him. He didn't think much of the research into mirror neurons to begin with, and that

kind of blathering really turned him off. He thinks we'll wind up being ridiculed by the press—and by our peers."

Pat scrutinized his face closely. "But you don't?"

"No," Bailey said simply, but added, "Oh the media might try to make a big thing of it, but I'm not planning on them finding out." He finished the last of his half of the pizza and wiped his mouth. "Ah, that was good," he said and reached for his stein of dark beer.

"What exactly have you seen on the scans?" Pat persisted. If he'd learned anything having to do with Amber, she wanted to know now, not after some long, drawn out study was completed.

Bailey took another sip of his beer. "I can't tell you anything about the other children," he said, but his eyes took on the familiar twinkle Pat had seen the other two times she had been in his presence. "However, I see no ethical barrier to talking about Amber."

Pat relaxed and waited for him to continue. He was a nice man and not encumbered with following bureaucratic regulations; he would tell her everything he could.

"Amber showed the same increased activity in the regions of the brain that harbors the mirror neurons just like the two kids we scanned while they were still in the hospital. But..." he paused, trying to think of the best way to put it.

Pat felt her heart skip a beat. "But what?"

"You said you've read about how mirror neurons work; they're active when someone is observing another person in close proximity. What I saw with Amber was intense activity of her mirror neurons. And remember, her head was inside the barrel, as we call it for the kids, and she couldn't see much, let alone observing the actions of someone else."

"What could that mean?"

"Officially? Not enough data for conclusions or even a hypothesis. Personally? I think the mirror neurons are multiplying, and that's why the area shows up on the scans. The area they cover now is larger than I've ever seen in patients. I guess that could account for the change in behavior."

"Is it dangerous?" Pat interrupted to ask.

"No, I don't think so, but again, I don't have much data." He hesitated to tell her the rest of it, but Pat sensed there was more.

She prodded, "There's something else, isn't there?"

Bailey removed his glasses and massaged his forehead before answering. "I'm wondering how far the process will go and whether something else besides cell proliferation is going on. Whether more mirror neurons will change her behavior or not. Whether the changes we've already seen are a result of the activity of the mirror neurons or something else. Whether the behavior we've already seen will change to something else or remain the same and become more ... intense, I guess is the best way of putting it. Or whether it fades as she grows up. There's all sorts of questions I have and no good answers. I'm sorry, Pat."

"There's not a chance she could really learn to read minds, is there?"

Bailey signaled for the waitress by holding up his stein then turned back to her. "My personal opinion?"

No, I really don't think so, but ... well, you've probably heard stories of how married couples who are really close seem to be able to read each other's minds on occasion. I suspect that's just their mirror neurons in action. However, let's say ... doubling or tripling the number ordinarily present in small children, making the cells a bit different somehow, a lot more efficient and much more active ... then ... well, I just don't know. No data. I don't know what would happen. Also remember children that age are forming new synapses—new wiring in their brains, so to speak—at a furious rate. Combine the two and what do you think would happen?

Pat had to ponder that one while Bailey waited patiently. “You said you didn't think Amber could become a mind reader, but given all the factors you just mentioned and a few years, she might become so good at anticipating actions that...”

Bailey finished for her. “Exactly. It might be hard to tell the difference sometimes.” Seeing the stricken expression on her face, he quickly added. “But we don't know that will happen. And suppose it did? Not mind reading like in science fiction stories, but simply knowing for certain what another person wants. Greatly increased empathy, in other words. Would it be a bad thing?”

Pat fiddled with the handle of her stein, trying to organize her thoughts. Finally, she just shook her head. “I just don't know. Too much empathy could be as bad as too little. It scares me.”

“Me, too.”

“Why you?”

“Well, to begin with, I like Amber. She's a sweet child and very intelligent and personable. I wouldn't want to see anything bad to happen to her, but if it turns out like we've been speculating, other people might not be scared. They would want to exploit her and others like her.” Bailey reached out and touched her hand, surprised when she gripped it so tightly. “Let's keep our thoughts to ourselves, shall we? I'd rather none of this become public knowledge if we can avoid it.”

Pat drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes. Don't let anyone know. Please, Bailey. She's all I have.”

## CHAPTER SIX

"How did you find out about this, Casey? The task force was disbanded and you were reassigned." Ray Hetrick sat at his SAIC Regional Director's desk in Little Rock, irritably shuffling papers on his desk while Sean Casey sat across from him. He couldn't figure out what Casey was up to other than trying to recover from his disappointment when the school poisoning case hadn't advanced his career.

"I left my card with a few of the hospital workers during the original investigation. One of them called and let me know."

"All right, fine, but how does this apply to us? What difference does it make?"

"I don't know but it sure seems funny to me, testing those kids all over again."

"What's so funny? Aren't followups normal procedure for a doctor?"

Casey struggled to make his superior see what was bothering him while wishing it was him sitting on the other side of the desk. "Yes, sir, but now he's running a lot of them through one of those big expensive machines. They didn't do that even when the kids were sick."

Hetrick fiddled with some paper files, wondering if the agency would ever catch up to the efficient way businesses were run. He didn't want to dismiss the Casey's concerns out of hand but he was getting a little tired of the man always trying to come up with something to attract attention to himself. "Okay, supposing some effects from the nerve agent are just now showing up in the children. It still doesn't concern us. Not now."

"How about if that's what those ragheads wanted in the first place? A long term effect?"

"No epithets in my office, Casey. Understand?"

"Sorry, sir. But couldn't that be what the terrorists intended? A delayed effect? Maybe paralysis of lots of kids that ties up a bunch of our medical facilities and costs us tons of money? Maybe this was just a test case, and if they see it's working, they'll hit us on a much larger scale."

Hetrick removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, remembering how many times he had told himself he was going to get his eyes fixed the very next time he took a vacation. Unfortunately, vacation time seemed to come in such small bits and pieces that it never happened. There were always more important things to take care of. He sighed and made his decision. It was just barely possible, and these days it didn't pay to overlook anything, no matter how implausible. Just look what had happened when the regional director in Arizona had downplayed the possibility of a dirty bomb. They were still cleaning up the contamination in Flagstaff. He grimaced and looked back up.

"All right, Casey, I'll give you five days. Get down there, investigate, and come on back. You can leave Monday. I'll take care of the paperwork. Now go away. I'm busy."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Casey hurried away before the SAIC could change his mind. As he left the building, he remembered the way the Morrison bitch had acted. Wouldn't it be nice if he did turn up something? Then she wouldn't have an excuse to act so fucking high and mighty when he questioned her. And he wouldn't have to be all that polite in taking her down a peg, either.

\* \* \* \*

Pat began observing Amber more closely after her conversation with Bailey, and she was also observing

how Jimmy acted when he came over to play. What she noticed most of all was how well Amber and Jimmy got along together. They never argued like they used to over what games they wanted to play or what program to watch on Saturday mornings when Pat allowed some television time. However, she saw that Jimmy had also become less talkative, just like Amber had.

Amber still asked as many, if not more, questions than before. On a few instances, Amber listened to her answers with a peculiar little tilt to her head and with a quizzical countenance on her elfin face, as if gauging the truthfulness of the answers she got. Then that bit of behavior ceased a day or two after Pat got the idea that the tilt meant exactly what she had thought it did—Amber had been judging whether she was being told the truth or the perhaps whether or not she was being equivocal. Pat had always tried to answer Amber's questions truthfully, but she admitted to herself now that she had temporized on occasions when she thought her daughter wasn't ready or couldn't fully understand a detailed explanation.

When Bailey called her a week after their pizza date and asked her out to dinner, Pat accepted, a little thump of excitement filling her heart. She had been thinking about calling him herself to talk about Amber if for no other reason. She wanted to see him again, too, but she hadn't wanted to appear too forward.

"I'd like that," she said. "But wouldn't you rather have a home cooked meal? I imagine you get tired of eating out—or do you cook?"

"Not what you'd call real cooking. Sure, that would be nice. How's Amber getting along?"

"Well, why don't you come as early as you can and you can see for yourself."

"Okay. When and what time?"

"Saturday? Any time in the afternoon."

"I have some hospital business in the morning. How about three? Is that okay?"

"Fine. Let me give you directions. It's..."

"I remember your address from Amber's records. 234 Elm Lane."

"You've got a good memory. See you then, and thanks for asking me."

"It's you I should thank. I'd like to see Amber, too, so it works out fine."

\* \* \* \*

"That was Doctor Bailey, wasn't it Mom?" Amber had been sitting beside her on the couch as they both read books.

Had she mentioned his name? No. Pat turned to face her daughter. "Yes, it was. And it's Doctor Jones, not Bailey. That's his first name. But how did you know?"

Amber gazed up at her with her big brown eyes and smiled. "You looked the same as when you told me you had a pizza with him, and when I was in the hospital, he said for me to call him Doctor Bailey."

"Well, okay, but how did I look, sweetheart?"

Amber's smile died as she caught the concerned expression on her mother's face. She shrugged. "It was just a Doctor Bailey look, Mom."

"Can you do that with other people, honey? Like Jimmy, maybe?"



Amber didn't answer.

Pat drew her daughter to her and hugged her tightly. "It's all right sweetheart; I think I know what you're going through. You can do it all you want with me if that's what you like, or with Doctor Jones—Doctor Bailey, I mean, so long as he says it's okay. But how about let's keeping it a secret from other people, huh?"

"Can I do it at school?"

Pat relaxed her grip on Amber, trying to go about the conversation exactly the right way. "It's okay, I think. But we don't want you to get into any trouble. Can you tell me exactly what it is you do?" She smiled encouragingly.

Amber frowned, making her little girl's face appear far too serious for someone her age. "I don't 'xactly know what I do, Mom. It's like I know how people are gonna act or what they're gonna say before they do it. I know when they're trying to fool me, too!"

"Hmm. Tell you what, baby. Whatever it is you do, I want you to talk to me and Doctor Bailey about it, but not anyone else. Okay?"

"Okay. But why?"

"Some people wouldn't like it, baby."

"Well, some people don' like me noway!"

"Anyway."

"Whatever. They don't like me, though."

"Are there very many?"

"Just some kids because I get good grades. And maybe one of the teachers at recess. Miss Larkin don't for sure. She thinks we're being treated special."

Pat didn't correct Amber's grammar this time. The conversation was too important to worry about it. "That's normal, sweetheart. We all have some people we don't like, but if she gets mean, you let me know right away. And if you notice anyone thinking you're not acting right, you stop what you're doing right then. Okay?"

Amber saw how serious her mother was. "Yes'm. If I can."

"Promise?"

"Yes'm. Except I can't help it! And some other kids do it, too!"

Pat hugged the little girl again, trying to stay completely calm. She had been worrying about Amber so much she had forgotten that other children had ingested the nerve agent, too. "I know, baby, but try not to let anyone else find out. Maybe we can talk to Doctor Jones about it. He's coming for dinner Saturday."

"Uh huh. Doctor Bailey likes you. He likes me, too."

"Oh, he does, huh? Maybe we'll wind up both having the same boyfriend!"

Amber giggled at the idea, sounding like a perfectly normal eight-year-old girl, and Pat relaxed. She had only one more question. "Do the other kids know what they're doing, like you do?"

Amber shrugged, open-eyed and honest. "I don't know. I think so. Some of them. Maybe. We kinda talk."

Pat decided to leave it at that until she could talk to Bailey again.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey Jones was in his office, comparing his PET scans with ones he had downloaded from colleagues who had been studying mirror neurons of normal children, ones from other areas who hadn't been subjected to the chemical used by the terrorists. It had taken him some time to find enough scans of children that young so he could do a fair comparison. Looking from graph to graph where he had plotted results, it was apparent that all of his patients showed a larger area of mirror neurons than normal children. Not only that, the level of physiological activity was much greater. He had called some of "his" children back for electroencephalogram tests where he could study their brain waves, and those tests confirmed the PET scan data. He closed those files and opened his clinical notes, but instead of reading them over again, he removed his glasses and leaned back in the big office chair to think about sessions with the children, especially the young ones.

Even though he still didn't have a large data base to go on, he had detected exactly the same phenomena as Pat had. The kids were so perceptive it was almost frightening, and he thought Amber and perhaps a couple of others were even more adept than the rest of them. The perceptiveness alone didn't worry him so much as something else he had begun to notice. A few of the children struck him as manipulative, demanding special treatment before submitting to the scans or ECGs and pushing their parents to the limit, stopping only before the parents became more greatly irritated. He overheard several conversations where rewards were being demanded for not telling "The Doctor" something they knew—and they seemed to know a lot. Two of the children had asked him what he would give them if they told something "bad" about their parents but never mentioned the subject again when they apparently perceived that such tactics wouldn't work with him.

How would children like that turn out when they grew up? Not good if it continued, he knew. On a hunch, he went back to the beginning and began trying to obtain the personal data files on the ones who had been admitted to his hospital in Mountain Grove. That took up some time since he had to give a justification for seeing the information. After he was reluctantly given a temporary password and had uploaded the files, he began reading them and making notes. He then began comparing the data gathered there with what he had written in his patient progress notes. He began to frown, and it only deepened as he read. He didn't like what he found.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Sean Casey made no attempt to contact the other agents who had been involved in Mountain Grove. He didn't want their thoughts. If he found something worth following up, he would receive all the credit. That satisfied him. The fact that Pat Morrison was one of the Mountain Grove parents was a bonus. He wanted a return bout with her anyway, her and that snotty damned doctor. He decided to start with the doctor; he knew just the right way to take him down a notch.

Casey paused in the men's room on the ground floor to check his appearance. His short blond hair, even features, and six feet of height had always made him feel attractive and confident in himself. The standard suit and tie worn by everyone in his department couldn't quite conceal his solid, well-muscled build. Only his eyes made him stand out from the crowd. They were a light hazel color set beneath heavy lids, a combination that made him look like a sleepy executioner. Satisfied, he went back into the lobby and took the elevator up to Doctor Jones' third floor office where Jones had agreed to meet him, albeit reluctantly.

The beginning of his investigation didn't officially start until Monday, but Casey arrived in Mountain Grove earlier on Friday than he had anticipated. He obtained the appointment with Doctor Jones by citing "urgent official business."

Bailey automatically glanced at his watch when his administrative assistant announced that the FBI Special Agent had arrived. Four-thirty, the only time he had open for the week. He always reserved it for last minute business, a bulwark against being disturbed on weekends. The ploy wasn't always successful, but most of the time it was. Bailey didn't do surgery; his work was more in the diagnostic line, including the tough problems referred to him by psychologists needing assistance from a medical doctor.

"Hello. Special Agent Casey, if I remember correctly," Bailey said. He held out his hand, deciding that he might as well try being cordial. He didn't like the man, but agitating him wouldn't help. Bailey had already tagged him as an individual who was insecure and who sublimated this trait by exercising what power he possessed on other people. He thought there might be something else odd about the man, but hadn't talked long enough with him to even make a guess.

Casey took Bailey's hand and shook it briefly. "That's right, Doctor Jones. Thanks for making time for me on such short notice."

"Coffee? Something cold to drink?"

"No, thank you. This shouldn't take too long, and I'm sure you're a busy man."

"Fine. What can I do for you?"

"Doctor Jones, I understand that you've initiated some special and rather expensive studies on the children who were admitted to the hospital here after the terrorist attack on the schools. Would you mind telling me why?"

Bailey did, but he tried to divert the agent. "It's a normal six month follow up by the Neurology Department. You do know that most of the younger children were seriously ill, and that it was a nerve agent of some kind used in the attack, don't you?"

Casey wouldn't be put off. "Certainly, I do. I was one of the initial investigative agents. Remember? We now know you didn't do PET scans on the children then. Why now?"

"We're simply checking to see that their brains are developing and functioning normally after they were poisoned. Standard procedure."

"But you have no base line for comparison, so what can a PET scan tell you?" Casey had familiarized himself with all the knowledge he could absorb about normal hospital and outpatient protocols in the short time he had before arriving in Mountain Grove.

Bailey was perturbed. Damn the man! What was he after? "We know what a normal scan looks like, Special Agent Casey, so we don't really need a base line. It was a matter of funding more than anything else when we didn't do them before. Also, the Chief of Neurology didn't see the need for PET scans originally after it was determined the children didn't have encephalitis. Now, let me ask you a question. Why should this be a matter for the FBI? As I remember, you caught all the perpetrators, and it's now obvious that the chemical agent they were using did no permanent physical damage." He adjusted the lapels of the long lab coat he had donned before meeting Casey. Sometimes it impressed people, but Casey obviously wasn't one of them, which he proved by his reply.

"Doctor, I've been given the task of determining whether the chemical agent was designed to cause a delayed reaction. Perhaps that's what the terrorists intended all along. I'd like copies of the medical records of all the children you've been testing. When can you have them ready?" Casey had found that speaking as if there was no question that his requests would be granted was often enough to accomplish the mission.

Bailey didn't even need to think about it. "I'm sorry. Doctors don't release confidential patient information. You should know that, Special Agent Casey."

Casey stood up, face impassive but clearly not dissuaded. "I believe I can request the records under the anti-terrorist statutes. I intend to do so."

So much for cordiality, Bailey thought. "You can request them," he said, "but that doesn't automatically grant you access. There's a procedure you have to go through, and I'll certainly contest it in court unless you come up with a better reason than you have so far."

Casey stood up, gave a barely perceptible nod, and departed without another word. *Goddamn Doctors! Always act like they're fucking gods*, he thought. *Well, not this time*. Jones was concealing, and he intended to find out what.

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, hi Bailey!" Pat said as soon Bailey told her who it was—though she would have known anyway from the sound of his voice.

"Is something wrong, Pat? You sound like you're out of breath."

"No, why—oh, sorry. I'm just breathing hard. Amber and I were playing catch. I try to get in a little exercise with her after school when I can."

"Good idea. In the meantime, do you remember that FBI agent you raked over the coals?"

"I remember. I guess I was a bit sharp with him, but I didn't think I was that bad. What about him?"

"You weren't that bad; he's just insecure and takes it out others. The reason I mentioned him is that he's back in town, and I suspect he'll be around to see you again—probably without calling in advance."

Pat was silent for a moment, running the episode in Bailey's office over in her mind. "What's he after, Bailey?"

It was his turn to become silent for a moment. "Pat, I'm not really sure, but be very careful when you talk to him."

"Do I have to talk to him at all?"

"Probably. There's all kinds of obscure language in the revised Patriot Act he can use to gain access. He asked for the medical records of all the children who were admitted to the hospital after the attack, and I refused. If he wants them, he's going to have to go to court."

"Good for you!"

"I don't know if it is or not. It may just make him even more suspicious. Anyhow, I just wanted to give you a heads up in case he dropped by before tomorrow."

"Well, thanks. I appreciate it, and I'll warn Amber, too."

"Do that, but better still, tell him she has a whole lot of homework to do and can't talk more than a few minutes. That's if he wants to see her. He may not; I think he'll concentrate on the parents."

"Okay. Come on over earlier than three if you get a chance. We'll be here."

"Thanks, I may."

Pat put the phone back in its cradle and began deliberating silently about how to prepare Amber for the probable visit by the FBI agent. One thing for certain, she knew she couldn't fool Amber with palliatives!

\* \* \* \*

Casey had better luck at the Mountain Grove primary school. He bypassed the teachers and went directly to the principal. He had also learned from Doctor Jones that in this little burg he probably should use something other than a direct request when approaching authorities for personal records, especially those of children.

"Mrs. Schaffer, I've been empowered by the FBI to ask for certain data in relation to the terrorist attack that I'm sure you remember. We've begun to suspect that the chemical the terrorists contaminated the pudding with may have been intended to cause a somewhat delayed effect on the younger children. I don't need individual records, but it would be very helpful to our investigation if you could provide a record of achievement of these children both before and since. Just their grades, mind you, nothing else for the time being." He smiled winningly, as he was capable of doing when he thought it was warranted.

The principal was more than willing since she both remembered Casey from the investigation and wasn't being asked to provide names to go with the grades. She was also thrilled to be a part of an FBI investigation. She smiled back.

"Well, I can do that for you. We have all of them on the computer, and they've already been categorized through the last reporting period. Just a moment."

The principal called in one of her assistants and asked for the data to be downloaded into a disposable drive before turning back to the FBI Agent.

"Is there anything else we can do for you? That was such a horrible experience, especially for the children."

"Yes, it certainly was," Casey agreed. "And yes, there are a couple of other things, Mrs. Schaffer. First, I'd like this kept secret, if you will. This is an ongoing investigation, after all. I'll keep you posted, of

course."

With that statement, Mrs. Schaffer nodded and dropped her smile, trying not to appear too eager. "Thank you. I'll do all I can to help."

"Fine, fine. Now the other thing, I'd like you to talk to the teachers and ask them if they've noticed any change in the children's behavior. Anything at all. Could you do that for us? I think you would be the best person for the job; however, I'll be talking to some of the teachers myself."

"Why surely. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

Casey looked solemn, trying to appear mysterious. "Well, let's just see what you come up with, and we'll talk again. How's that?"

"Oh, good. You know, now that I think about it, a number of children have been absent lately because of medical appointments according to their parents. I wonder if that has anything to do with what you're investigating?"

"It very well could be, Mrs. Schaffer. It could be, indeed," Casey said, thinking of the PET scans.

"How soon do you need me to talk to the teachers?"

"I'd like it to be as soon as possible." He took out his wallet and handed her his card. "This has my cell phone number on it. Please call me when you're ready to see me again."

"I certainly will," she said as Casey stood up.

They shook hands and Casey left; so far, he was more than satisfied with his progress. Now it was time to go calling, and the Morrison woman was one of the first on his list. He looked forward to that interview.

\* \* \* \*

Since talking to Casey and then Pat, Bailey had done some serious thinking and a lot of research. Saturday morning he pulled his files up from the hospital computer and went over them again. He sat for almost an hour, considering the implications of what he had discovered so far. What wouldn't a drug dealer give for someone who could tell who was an undercover narcotics agent? How far would the government be willing to go to induce people with abilities like the children were showing to work for them as customs agents, for interviewing captured terrorists—or worse, in his mind, using them to blindside politicians of the opposing party. There were other possibilities he thought of that were even more frightening. Finally, he decided. He couldn't do anything about the middle school children in other areas of the country who might develop perceptive abilities, but he could certainly try to protect the ones he felt responsible for. The children of Mountain Grove primary school were the ones most obviously affected anyhow.

There was nothing he could do now about the PET scans, but he could certainly change the language and the interpretations written up in his notes. He agonized over falsifying medical data, but finally his concern for the future of the children pushed him over the edge. He deleted all mention of mirror neurons, simply leaving descriptions of the areas of increased activity and eliminated his speculations. If anyone who examined them knew much about mirror neurons, the scans would still stand out, but without a history, no one else would become excited. He was well aware that if a computer expert examined the records closely, his previous notations could be brought back up, but hopefully, that wouldn't happen. In the meantime, his actions might buy the children some extra time. He was just glad Mountain Grove had been the only primary school attacked and that only young children showed the increased perceptiveness. So

far.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey felt very cheerful as he headed toward Pat's home. It had been a while since he had been out with a woman more than once, and he liked her. He touched his forehead, hoping she wasn't put off by approaching baldness because it certainly looked as if he were headed in that direction, but since she had been out with him once before, perhaps she wasn't. After meeting her, he had begun trying some of the hair restorative medicines and thought his hair loss had at least slowed down.

He rang the doorbell while juggling the bottle of Chablis he had brought, hoping she wouldn't be offended. *Damn it*, he told himself, *one of these days you're going to have to get out of this idiotic shyness*. Except he knew he probably wouldn't. The DNA scan during his internship had unfortunately shown that he had inherited the shyness gene.

"Hi! Come on in." Pat smiled at him and asked, "What have you got there?" as he walked through the entrance.

"I brought some Chablis to go with dinner. I hope it's okay with you."

"Sure. Give it to me and have a seat. Amber's over playing with Jimmy right now, but she'll be back in a bit."

Bailey looked around and finally chose the small leather couch against one wall. Behind it was a tier of bookshelves, and as he looked around, he saw another whole wall was covered with them.

"You read a lot," he said, wincing almost immediately at the thought of what an inane statement that was considering there were so many books in this one room.

Pat simply laughed. "I had a hard time finding a house with enough built-in bookshelves. I still want another wall of them. Maybe when the school's insurance company settles I can afford it."

"Sounds like me. I'm going to have to move out of my apartment soon if I don't get rid of some books."

Pat laughed again. "How about something to drink, if it's not too early for you."

"Not a bit. I mean, yes, thanks. Whatever you're having."

"I have some Chablis already open, so we'll save your bottle. Be back in a jiff."

Bailey's gaze followed her as she rounded the bar into the big kitchen and continued to watch her through the opening above the bar as she stretched to collect wine glasses from a hutch. She had on well worn jeans and a sleeveless pink blouse that went well with her blond hair. She made him feel overdressed in a jacket and slacks.

Pat brought two glasses of wine, handed one to Bailey, and sat down on the other end of the couch from him. "Why so serious looking?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No. Not yet, anyway. I guess I'm just worried about the kids after that FBI agent came to see me." He didn't know whether to tell her about changing the medical records or not.

"Well, as far as that goes, so am I. He hasn't come here, by the way, though I heard someone from the FBI was in with the principal yesterday. I assume it was Casey unless there are others like him nosing about."

"Hmm. Wonder what he was after there?"

"No one could find out, other than it was definitely an FBI agent who visited with the principal."

"Typical. He probably told the principal everything was top secret."

Pat looked at the wine she was still holding, sipped at it, and set it on the coffee table. "So far as Amber goes, I wish it would stay secret. By the way, we had a good talk, and she says she'll be careful. She's a good girl; I'm sure she'll try. On the other hand, she also said she can't help what she does."

"If it's the mirror neurons responsible, which is what I believe, she can't stop. It would be like trying to stop herself from breathing. However, I do hope you told her to keep anything she learns to herself."

"I did, and she said she would. I gave her permission to talk to you though."

Bailey was humbled by her trust in him, and that made the decision to tell her what he had done easy.

When he was finished, Pat slid over and took his face in her hands. She kissed him thoroughly and said "Thank you, Bailey. You risked a lot for the kids."

Bailey took her hands and held them. "Pat, I..."

"Why don't you kiss her again, silly. That's what you want to do, isn't it?"

Startled, both of them turned to the door that led into the back way in through the garage. Amber was standing there, grinning mischievously.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

The door bell rang just as they were finishing dinner. Pat had made grilled chicken breasts with twice baked potatoes, one of Amber's favorite meals. She was pleased to see that Bailey had cleaned his plate.

"Now who can that be?" Pat wondered. It was still early; she had gone ahead with dinner after deciding they had both consumed enough wine. Still upright, despite the multiple glasses of wine, she slid away from the table and went to the door. She pulled it open and, despite Bailey's warning that Casey might want to see her again, couldn't help being startled.

"What do you want?" she blurted out before thinking.

Casey displayed his credentials. "Mrs. Morrison, the FBI has reopened the investigation into the terror attack which involved your child. I need to speak to you, please."

"Why?"

"May I come in?"

Pat debated a moment and finally decided that it might be better to get it over with while Bailey was present. "Alright, but don't take long. I have company."

As soon as Casey saw Bailey standing in the living room, he felt the welcome tickle of power over another person welling up inside. Now he had additional leverage with the doctor. "Well, fancy seeing you again," he said as he came into the living room where Bailey was standing.

"Hello, Casey," Bailey said and left it at that. He didn't know whether to stay or offer to go.

"Sit down," Pat said to Casey. She decided not to offer the agent anything to drink, even though Bailey had a glass of wine from dinner in his hand. "Why don't you stay for this, Bailey. Please?"

"Alright." Bailey sat down next to Pat.

Bailey suspected that Casey already had a recorder going even though he hadn't mentioned it, as he was sure regulations must call for.

"Mrs. Morrison, without going into specifics, I—the FBI, that is, has evidence that some changes have taken place in the children exposed to the agent used in the attack on Amber's school. I'd like to ask you about it, if I may."

"You can ask," Pat said, her expression tense.

"Very well. Have her grades improved or changed in any way over the last six months?"

"Amber's grades have always been good."

"Has her behavior changed any at all that you've noticed?"

"Amber has always been well behaved."

Casey's expression went from friendly to threatening as he began to understand that the woman wasn't going to tell him anything. However, he knew the kids had changed. He had already talked to several teachers Friday evening and this morning. One of them, Nora Larkin, had given him a lot of information.

"That doesn't agree with what I've learned from some of the school authorities and others involved with the children."

"Amber is fine. She hasn't changed."

"Perhaps you'll be able to tell me why Doctor Jones ordered a PET scan on Amber then. As well as many more of the children."

"You'd have to ask Doctor Jones about that," Pat said. She wasn't about to give this man anything, no matter what he said.

"I have. However, he is hiding behind medical confidentiality, and if I'm not mistaken, skating rather close to the ethical line by consorting with a patient's parent." He let them both absorb that bit of input before continuing confidently. "Suppose you bring Amber in and let me talk to her for a few minutes."

Pat felt her pulse beginning to pound. *Now what?* she thought. *Can he compel Amber to speak to him? And if he can't, will he blackmail her into it by threatening to tell everyone at the hospital that Bailey is seeing me?* She didn't think there was anything obviously unethical about the arrangement, but—

"I don't want to talk to you. You're a bad man," Amber exclaimed loudly as she came into the room.

Bailey was amused but tried not to show it. The little scamp had been hiding and listening!

Pat motioned to Amber and when she came to her, surrounded the little girl with both arms.

"I'm not bad, Amber," Casey said and realized he was frowning.

"Yes, you are!" Amber said adamantly. "You want to do bad things to me! I saw you at school looking at the girls. You wanted to do bad things to them, too!"

Casey's face turned bright red. How had the little devil known that? By God, there was something strange going on here!

Bailey cleared his throat until he had everyone's attention and said "As Mrs. Morrison's and Amber's physician, I believe this interview is causing them undue stress. I think it's time to terminate it."

Amber had stared at Casey for a few long moments and buried her head in Pat's bosom.

"I can compel cooperation, you know," Casey said, regaining his composure though still thinking furiously about what Amber had blurted out.

"You're not going to talk to Amber without a court order," Pat said firmly. "Now, please leave. You're upsetting my daughter."

"I'll be back," Casey said. He got to his feet and left without another word.

Amber didn't raise her head until she heard the door close behind him. Then she said "Mom, he really does do bad things to girls. I don't want to talk to him!" Tears gathered in her eyes, ready to spill over at any moment.

Pat hugged her. "Don't worry, baby. We'll take care of you." She spoke the words while staring over Amber's head at Bailey with fear-stricken eyes.

Bailey nodded and gave her a reassuring smile, all the while considering Amber's outburst. *Could there*

*be something to what she said? Something more than daydreaming on Casey's part?* he wondered. Bailey knew as a psychologist that some men and women might desire sex with underage girls or boys but never carry it any further than fantasies. Just on the chance, though ... “Amber, if what you said about Mister Casey is true, maybe I have a way to find out.”

“He *is* bad,” Amber insisted.

“I believe you,” Bailey told her, “but I’ll have to dig up proof.”

“Can you do that?” Pat asked.

“Maybe, but don’t ask. Better for you not to know.” Silently, he hoped he could find something out before Casey went to the hospital administrator or his chief and told about him seeing Pat while, in a sense, having Amber as a patient.

Amber was already over her momentary trauma. “I bet I’ll know,” Doctor Bailey.”

Bailey stood up and smiled at her. “I’ll bet you will too, Amber, but don’t tell anyone if you find out. Okay?”

“Can I tell Mom?”

“Oh, sure. You can tell her or me everything. Just no one else. Other bad men might want to know.”

“Okay, I won’t,” Amber said, nodding her head.

Bailey grinned at her and Pat. “That spot about being your physician just popped out as a way to get rid of him, Pat.”

“That’s all right; it did the trick.”

“I think Amber had something to do with him leaving, too. Listen, I’m sorry to rush off, but now I really do need to get home and get to work on a little project this brought up. I might be able to confirm what Amber said if I get lucky. In the meantime, if Casey or anyone else bothers you, call me immediately.”

Pat walked with him to the door. Seeing that he was hesitant and knowing that Amber was watching couldn’t stop her; she put her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers. *He would probably have shuffled his feet and shook my hand if I waited on him to make a move*, she thought. Once started, however, she found no complaints with the way he kissed. Shy or not, he must have had some very good experience sometime in the past.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey drove back to his apartment in somewhat of a daze, remembering the kiss all the way. Pat made him feel wonderful, as if he could solve any problem he cared to take on, and he intended to do his damndest to try getting the FBI out of their lives—and that included the rest of the children—before this went any further.

As soon as he shucked his jacket, he went directly for the phone. He had to look up the number; he hadn’t talked to Wanda Greenleigh in a long time. They had lived together during their last two years of medical school, but once their internships took them to different cities, they had gradually drifted apart. He still thought well of her, and Wanda was always ready to talk on the rare occasions he called even though they were no longer romantically involved.

Once through the greeting and rehashing of a few old times, he got into the real reason he had called.

"Wanda, I have a big problem. Remember the terrorist attack I told you about? Uh huh. Now I've turned up a few anomalies in the children who were hospitalized, and there's a certain FBI agent who's giving me and the mother of one of the children a hard time. Could I get you to run a personal search on him?"

"Gosh, Bailey! The FBI? No way I'm going to hack into FBI files. I'm good, but not good enough to risk getting away with something like that!"

"Not the FBI files; I wouldn't ask you to go that far. All I want is personal data on him, maybe something nefarious he's been up to."

"Like what?"

"Possibly fooling around with underage girls."

"Oh, really! That paints a different picture. I hate those bastards. Yeah, I'll do it. If he's one of those, I'll find out! How soon do you need it?"

"As soon as possible, Wanda. I, uh..."

"Wanda's laugh came tinkling into his ear. "I bet you're involved with her mother, Bailey. Right?"

"Well, I want to be. I like the little girl, too."

"Alright, give me the full name of the agent, where he lives, and anything else you know about him. Also, give me the exact time of the terrorist attack. I've forgotten."

Bailey told her everything he could think of, including Little Rock as Casey's home base and probable residence.

"Okay, I'll get on it right away. I've got your home number, but give me your cell, too. I'm working in research now, same place. Sanford Labs. You can call me there if you need me immediately and I'm not answering my phone at home. I work late sometimes."

"Great. Wanda, you're a big help," Bailey said. They exchanged information, and by the time they said good bye, he felt much better. Wanda was a computer whiz and had hung around with some very experienced hackers for a while, but she did it just for fun. Only as a secondary thought did he realize that if Wanda did find that Casey was guilty of the very thing Amber said he was, it would also be resounding proof that a profound change had taken place in the brains of the children.

It was late Sunday night, nearly eleven, before she called him back. The ringing phone woke him instantly, a response ingrained into him by years of medical practice.

"Bailey? You awake?"

"Now I am," he laughed, recognizing Wanda's voice.

"Is your computer on?"

"No, but I can fix that in just a minute. Hold on." He slid his feet into house shoes and headed to the spare bedroom that he used as an office. As soon as he was inside, he punched the on button of his computer. "Okay, I just turned it on. It sounds like you found something."

"You bet I did! Give me your email address again, just to be sure."

Bailey read it off to her.

"Okay, got it. Boy, what a scumbag. I wish I could tell the FBI how I found out all this stuff about your man."

"As bad as that?"

"Uh huh. I'm going to download a bunch of data for you, and it'll also have links where you can find more. I hope you stick it to him, Bailey. There's no cure for those monsters."

"I'll see what I can do. Thanks, Wanda. This might be enough to prevent a real tragedy. I'll tell you about it someday if I can."

"Great. G'night, Bailey. I'm going to bed. I haven't slept much since I talked to you."

## CHAPTER NINE

Bailey only had to look at a small amount of the material Wanda sent him to see that Amber had been right—and that was all he *wanted* to look at. Sean Casey was indeed a bad man, and there was no possible question he did bad things to little girls, just as Amber had said. He wrote down the links and closed down the computer.

Back in the bedroom, he took out the card with Casey's number on it and dialed. He didn't give a damn what time it was.

It took several rings before Casey's sleepy voice answered.

"Casey, this is Doctor Jones," Bailey said.

"That's Special Agent Casey, Doctor. Please remember it in the future. Now what in hell do you want?"

"Child molester Casey might be a more appropriate title for. Are you interested now?"

"You're a fool Jones. No one would ever believe what an eight-year-old girls says, especially without proof. It's not true anyway."

Bailey gritted his teeth. He hated confrontations, but the memory of Amber's frightened gaze pushed him on. "I have the proof Casey. Let me read a few links for you and see if any of them jog your memory." He recited the Internet addresses of Casey's contacts and also the title of the files on Casey's computer that Wanda had somehow hacked into.

For a long moment there was dead silence on the other end of the line. Finally, Casey answered. "What do you want, Jones?"

Bailey had been thinking about it. "First off, you're not to say a damn word to anyone at the hospital about me seeing Pat Morrison on my own time. Not that there's anything wrong with it, but I don't need complications right now."

"I've already talked to the hospital administrator."

"Goddamnit," Bailey cursed, genuinely angry, which was an emotion he didn't allow often. He turned that scenario over in his mind for a moment, and when Casey added nothing to his remark, decided there was only one thing to do. "Then I suggest you call him back Monday morning and tell him you made a grievous error and that it wasn't me after all."

"What else?"

"Drop this investigation, Casey. There's nothing here that threatens national security. Just drop it and go away."

"Is that all?"

"One more thing. I have someone watching you, and I have copies of the files we downloaded in a safe place. I'd suggest you stick with females nearer to your own age in the future. Clear?"

"I'm not admitting anything, you bastard. What else?"

"That's all. Good night, you pervert." Bailey hung up the phone. He felt the tremor in his hand and a

lightheadedness from talking down the FBI agent. He wished mightily that he could turn the man in to authorities, but it was better to have something to hold over his head. He knew this sort of thing was likely to come up again. With the talents the children were developing, it was inevitable. He eased his conscious somewhat with the knowledge that he had put a stop to Casey's predations, at least for now.

\* \* \* \*

Sean Casey raged with hatred, but knew there was little he could do about Jones. Not now. The best he could hope for was that his private habits wouldn't be exposed to the world. An FBI agent wouldn't last any longer than the first venture into the exercise yard at a prison, and if he didn't go there, other means would be found to dispose of him. On the other hand, he knew Jones wasn't about to reveal anything. He would keep quiet in order to preserve his relationship with the Morrison woman and her daughter and in order to keep a hold on him. Damn the man. Damn the little devil bitch. What he wouldn't give to have her in a room alone. He'd show her bad things, but they wouldn't be bad to him. Not at all.

For the rest of the night, Casey remained awake trying to figure out a future course of action. He had the analysis of report cards, showing a clear uptick in grades of the young children. He had records of his interviews with other teachers, Larkin in particular. Those kids were developing peculiar talents. Just look how that little girl pinned him down just by looking at him a couple of times! He had records of the whole investigation on file, including the formula of the chemical the kids had ingested. Someone ought to be able to use his information. It was just a matter of finding the right people.

In the meantime, he intended to toss his computer into a dump somewhere and get rid of all references to the sites and correspondence where he had been involved. There was one other thing he could do, too. Bailey apparently wasn't aware of just how deviously digital data could be manipulated nowadays. It would cost him, but he intended to have all the digital records and photos of the few times he had been recorded in action changed so that it would look like the pictures had been a set up—an attempt to interpose his face with false images. Then, even if Bailey did have downloads, he could at least counter them with some others. It wasn't an elegant solution, but it was the best he could do. He realized now that he had been a fool to ever allow the images to be recorded—and even more of a fool to exchange correspondence with a few selected individuals like himself.

When daylight finally arrived, he decided there was one other person to see before leaving this hick city. Nora Larkin, the shrewish teacher he had talked to before. She had been really cooperative and he wanted to wring the last little bit of information he could out of her before going back to Little Rock. He had no doubt she would speak freely. She disliked the children who had been hospitalized, and like him, suspected there was more to them than met the eye.

\* \* \* \*

"But sir, I don't see the problem. You said that FBI agent called back and told you it was a case of mistaken identity. Besides, Ms. Morrison removed Amber from the study before I saw her."

By the time Bailey got the message to report to the hospital administrator's office Monday morning, he had already decided to admit seeing Pat, especially as it appeared she wanted the relationship to continue.

"But you did meet her away from the hospital, didn't you?" Robert Clayton, the hospital administrator asked with raised brows.

"Of course, though as yet it's nothing much. And for all I know she may be seeing someone else besides me. I should point out, though, that we're both single and both adults."

"Well, just be careful, Doctor Jones, Clayton said dubiously. "This is a small city; we have to watch

ourselves more closely than we would elsewhere. Now, tell me how the study is going as long as you're here."

"The children are all doing fine, Mister Clayton, and we don't have to worry about the expense this time; the school's insurance company is covering the costs."

"That's good, but I still want to be notified of any unusual developments, Doctor Jones, especially visits from the FBI. We have to cooperate with the government. A lot of our funding comes from them, after all."

"Sad but true," Bailey commiserated, glad to get off the subject of the children for the time being though he knew there were bound to be more questions raised as they matured.

For the next few minutes, he listened to Clayton's tales of problems running the hospital, merely having to nod and agree with him every minute or two. He was finally dismissed in a cordial air of good fellowship.

Bailey could hardly wait to call Pat, but he decided to postpone it until she had time to get home from school; he remembered a remark she had made about how casual calls disrupted classes and how she routinely turned her cell phone over to vibrate in class. When the time finally came, he was almost bubbling over with the news. As soon as she answered, he began.

"Pat, Casey had reported our, uh, relationship to the administrator, but I got a call from a friend late last night that gave me enough evidence to get him to retract. Oh yes, if anyone asks, you removed Amber from the study. Okay? And—"

Pat laughed. "Whoa! Sounds like we have a lot to talk about. If you're free, why don't you pick up some takeout and come by about six or so and tell me everything? I'll try to have all my papers graded by then."

Bailey didn't have to be asked twice. "What kind of food?"

"Just get some fried chicken. That's always good."

\* \* \* \*

The chicken, rolls, and potato salad had been the fare of the evening; the empty paper containers and greasy napkins were proof enough of that, and after dinner, Pat and Bailey were in the den with coffee while Amber drank ice tea. Pat had insisted that Amber be present while Bailey told her of the latest developments, and he had not objected. After going over all he could think of, he wrapped it up with his reasons for changing the records.

"I'm just worried about the kids. If the public knew what was happening with them now, there'd be a media frenzy. I'm also worried about not only the government, but other institutions getting interested in them. I take my real notes directly to a disposable drive and bring it home and store on my own computer. I feel guilty in a way for not entering all the data on their medical records, but I'm more concerned about the safety of the kids than my professional reputation."

"Bailey, I'm just glad it was you and not someone else who caught on to the changes in the kids. We can trust you to do what's right."

"I wish my dad would worry about me," Amber said forlornly.

Bailey's heart went out to the child. She was caught up in an experience that she really wasn't mature enough to handle, yet she was doing it very well.



"He never visits or calls," Pat said.

"Well, I guess I could serve as a substitute dad for you Amber, if you want me to. I worry about you, and I care what happens." Immediately after he had spoken, he lowered his gaze, realizing how that might have sounded, as if he were trying to force himself into the family, but when he looked up, Pat and Amber were both smiling at him. His heart melted again.

Amber came over and sat beside him on the couch. She looked up at him, her brown eyes appearing too big for her face. She took his hand and twisted her two little ones around it. "You would be a good daddy," she said gravely. "I can tell. And I won't let nobody know 'bout us."

Bailey felt tears gathering and brushed at his eyes. He didn't know exactly what lay in the future, but he knew with almost absolute certainty that trouble lay down the road, and he knew he would do all he could to protect this young girl. And her mother. And the other children. Amber nodded her head in agreement with his unspoken intentions and suddenly hugged him.

Once Amber was in bed and asleep, talk trailed off, and the invitation in Pat's eyes and mannerisms became so obvious that even Bailey couldn't mistake it. He took her in his arms. They kissed a long time. He stroked her back and the indentation of her waist, and, eventually, his hand strayed to her breast. Pat finally broke the embrace and said breathlessly "Bailey, please, let's go to bed."

Bailey let her lead him to the bedroom where she kissed him again.

"Get in bed. I'll be back in a minute," Pat said. She disappeared into the bathroom.

A few minutes later, she slid under the covers and snuggled up next to him, her body soft and sensuous beneath the flimsy covering of her negligee. Before long, even that ceased to be a barrier.

## BOOK TWO

### CHAPTER TEN

Amber realized she was pretty and that was part of the problem. She was several months short of her thirteenth birthday, but it was already apparent that she would be somewhat taller than her mother. It was also obvious that she had inherited the genes that would give her a figure like her mother, slim and nicely curved with generous breasts. Already her breasts were larger than all but a very few of the other girls her age, and that presented problems, too. Because of her gift, she could tell how nearly all the boys wanted to have sex with her, but the intentions of many of them were very vague about details. Others had more definite ideas, and it was those she disliked. Their intentions were crudely sexual and not much else.

Amber tried to remember her mother's advice. Interest in sex was a natural part of growing up, but despite all the talks with Mom and Bailey about how her "talent" worked, she still hadn't realized how easily she would be able to perceive the lustful yearning of boys. Even a couple of girls had looked at her that way, much to her surprise. She realized she hadn't been prepared for the whole experience, the shift from primary to middle school where some of the boys were two years older, experienced, and had very definite ideas about what they wanted. The subject was almost always on her mind and had begun to affect her studies. Her grades, once perfect, had begun to slip a little. She knew other girls in "the group," the same ones who had been in the first three grades of primary school when the terror attack happened, were having problems, too. She had been in the second then, what seemed like an eternity ago from the lofty vantage point of a sixth grader.

There was also a great divide between the students who had grown up in town and those who had transferred in after the attack. The new ones couldn't compete. They couldn't *know* what teachers intended to ask on quizzes and tests; they giggled over boys and didn't *know*, like the girls of the group did, how blatantly sexual their thoughts were, which girls they were interested in, and what they thought about individual girls. Amber thought of those classmates as almost like members of a separate species, unaware of all the innuendo, intentions, and deviousness that went on right in front of their eyes. It made her sad, too, and she felt sorry for them. On the other hand, some days she thought wistfully that it would be nice if she *didn't* know quite so much.

Even Jimmy who still lived next door, sweet and caring as he was, couldn't avoid thinking of her as a girl, an object of desire. Not always, but sometimes. He liked other things about her though, and that made it better. She smiled to herself, thinking of the few times they had kissed. If she ever decided to have sex, she thought it might be with him. At least they were the same type of people, though Jimmy's father wasn't as understanding as Bailey was, nor was his mother. To be fair though, she didn't think anyone could be as nice as Mom and Bailey. They never lied to her or tried to avoid sensitive subjects like sex and how some of the teachers didn't like them. Bailey was almost like a father; in fact, he was far better than some fathers the other kids told her about.

The teachers were getting to be a real problem, especially for her, Jimmy and Jeannie. The three of them had begun to realize this year that they were more perceptive than others of the group—sometimes much more perceptive, and they didn't know why. Even the change in schools hadn't helped much because the primary school teachers put everything on their records, which followed them when they graduated. Mrs. Larkin was the worst. Amber could still practically *feel* the dislike the teacher held for them overflowing her mind when they were in her class or passing her in the hall. She translated her thoughts into action, too, speaking negatively about them to other teachers. She had taught the group only three years until the first graders passed on to the fourth grade. That was enough, though, and unfortunately, she had

accepted a transfer to middle school and was teaching a Language Arts class. Already, she was grading her former third graders with a heavy hand, especially in composition. She must be talking about them, too. Amber had caught the same attitudes that Mrs. Larkin held in some of her other teachers. They looked at her and the others like her as if they were active cheaters and had to be watched constantly.

Amber sighed and blinked as the final period bell rang. As she gathered her computer and other materials, she decided to ask Mom and Bailey what to do. It wasn't like she or the others could turn their ability on and off like a light bulb. It was just *there*, like vision and hearing, and now she and Jimmy and Jeannie were even beginning to feel a little different from the rest of the group in a manner she wasn't quite sure of yet. She remembered a few days before when one of the girls who hadn't been around for the terror attack asked her point blank if she could read minds. Amber had laughed as if it was a big joke and said of course not; if she could read minds, she would know whether or not Henry Keller, that cute eighth grader, was interested in her. After that, she changed the subject as Bailey and Mom suggested she do when questions like that came up. She didn't mention that she *knew* Henry was more than interested or that she wasn't. He had been in the fourth grade when the attack occurred and showed some of the younger one's abilities but not enough to make him a part of their group. Besides, he might be good looking on the surface, but inside he was gross. The thing was that she and Jimmy and Jeannie knew more about Henry than the others of their group, but she didn't know why that should be.

There was something else she had noticed that she didn't like. Some of the other kids of the group, especially the boys, were beginning to act brazenly with their ability to sense intentions and attitudes. They were taking advantage of girls, excelling in contact sports, even as sixth graders because they could judge intentions, cheating in class by watching nearby students' attitudes. A few had even learned they could commit larceny with near impunity. Even when caught, they could tell almost exactly what the authorities knew and didn't know, what they intended to ask, and when they what kind of answers they would be satisfied with. The ability allowed them to wiggle out of almost any accusation. Even worse was one boy who had begun to peddle stolen prescription drugs. He knew he wouldn't have to worry about undercover policemen around the school; he would *know* them almost immediately and not do business around them.

"You act like you're in a daze, Amber. What's wrong?" Jeannie Burger, her best friend, asked as she joined her in the hall. Like Amber, she was wearing jeans and a short sleeved blouse over a halter top. The top and bottom two buttons were unfastened, as the current style called for.

"Oh, you know. Mrs. Larkin thinks we're cheating. I guess we're going to have to deliberately flunk some tests to get her off our case."

Jeannie frowned, the lines on her young face making her look older and still more attractive than she already was. She was almost as developed as Amber, and some boys thought she was prettier because of her long blond hair and expensive clothes. Amber thought her one real fault was her inability to refrain from teasing boys. She could sense their intentions and stymie them so easily, and she had fun doing it.

"Well, I'm not going to put down any wrong answers just to make the old creeper happy. I can't help it if I get hunches about what she's going to ask on a test and neither can you. It's not our fault."

"No, but Mom says we shouldn't let other people know or even guess. Bailey says so, too, and you know he's a psychologist."

"I guess you're right," Jeannie conceded. "But you're lucky. Your parents talk to you. My mom and dad are so busy I hardly ever see them." It was a familiar lament with Jeannie.

"I guess we're all lucky Bailey is interested in us. He talks to everyone's parents when they get worried."

Amber had a sudden thought. "You know, if you run into problems, you can always talk to my mom and Bailey. You don't have to tell your folks about it. Some of the other kids in the group have. They won't embarrass you or tell you that you're on the skids. They understand."

"You're lucky," Jeannie said again. "Anyhow, what difference would it make? The teachers kind of know anyway."

"Uh huh, but they can't prove it. Bailey says if they could, we might be locked up somewhere and experimented on. He and Mom are like worry bandits over all of us, especially about what crooks might do if they knew about us."

"It must be nice to have someone to worry," Jeannie said wistfully as they passed through the main entrance to the sidewalk outside. "Maybe I will come talk to your mom and Bailey. They're sugared and creamed. Jimmy thinks so, too."

"Yeah. I—"

A shrill wolf whistle interrupted their conversation. Amber didn't even have to look to know who it was: Jordan Rhieman, a big eighth grade boy who studied just enough to avoid failing. He concentrated much more on girls and the wild, off-beat jitterswing music vids just now becoming popular.

Amber and Jeanine both ignored him. To them, he broadcasted his thoughts almost as crudely as a movie villain, and they were blatantly sexual. If she looked around, Amber knew she would get an impression of him forming images of herself and Jeannie as naked as the pornographic images passed around on phones and computers. She didn't look, but Jeannie did and turned quickly away.

"He comes on like a freight train," she said, even though she was curious about what it would be like to be with him. "He likes to get girls alone. I can tell. Even if I couldn't, Annie told me he popped a button on her blouse when she wouldn't let him get his hand inside her bra."

"Stay away from him. He's a real broke rock," Amber warned. "And dumb besides." She had been cornered by Jordy recently between classes at a bend in the hall, and she had to stomp his foot to get out of his clutches. Apparently, it hadn't dissuaded him a bit. Amber wondered if she would have to use more of the techniques she was learning in the martial arts classes she had been attending twice a week for the year along with Jimmy and a few others of the group. Bailey had suggested it when she was eleven and her breasts first began to swell. She smiled thinking of how protective he and her mom were, but she was glad. They didn't make a big thing of it, and they always gave reasons for anything they did.

"Hey Melay! Wait up!"

Amber turned at the slang hail and stopped, her face lit up in a smile as she recognized Jimmie's voice. He joined them a moment later, his dark hair even more tousled than usual. Amber reached up and tried to brush it into place. It stubbornly resisted her efforts, as she knew it would, but she felt a sudden impulse to touch someone nice like Jimmy after being subjected to Jordy's unwelcome attention.

"Aw, Amber, you know my hair won't stay in place. Mom says it's like I'm fertilizing it." He fell in step with the girls as they continued the walk home, only a two block trip now that they were in middle school.

"I like it," she assured him and was rewarded with a pleased expression and a notion that he wanted to kiss her again. Amber took his hand and walked in step with him, having to lengthen her strides to keep up with him for a moment. He sensed almost immediately that he was walking too quickly and slowed down.

"I'll see you twink later," Jeannie said as she turned off toward her home at the first intersection.

Jimmy waved at her and turned immediately to Amber. "Is that Jordy creeper bothering you and Jeannie again?" His face had lost its usual cheerful countenance. "If he is, I'll hurt him."

"It's okay, Jimmy."

"No, it's not. He's a broke rock. If he tries anything with you, let me know, and I'll toss him in the trash."

Amber squeezed his hand. "I can handle him," she said, wondering if it were true. He was not only big for his age but had once been held back a grade, so was a year older than the other eighth graders.

"You sure?"

"If I can't, I'll give you a trace. Remember what Bailey says. It's better not to attract the insects. They'll start gnawing on us."

"Just don't wait too long," Jimmy said balefully, concern written as plainly on his face and as easily readable as seventy-two point font on a blank screen.

"I won't," she said. On impulse, she stopped walking. She reached up to his neck and pulled his face down. She kissed him on the lips and smiled at how pleased he was by her action. "See you later. I've got a cargo plane of homework tonight, including some for the L creeper."

"I'm glad I don't have her," Jimmy remarked. "Trace me later." He waved and cut across the yard to his own house.

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Bailey smiled at Amber as she skipped inside. Every time he saw her, he thought how quickly she was growing up and what bright, beautiful young woman she was turning into. He didn't try to conceal his pride in her, knowing she was already aware of it. He had even adjusted his own hours so he could be home when she returned from school. He never had liked the idea of "latch-key" kids. "Hello, Lumpkin. You look happy."

"Hi, Bailey. I am, or I guess I would be, if old—I mean if Mrs. Larkin wouldn't be so hard on us kids."

Bailey grinned at her slip in almost calling the teacher "Old Lady Larkin, or perhaps something worse."

Amber returned it knowing full well that he knew what she had wanted to say, but Bailey and Mom were strict about epithets. He also knew when she said "us kids" it meant the special group, the first through third graders who had been exposed to the terrorist chemical more than four years ago.

"I wish I could do something about her, Lumpkin, but there isn't. Just try not to give her any reason to talk about you, and pass that on to the other kids, too. We've got to keep a low profile."

Amber dropped her books on the coffee table and went to give Bailey a hug before picking them back up and going to her room. She liked to get her homework out of the way first thing and be done with it.

Bailey remained seated in his big easy chair and thought about how the last four years had gone.

He and Pat had married six months after first spending the night together. Sometimes he wondered how he had gotten so lucky. They didn't seem to argue like the majority of couples did, nor did they have differing ideas on how to raise Amber. He didn't think it was simply because he was a physician or a psychologist. So far as he could tell, it was just pure compatibility. They had decided on another child,

but so far, Pat had failed to conceive. In the meantime, the group of kids he still felt responsible for continued to draw them ever closer as Amber grew up. With every day that passed, he and Pat could see how sharp her perceptive ability was and how it was continuing to develop. Besides that, the parents of the other children had gradually begun consulting him when problems with their youngsters came up. He charged those who were well able to pay and saw the others at a discount or free. He and Pat had no real need of extra money what with her settlement from the school's insurer over the terrorist incident and his inheritance from his remaining parent, which he recieved shortly after they married.

He continued to worry about the group. Amber was coming along fine, with even fewer problems than girls nearing the teenage years usually displayed. He thought it was partly because her ability had contributed to attaining a maturity beyond her years. In fact, Amber had become a conduit to the other kids. She didn't mind talking about them, and herself, at all. For years, events had progressed with little problem other than a few teachers who were suspicious of the group but didn't quite know why. Fortunately, they didn't believe Larkin's story about mind readers, even untrue as it was, and, so far, he had heard nothing else from the FBI or from Casey. However, recently, he had begun worrying again. The kids were growing up, and a few were already acting in a manner that he and Pat both thought was endangering them all. Already, several distraught parents had called him the last few months.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amber was still in her room doing homework when Pat arrived nearly two hours later. Bailey got up to kiss her and noticed immediately that something was wrong. She had smiled at him, but it wasn't the kind he loved, the big, enriching smile she usually wore when seeing him first thing in the morning and in the evening after work.

Bailey kissed her gently and held her against him a moment before asking "What's wrong sweetheart? Bad day?"

"Yes. Do we have anything in the house to drink other than wine? I think I need one today. Thank God it's Friday."

"We have some bourbon. Put your things away, and I'll fix some for us."

Bailey poured the liquor over ice cubes in a couple of short glasses and added a bit of water to each. He handed Pat one when she came back into the living room and sat down with her on the couch.

"Is Amber home from school?"

"She's in her room doing her homework so she'll have the weekend free. Smart girl."

"I wish more of her classmates would get into the habit, but never mind that." Pat took a big sip of the bourbon. Her expression hardened.

"Larkin again?" Bailey guessed.

"Yes. That ... bitch! Sorry, but I don't know any other way to describe her. She's more of a menace to the school system than politicians running for reelection."

Bailey had to laugh. "As bad as that?"

"Every bit. Do you now what she did now?" The question was purely rhetorical, for she answered it herself. "She got me aside and accused Amber of cheating and reading her mind; she says she has the devil in her. She thinks other of the kids can do it, too, and that they're all devil-spawned fiends! Can you believe it? And worst of all, she says she's going to do something about it."

Bailey had been scared of something like this happening. Larkin had voiced her suspicions in the past but never so stridently. Perhaps she thought she had more leeway now that she had announced her retirement plans. "Maybe we ought to suggest to the school board that she's mentally ill."

Pat laughed harshly and drank more of her bourbon and water. "We wouldn't be believed because she's in cahoots with the principal, that Schaffer woman who thinks she knows everything. Neither of them are stupid, Bailey, and they're too damn smart to go public with the mind reading bit. But Larkin saves up examples and tells the other teachers and Schaffer about them. I think she's actually convinced a couple of them that it's true."

"What—mind reader or cheat?"

"Both. All I can say is that it's a good thing she's retiring next year, or I might be tempted to ask Amber to find out what's really on her mind."

"Do you think she knows?"

"Of course she does, Bailey, but she's a good girl. We've taught her to keep knowledge like that to herself. The thing is, she's getting better and better at perceiving intentions and attitudes, so are Jimmy and her friend Jeannie, for that matter."

"I've noticed it with her and Jimmy. I haven't seen Jeannie lately."

"She's been here when you were gone the last couple of times, but I see her all the time. Remember, I have her in one of my classes. Bailey, what are we going to do?"

"Do about what?" Amber asked as she came into the room with a glass of iced tea. She searched Pat and Bailey's faces and her cheerful expression vanished. "Oh. Mrs. Larkin."

"Yes, Mrs. Larkin," Pat said, knowing it was useless to try keeping the information to herself. "She's causing problems again."

"Mom, I could tell you some things about her that..." Amber broke off as she saw that neither her mother nor Bailey wanted her to continue. "I'm sorry. I know I'm not supposed to tell on people, but Mom, she's *mean!*"

"I know she is, baby, but we don't want to let her drag us down to her level."

"You kids have to be careful. It could get to be a habit, holding a person's private life over their head like blackmail," Bailey added. "So far, most of you have done well, and we're proud of you."

"You did it with that awful FBI agent, Bailey," Amber reminded him.

"Yes, but what he was doing was horrible and highly illegal. Besides, I did it more to protect you kids from harm than for myself or Pat. Is there anything Mrs. Larkin is doing that's illegal?"

"Not that I know of," Amber conceded after a moment's thought. "Nothing serious, anyway." She came over and sat down beside her mother on the couch, leaning forward so that she could look past her at Bailey. "I'm sorry to be dragging her, but she is making trouble. She's even been going to Mrs. Schaffer about us. I wish her and Mrs. Schaffer had stayed at the primary school, like Mrs. Gomez did." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Some of the boys in the group are making trouble, too. Even a few of the girls."

Bailey sighed. He started to comment, but Amber interrupted. "Oh, golly, I must have had an EC moment. I forgot—Mrs. Larkin told one of the other kids the FBI was going to investigate us again, and I think it's that ... that Casey man she was ramping her B-cells over. I thought he was all taken care of."

"Oh, damn," Bailey said. "I take it EC means an elder citizen moment and by ramping her B-cells you mean brain cells, as in she was using them to think of him?"

Amber grinned, remembering how Mom had given her a book to read on how young people's slang sometimes changed the language and how it grew and was constantly being modified. It was interesting. Some of the old words were strange but usually funny and pertinent the way they related to cultural, political, and social trends. She had enjoyed it, except that by the time it was published, a lot of the words weren't even being used any more. "Yep, you got it right first time," she said to Bailey.

"I guess I better ask Wanda to see if she can find out what he's up to now. This doesn't sound good if it really is Casey. I can't understand how he would dare start up again, not with all the stuff Wanda gave me on him. And Lumpkin, tell me more about the kids causing problems, would you please? I've talked to some of them and some of the parents, but not all of them."



Amber laughed. She thought it was funny the way Mom and Bailey still called her by pet names from when she was a little girl. She didn't mind, really, because they were always careful not to do it except in private. She watched her mom and stepfather sip at their drinks while she thought about how to begin. Finally, she decided to just let it out. Mom and Bailey weren't like some parents who got twisted sideways when the word was mentioned.

"It's mostly sex that's the problem," she said. "The boys our own age are using their perception to cernify—to tell—which girls will do what and how to get them to do it for them. The older boys that can't sense as much as our group are trying it too." She hesitated, but she eventually went on. "But it's mostly the ones in our group who can really get girls to do things. That's making some of the ones not in the group jealous and lurching mad. I've already told you about that one kid selling dope and a couple others are shoplifting or stealing stuff where there's no vids 'cause they know they can get away with it. And some other stuff."

"Is that all, sweetie?"

Amber grinned again. It was kind of nice having two adults you could talk to about anything, even if she didn't *tell* them everything. A girl had to have *some* secrets.

"Well, the boys in the group are always thinking about sex. I guess some of the girls do too, but not as much. It's the bad ones who are the real lizards. They undress us in their minds all the time. Jimmy doesn't much, even though he thinks about sex a lot. He's nice around us and doesn't try to take advantage of other girls. Everyone likes him. Me, too."

Bailey noticed how her expression softened as she began talking about Jimmy. "Hmm. Do I detect a bit of romance between you two? Or is that any of my business?"

"It's okay. We've kissed some, and I know he likes me as a friend as well as a girl. But Bailey ... Mom ... I don't know what to do about the others. Even Jeannie sometimes teases the poor boys who don't know. I try to get her not to, but she doesn't listen."

"Maybe she's feeling left out with you and Jimmy getting close," Pat observed. She had noticed how Jeannie sneaked glances at Jimmy in her class. She had also moved on up to teaching at the middle school.

"Oh, Mom, we're not close like that," Amber said, stopping when she realized what she'd said wasn't entirely accurate. "Well, not yet anyway, or not too much, anyway, I guess. We're still too young, I think, even if we do know more than most other kids."

Pat was sure she did. Children matured so young nowadays, and the perceptive ones like Amber were maturing even more rapidly than normal. She smiled reassuringly at her daughter but was a little sad all the same. Her little girl was becoming a woman. "You'll be thirteen soon. Maybe we should begin thinking about an implant."

"Mom..." Amber blushed for the first time. A memory popped into her mind of how much she liked it when Jimmy's arms were around her and how good it felt to have his hands pressed against her back. She had thought the last time he kissed her that it would probably feel even better if his hands were touching her front.

Bailey, with his history of often painful shyness, wanted to change the subject for now after he saw the color suffuse Amber's face. The last thing young people wanted was to be embarrassed. It was best to talk about something else or leave it with Pat perhaps. He stood up. "This sounds like it's getting into a mother-daughter thing. Why don't you two talk while I go see if Wanda's home?"

Amber gave him a grateful look. Sometimes she thought her stepfather had an enhanced perceptive sense of his own.

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Bailey tried both of Wanda's phone numbers and got an "Out of service" recording for each of them. *That's strange*, he thought. *She's never moved without giving me her new address or number before*. He glanced at his watch and decided to call her employer on the off chance she was still at work.

"Sanford Labs, Research. Can I help you?"

*My word*, Bailey thought, *A real person, first time out of the chute*. "Yes, may I speak to Wanda Greenleigh if she's still there?"

"Wanda—she's not here anymore."

"Well, would you have any way I could contact her? It's very important."

There was a long silence at the other end, then a reply. "Maybe a psychic could contact her. No one else can, that's for sure."

A warning bell began sounding in Bailey's mind. "What do you mean?"

"Wanda was killed in her own home by a burglar a month ago. Poor girl; she was so nice, too. Everyone loved her."

"Did they ever catch her killer?" Bailey asked, his heart beginning to feel like a lump of lead in his chest.

"No, not that I've heard. I'm very sorry. Was she a friend?"

"Thank you. Yes, she was a very good friend."

Bailey hung up and simply sat in his office chair for a long time. Was it possible that a burglary wasn't the reason she had been murdered? It didn't seem conceivable, but Bailey didn't much believe in coincidence. Not for something like this. Larkin, stirring the pot again. Amber, sensing that Larkin was perhaps in contact with Casey again. Larkin talking to Shaeffer, the principal, as Casey had done four or five years ago. And now Wanda murdered. That was too much of a stretch. On impulse, he got up and unlocked his file cabinet where he stored important documents. The implicating evidence Wanda had given him about Casey was in the bottom drawer, far to the back and laying flat behind the upright files, out of sight. He searched the drawer and the cabinet and the drawer again before he could make himself believe the big sealed envelope was gone.

Frantic now, he began going through his password protected computer files. Again, the information on Casey was missing, gone without a trace. By this time, Bailey's heart was beating rapidly as the implication of the stolen documents and files swept over him. Someone had broken into their home, violating their sanctity with brazen impunity, and one of his best and oldest friends had been murdered. *Probably by the same person*, he thought desolately, *and I'm certainly responsible for her death*.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Pat saw the grim look on Bailey's face when he returned to the living room.

Bailey looked around. "Is Amber still here?"

"She's gone over to Jimmy's house for a while to chat with Jeanie. Those kids are like a hive of bees; they're never out of contact for long. What is it, hon?"

"Well, we can talk to Amber later. I just learned that Wanda was murdered recently, supposedly by a burglar."

"Oh, Bailey. I'm sorry. I never knew her, but I know you were close."

She reflected a moment. "Why do you say supposedly?"

Bailey lowered his gaze and thought about having another drink. He saw that Pat had already started on her second. He held up a finger asking her to wait and headed for the bar. A moment later he was back, carrying a glass of bourbon, but, at the moment, he was too preoccupied to think about the ice or water. He sat down by Pat and finally responded to her last comment.

"There are too many coincidences, Pat. Is it five yet?" Bailey usually took off his watch when he got home.

Pat glanced at hers. "Not yet. Why?"

"I want to see if Casey is still at the Little Rock FBI office." He thumbed through the address book where he had written the number from Casey's card and dialed. Pat listened intensely as he held the phone to his ear after asking to speak to Casey. When he replaced the phone she knew something was awry.

"I suspected as much. Casey is no longer with the FBI, and, brace yourself, we've been robbed sometime during the last year."

"What!"

Bailey nodded. "Yes, robbed. Someone broke into the house while we were all gone. It was probably our friend Casey, or someone he knows, who slipped in here and stole the documents that Wanda sent me. That person also wiped all the files concerning Casey and his little perverted sideline off my computer."

"My God, Bailey—if he could do that without us knowing, he could have killed us! Right in our own home! Can't we do something about it?"

Bailey took her hand. "Sweetheart, I don't think he wants us dead, or he would already have seen to it. What I'm afraid of is that he must be planning something bad for the kids."

"Amber!" Pat stood up and started to reach for the phone, but Bailey still had hold of her hand. She looked down at him. "I want to tell her to come home. Right now." Her voice was trembling with fear; she was truly afraid for the first time in years.

"Pat, I think she's fine for now. No one is going to do anything in broad daylight. She'll be home for supper in a half hour anyway. What we need to do is figure out our next move."

Pat let Bailey pull her back down beside him. He put his arm around her and kissed her gently without a hint of amorous intent. She accepted the comforting attention and huddled against him, lost for the moment in the complex emotions of the protective parental instinct that was demanding immediate action, but being restrained by the need to be comforted herself. When she sat back upright, she sighed and kissed Bailey again, managing a grateful smile afterward.

"Bailey, you're such a good man. I don't know what Amber and I would have done if you hadn't come along."

"You're a good person, too, sweetheart. I love you, and I don't think I could love Amber any more if she were my own daughter. Be that as it may, we still have to come up with a plan of some kind."

"You're sure this couldn't just be coincidence? Just Casey wanting to get clear of incriminating evidence?" Pat asked, not really thinking it could be true but wanting it to be just the same.

"I might be wrong," Bailey said, "but when have you known Amber to be mistaken about anything she declares so positively?"

Pat nodded agreement. Amber *knew* about things like that, and she was getting better at it all the time. Pat felt a tender wave of love for Amber sweep over her, but, immediately, fear for her safety replaced it. She felt tears forming and tried desperately to hold them back. One escaped anyway and trickled down her face.

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Amber's PPC was in her lap, cradled in its unfolded keypad. Jimmy sat beside her with his own in the same position so each could see Jeannie's conversational rejoinders as they talked. Their fingers roved over the keys with the speed and dexterity a court reporter would envy, but the language they used bore only a passing resemblance to English as it was taught in school. It was saturated with abbreviations, euphemisms, slang, anagrams, and phrases designed purposely to be read one way by them but interpreted entirely different should a parent or other adult try to judge the decency of their messaging, so much so that no one but the current generation of near teens and students in high school could make sense of it.

Amber was acutely aware of Jimmy's thigh against her own and that their shoulders were touching as they talked with Jeannine. Every few moments, they paused, glanced toward the kitchen to be sure Mrs. Gomez wasn't watching, looked at each other, and kissed briefly. It was like a game, even though Amber and Jimmy both knew Mrs. Gomez was aware that they were probably stealing a kiss or two while she was busy preparing dinner. Sometimes Amber's fingers stayed busy at the keyboard even as her lips were pressed against Jimmy's. She had just mentioned her mother's remark about an implant to Jeannie, causing Jimmy to blush even though his perceptive sense had already picked up a hint of it from her.

"No lie! Mom would kill me if I even suggested something like that!" Jeannine responded in their abbreviated version of regular text. "Your mom and Bailey are colder than cool. When are you going to get it?"

"I told her we were too young."

"Bertie is our age, and she's already doing it. And Kindra and her gang are going to lipstick fests already."

"They're not us," Jimmy typed, but he couldn't stop his imagination or his perception from working. He knew Amber couldn't either.

"We probably will, but not yet," Amber wrote without glancing at Jimmy.

"Where am I going to be? You two are the only ones I really like. Gordon can't ... whatever it is we do."

Amber and Jimmy knew what she meant. Increasingly, their minds were taking paths that the other kids in the group seemed unaware of.

"I guess I should ask Bailey about us."

"What if he doesn't like it?"

"He's not like that. Neither is Mom."

Melissa Gomez came into the living room. "Amber, dinner is about ready, and Joe will be home in a few minutes. He's in town for a few days. Would you like to eat with us?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Gomez. Mom and Bailey are 'specting me in a jiffer. In fact, I better moodle 'fore I'm late."

Melissa blinked then smiled at the youngsters as she correctly interpreted the slang.

Amber folded up the keyboard and closed the cover over her phone.

"S'later," Jimmy said. "I gotta go wash up." He winked and Amber winked back at him in lieu of another kiss. She stood up and walked back home, slowing after she left the front entrance of Jimmy's house to give herself a moment or two to think by herself.

Her remark about "probably doing it" had been spontaneous, but with a moment or two alone to reflect, she recognized the truth. Unless something drastic happened to prevent it, she knew that she and Jimmy would become intimate, even though she still wasn't in a great hurry. She kept in mind the talks where she and Mom had discussed the matter of sex and growing up. Her mother had told her that children were maturing physically much earlier than in the "olden days" but that it took good parents to guide their mental advancement. Amber thought it was probably true, even though it didn't apply so much in the case of the group, where they could perceive so many attitudes and see some of the resulting actions. Although, now that she thought about it, some of the kids appeared to be lacking guidance or had become so confident in their abilities that they didn't think they needed it.

Before going inside, she stopped a moment at the door, mulling over their last remarks again. Amber could practically *feel* the widening difference between herself, Jimmy, and Jeannie lately. They could just about read each others' minds! It was becoming scary at times. Maybe Bailey could do some tests or something and find out. In the meantime, the three of them had agreed to keep their differences secret, even letting Bailey and her mom know only that they were beginning to feel a little alienated from others of the group, especially from the normal kids. They had decided not to try to define their increased talent, not yet. It wasn't hurting anything.

Amber would have known something was wrong yet again, even if Pat hadn't met her halfway between the door and the living room couch and hugged her. She could just look at her mother and know she was afraid for her and wanted to protect her. A glance past Pat's shoulder told her Bailey felt the same.

Bailey watched the embrace and noted that Amber's head peered at him past her mother's face. She was only an inch or so shorter than her mother now. He had already decided she was going to be one of the girls who was fully mature physically at fifteen, and he hoped he and Pat could keep helping her with the transition, not only physically, but mentally. So far, he thought his stepdaughter was doing wonderfully well.

Amber perceived Bailey's approval of her and grinned at him when Pat released her.

"Hi Lumpkin. How's Jimmy?"

"He's growing, just like me," she replied. "I don't smell anything cooking."

"We decided to send out for pizza," Pat said. "Unless you object, that is."

"I'll just force myself to eat it," she said, laughing. "Have you ordered yet?"

"No, Bailey and I wanted to talk to you first if you can wait a bit."

"Sure. 'It's about Larkin and Casey again, huh?'"

Pat was too upset to correct her for not using a title with the names. "Yes, but let Bailey tell you. I might start crying."

Amber seated herself between them and listened solemnly as Bailey described what was happening. She could perceive his concern for her and for her mother along with his love for both of them.

When he had finished, Amber asked, "What can I do to help?"

Bailey glanced at her sitting between them, looking so fresh and so young in the shorts and pullover she had changed into after school, marveling that she was so young and was still mature enough to ask how she could help rather than avoid the situation or depend on them to solve everything.

Pat looked to Bailey. He had already been thinking about it and had an answer ready. He took off his glasses so that Amber could observe without hindrance how serious he was.

"Lumpkin, I think the most important thing you can do is keep your eyes open for any strange men or women you see hanging around the school or the movies or the skating rink and mall—well, you get the idea, I know. The usual hangouts. Pass this on to the other kids, especially Jimmy and Jeannie."

Amber nodded and Bailey continued. "If you or anyone else does spot strangers showing an interest in you, try to perceive what they're up to. If one of the other kids sees them first, you might get them to notify any of you three real quick so maybe one of you can get a take on them since you're better at it. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir," Amber said, all but admitting that Bailey knew the three of them were becoming more adept—and different—than others in the group. "Are they really dangerous? Would they hurt us, like that Casey wanted to?"

"Baby, I'm not sure. I suspect that if the government or some other organizations start to believe Mrs. Larkin's tales, they'll try to come up with a pretext to take you into custody." He hadn't intended to mention that some groups, like drug cartels or security agents for instance, probably wouldn't bother with a pretext but simply grab them. He smiled mirthlessly as he saw that Amber caught it immediately. He should have known better than to try sugarcoating the threat. Amber grinned at him as she perceived that rueful admission to himself, too.

"I'll tell the kids to be careful," Amber said. Then, without disclosing how rapidly she, Jimmy, and Jeannie were developing broader powers than the others, she told Bailey how the three were beginning to feel "different" from the others. After that, she used her perceptive sense to steer the conversation in another direction despite the guilty feeling she felt in her stomach for doing it to Bailey and her mother. It would have made her feel dishonest had she not intended to talk to them about the three later, after she had

more of a handle on just what they were becoming. She didn't intend to delay it long; she wanted to know *why*, and Bailey could probably help. Right now, she would rather find out what else Bailey had planned to protect them.

As if perceptive himself, Bailey said "One more thing. I'm going to buy a handgun and take the concealed weapons course so I can carry it legally. Pat, honey, I won't insist, but I'd feel a lot better if you'd do the same. Amber is too young for a permit, but she can go to a firing range as soon as she turns thirteen, which is less than two weeks from now." He smiled at both of them, this time truly amused. "I guess you can have a Turnteen Party if you want to, Lumpkin. If you do, we better start planning."

"Oh mercy, Bailey, Amber and I have already talked about that and already have it mostly planned. I was intending to get us all together and see what our prospective new teen wanted for a present then all this came up."

"No time like the present, but let's order our pizza first."

"Go ahead, baby while Bailey and I hash out this gun thing."

Amber went, already knowing what the decision would be. Mom would talk about it, but in her mind, she had already agreed. She would go through the course with Bailey and let her go to the range with them! A sudden atavistic thrill shot through her body as she thought about it, making her stutter as she gave the operator their pizza order. Now she knew what she wanted for her Turnteen Party. A gun for herself, even if she couldn't legally carry it out of the house on her own.

She put the phone back in its cradle, wondering if Mom and Bailey knew the difference between a Turnteen Party and TurnOteen party. The other one was the kind where some privacy could be anticipated and where the girls invited and the guest of honor would have a chance to try his or her first oral sex. Or, for some girls, not the first. She knew most parents would be horrified if they realized what went on, but teens were fairly blasé about the idea. Some kids even congregated in what they called a "LSF," the acronym for Lipstick Fest, ostensibly a gathering to exchange, compare and discuss various lip colors, but, in reality, a game where the girls "marked" the guys present with a particular brand of lipstick. Whatever parents thought, it beat getting pregnant for sure, even though she didn't think she was ready for that step yet, much less sex.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The pizza had soaked up some of the bourbon, but a liter of wine split between them had Bailey and Pat in a very amorous mood by the time they retired.

Bailey watched as Pat came from the bathroom into the dimly lighted bedroom. A flickering candle cast moving shadows and highlights over her body, which was clad in a nightgown she knew he liked to see her in, a thin light blue color that zipped open from the top of the bodice to the hem. Her breasts swayed provocatively beneath the fabric as she walked toward the bed, their movement and the stride of her slim legs first revealing, then partially concealing the splendor of her figure. He never tired of her and never ceased to be amazed that she had chosen him to share her life with.

Pat came into bed beside him and flung the covers back immediately. She slid over into his waiting embrace, already eager for his attention. She loved the way he touched her, gently but confidently. His hand moved over her back and to her thighs then traced the curve of her hip to the indentation of her waist and up to her breasts. She shifted slightly, giving him freer access and began her own exploration.

Bailey found the zipper and slid it open slowly, pausing in increments to caress her firm breasts and touch her nipples, already erect with excitement. A moment later her gown was open, baring all of her body to him.

Pat gave a soft little anticipatory moan and drew Bailey to her, holding him tightly, loving the strength and comfort she gathered from the feel of his hard body. She lay back and pulled him over her. A moment later he was inside her, his murmured endearments stimulating her all the more. She held him with her arms and legs and hands, wanting nothing more than to prolong the act, to make it last as long as possible. Her senses blurred with the intenseness of their mounting excitement until she could hold it back no longer. She bit at his shoulder to muffle her cries then tears and laughter and the unintelligible noises of total involvement went unheard by either of them as the peak of their orgasms wrapped their senses in a total togetherness that nothing else could penetrate.

\* \* \* \*

Amber woke up to a noise and realized it wasn't sounds she was hearing, but something in her mind, something coming from a secondary source. A dream? No, it was real, noise and emotion, an intense, mounting emotion impinging on her awareness, yet it was as soundless as if it was happening in a vacuum. *Mom! Bailey!* She set up in bed, startled and scared, remnants of sleep flying from her mind like patches of fog being blown away by a sudden wind. For a moment, she thought they were being hurt because of the powerful feelings of mounting excitement that suffused her mind, almost overwhelming her with their intensity, and then, almost as if she were there, she could hear them, not audibly but ... somehow; she could feel the wonderful sense of passionate release along with the bursts of mingled noises from both of them, exploding silently in her mind, *Oh, Oh! Oh God! I love you, oh, oh! Ahhh, oh God!* It went on and on, and while it continued, she could *feel* the mingled length of their bodies, almost as if she were participating in the act. Amber knew that Mom and Bailey must be making love, and knew she shouldn't be listening or whatever it was she was doing, but there was no way she could shut it off. She covered her ears and closed her eyes, trying not to intrude on their privacy and wondering if they could sense her, and still the sensations assaulted her, almost as if she were in the same room with them. Just when she thought she must do something, make some violent move, anything to distract her, the awareness of their emotions impinging on her mind slowed; they became less intense and then gradually faded to nothing.

For a long time Amber lay awake, shocked by what had happened, sometimes hugging herself in despair,



sometimes crying, but still not able to put the experience aside. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced she had actually become mixed up in Bailey and Mom's minds while they were having sex, and despite knowing it was a horrible intrusion, something no one should be able to do, she couldn't help but remember how much they enjoyed the act, how intense their pleasure had been, how much they loved each other and clung together in mutual rapture.

All the while, another concern kept her from sleeping. She couldn't stop herself from wondering whether it was always like that or whether it would be as enjoyable for her as it appeared to be for them when she decided to do it herself. Her last thought before finally falling asleep sometime after midnight was of Jimmy. Would it be that good with him?

\* \* \* \*

When Amber opened her eyes the next morning, the first thing she thought of was what had taken place during the night. For a while she lay in bed, trying to convince herself it had all been a dream. Finally, she sighed and sat up. It was no dream. It was another manifestation of her increasing ability to know what other people were inside, but this was different just as the way she and Jimmy and Jeannie had noticed the last month or two. Previously, she hadn't wanted to believe they could actually read someone else's thoughts; all of them kept attributing the occasional intrusions into their minds as just a more intense working of their mirror neurons like Bailey had explained on numerous occasions. Now there was simply no denying it. She sat in bed for a while longer with her chin propped on her knees, wondering how often she would experience other people's emotions, the very inner workings of their minds. It might be interesting and informative at times, but even as young as she was, Amber knew it could be dangerous. She knew she wouldn't want anyone reading her mind and knew she would resent it horribly if anyone did. Well, maybe not Jimmy, but even with him there were a few things she wouldn't want him to know. How would she feel if the L Creeper could tell what she was thinking? Or ... she didn't want to think about it any more. Not now. Finally, she got up, showered, and dressed in jeans and a top.

For the first time in her life, Amber felt hesitant about facing her mother and Bailey. Would they know? She didn't think so; they had been so involved, she doubted if a train wreck would have caught their attention, but she still felt something like embarrassment when she came into the living room.

"G'morning Lumpkin. You slept in this morning," Bailey said from his easy chair where he was reading the morning paper.

"I guess I was tired," Amber answered. "Where's Mom?"

"She went to the bedroom to lie back down for a little while. We had more to drink last night than usual. Want me to fix breakfast?"

Amber had a hard time facing him as she leaned down to his chair to give him her usual morning hug. "I'll get some cereal. I need to run over and talk to Jimmy about something we can't do on the phone."

"My word, I didn't know there was anything short of taking a bath you couldn't do on the phone these days," Bailey grinned. "It must be important."

Amber nodded and smiled feebly at his joke.

Bailey noticed the reticence but let it pass. He knew there had to be things his stepdaughter didn't talk about, just like all teenagers, but he also knew how good Amber was about expressing herself when she had problems. If it was worrisome enough, she would come to him or Pat. He went back to his paper.

Pat came into the living room just as Amber was leaving. She also noticed that her daughter wasn't as ebullient as usual for a Saturday morning with no homework in sight, but the lingering headache caused

her to let it go without questioning her.

Amber hugged her mother, told her she would be over at Jimmy's house for a while, and hurried outside.

\* \* \* \*

"Good morning, Amber," Melissa greeted her. "Jimmy's in the game room." She smiled. "I assume you came to see him instead of me?"

"Yes'm." Amber had to smile back at Jimmy's mother. She liked her and her friendly banter, the same kind Bailey liked to engage in. It was easy to tell that she was troubled, though. She thought it had something to do with Mr. Gomez, who was gone so much, and Jimmy's perceptive sense, but she made no attempt to discover the exact cause. This morning there were more important things to consider.

The moment Amber stepped into the game room, another assault on her senses occurred; it was just like the one the night before but different in content. *Jimmy!* She would have thought he was in mortal danger had it not been for the experience last night. He was straining, heart beating rapidly and emotions running wild as he tried mightily to escape the mandibles of a huge threatening creature. She shook her head, trying to blot out the fear and danger from the threatening monster that seemed to be trying to overwhelm her and Jimmy both. It was like a roller coaster ride; Jimmy's sensational fight with the creature sending him to awesome heights of fear and terror and dropping suddenly as he narrowly escaped and up as he was threatened again. Then, suddenly, a crescendo of triumphant enthusiasm seemed to surround her in an explosion of emotional sensation. It held for a moment then the whole episode faded and vanished like a speeded up twilight turning into darkness.

Amber blew out the breath she had been holding and cautiously stepped down into the sunken room, not wanting another sudden rush of stimulation to cause her to lose her footing. By then, Jimmy was standing up, clasping his hands over his head. He grinned hugely when he saw her. "Hey, I beat it! I ran the zilk out of Alien Planet! First time!" His grin faded when he saw that Amber wasn't congratulating him.

"What's wrong?"

Amber stood still. "Jimmy, I ... I felt you playing. It was like I ... like I was in your mind."

Jimmy walked the short distance to her. They stared at each other, and, suddenly, Amber knew he had experienced something like she had.

"Oh, God. Manny Maloosa, Amber, I was going to tell you. Last night..." He halted, embarrassed.

"Last night what?"

"I woke up and thought I was dreaming about Bailey and your mom." That was as far as he took it.

Amber grabbed his hand. "It wasn't a dream. You thought they were having sex, didn't you?"

The young man blushed. "I didn't mean to. Honest!"

Amber needed to sit down. Still holding his hand, she looked behind her and pulled him down to the little couch in the room. "It wasn't your fault. It happened to me, too. It woke me up. It was so real. Like I was in their minds or something."

"Has it happened to you before?"

"No, except last night and just now. Not like that, anyway."

"Yeah, same here. Mom and I went to a movie last night. I thought something was wrong with me when it got to the real exciting parts. I kept thinking I was going crazy when I was experiencing what all the people around us felt. I had to go outside a few times, and Mom kept asking me what was wrong. It was scary."

"It must have been. Jimmy, last night when you woke up, was it ... like real, real intense? Like the best thing that ever happened to you?"

Jimmy squirmed under Amber's intense gaze. "Well, maybe not quite like that, but they were all wrapped up with it. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe distance has something to do with it."

"How 'bout excitement? I was really revvin' with the game when you came in. Did you feel that in me?"

Amber slumped down in the seat. "It was almost like I *was* you. What I'm worried about is ... what if it keeps happening. What do we do then? What it happened in class, say?"

Jimmy forced smile. "Maybe they'd think we were hyper, like the kids that take the autie pills."

Amber had to laugh a little. Trust Jimmy to make a joke.

Jimmy suddenly looked very serious. "I wonder if we could do it with each other if we tried?"

Amber wondered if she really wanted to and decided that if they were going to be mind readers, they had better find out something about it before they got into trouble. "I guess there's only one way to find out. Let's try it and see."

For a long minute or two they stared at each other. Finally, an image of two persons trying to hypnotize each other flashed into Amber's mind and she giggled. Jimmy laughed. She laughed. Suddenly they were hugging each other, roaring with laughter, unable to stop.

"What on earth is so funny?" Melissa asked. She was holding two glasses of lemonade.

"We were having a staring contest, and it got funny," Jimmy explained.

That made Amber laugh again. It felt good to let go after worrying so much during the night and again when she first came over to see Jimmy and found herself immersed in his game.

"Well, that's some pretty cheap entertainment. Keep it up, and it'll save us money. Jimmy can just stare at his friends, and I won't have to buy him any more gamepods."

That got the two of them going again, and this time, Melissa laughed with them, glad to see them enjoying themselves like normal children. She only half believed they were different from their peers, despite what some of the middle school teachers were saying. She set the glasses of lemonade on the coffee table in front of the couch. "I have to run to the store for a moment. I'll lock behind me. Don't let anyone else in until I'm back. *Comprende?*"

"Yes'm," they both answered.

As soon as she heard the front door close, Amber scrooched closer to Jimmy, ignoring the lemonade.

Jimmy knew she wanted the same thing he did; a chance to kiss while no grownups could see. He put his arm around Amber's shoulder. Their lips met. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of Amber's body pressing against him and her arm around him. It excited him even more than usual.

Amber could sense Jimmy's longing, even with her eyes closed, a vague but very strong desire to continue with what they were doing. She remembered her thoughts of what it would be like for him to touch her in front, and almost as if she were willing it, Jimmy's hand rose from her waist to cover her breast, just like she had secretly wanted him to. The sensation was electric, even through her top and thin bra. She parted her lips, wanting to kiss him more deeply. Before she knew what was happening, she felt herself being swept into a sensuous, all enveloping rush of desire. She had felt it before, but never so strongly and never so directly. She could feel her breath coming faster as Jimmy's hand moved on her body. She clutched him more tightly, suddenly wanting to experience what she had unintentionally participated in the night before. Almost imperceptibly, she felt her mind interacting with Jimmy's, like two hands coming into intimate contact and the fingers lacing together to keep them there.

It was Jimmy who broke the kiss though she could plainly sense his reluctance.

"Whittikers, Amber. We better stop before Mom gets back." But he kept his hand where it was.

Amber took a deep gulp of air, trying to calm her racing heart. She reached up and pressed Jimmy's hand to her for an instant longer then leaned away from him. She could tell he had an erection and a continuing desire for release. She could *feel* it!

"Jimmy..."

"I think we're mind readers," he said.

Amber hugged herself, just as she had done during the night. Where was this going to lead? What were they going to do? Maybe it would be all right if it was just her and Jimmy, but...

"As long as it's just you and me, it's okay," Jimmy ventured, then his mouth dropped open in surprise. "You didn't say that!"

Amber nodded. "No. I thought it."

They sat together but not touching, getting the hang of letting their minds intermingle and talking about what was happening. They were discussing what they should do about it when they both turned toward the door. A moment later they heard it open as Melissa returned. They had sensed her presence before she made a sound.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Amber thought it would be best if they talked to Jeannie before doing anything else about their newly discovered talent. They made a hasty plea to parents and got permission for her to spend the night with Amber. She came over Saturday afternoon.

The three of them spend all the time they could together over the weekend. It came as no great surprise when Amber perceived Jeannie was showing signs of the same ability that they were. In fact, she showed more enthusiasm for the development than she and Jimmy did once some experiments among the three showed her she could do it at will, just as Amber and Jimmy could now. She began thinking more about the benefits and discounting the drawbacks, despite everything Amber said to convince her otherwise. Amber perceived that she had experienced an episode similar to what she and Jimmy had but wasn't mentioning it for some reason. All she admitted to was catching occasional thoughts from the group.

"Bailey says people would hate mind readers if they found out. Do you want to be hated?" Amber asked her during their first conversational spurt.

Jeannie shrugged. "How can anyone hate us if they don't know we can do it? Besides, who cares?"

"I care, and they'll find out somehow," Amber warned. "You know the L Creeper is fooling with that nasty FBI agent again. What about that?"

"Yeah, I passed the old creeper in the hall. She about knocked me over with her attitude. They still can't prove anything. Besides, maybe it just happens with us three, and maybe it's just, you know, an occasional thing."

"You know it's not," Amber said, not wanting to mention the incident of her mother and Bailey. Instead, in the momentary silence, she thought suddenly of how good it had felt when she and Jimmy had kissed and touched.

Jeannie grinned, having caught the thought. "You've been gravitizing, haven't you? How did it feel? Never mind, I can tell. Great, huh?" Amber was glad she had caught the memory of her and Jimmy rather than the one that had been on her mind the moment before.

"That's ... Jeannie, we shouldn't try to see inside each other without permission."

"Yeah, but it doesn't take much of a mind reader to tell you two are magnetizing each other."

The conversations went this way and that but never strayed far from the subject, and, while they talked, it gradually became apparent that deliberate attempts to see each other's thoughts made succeeding attempts easier—and sometimes embarrassing. By Sunday evening when Jeannie had to return home, they had worked out silent signals and expressions they could use for communication without much concentration, almost like holding up signs for various responses such as "privacy area" or "think more." Amber also thought she had finally convinced Jeannie to play it safe and to quit her teasing of boys, but it was hard to be sure. Jeannie's mind flitted here and there like a bat in daylight as she kept thinking about their talent.

Sunday night, Amber woke again while Bailey and her mom were having sex, but this time there was a difference. Amber tried very hard to shut off the sensations coming to her, and it worked to a degree. There was a certain way she had to think, like moving her mind behind a door, and it curtailed the intensity down to a bearable level that was more like a fuzzy dream than really connecting to other minds.

She thought that, with a little more practice, she would be able to shut off any unwanted thought, even from Jimmy and Jeannie if she wanted to. It made her feel better until she got to school Monday.

\* \* \* \*

The first surprise at school Monday was how easy it was now was to tell what the other kids in the group were thinking when they were nearby, especially if the thoughts were emotional in nature. Sometimes she didn't even have to look at them to know, like with Breiley and Al. They were so enamored with each other that when they were together it was like sitting next to them while they were into heavy gravitizing, the catchword for kissing and fondling. It wasn't too bad, though, because, as she had hoped, practice made shutting off outside thoughts easier. With the optimism of youth, she was already beginning to think they could work it out—until her midmorning class with Mrs. Larkin.

\* \* \* \*

When the teacher looked directly at Amber the first time, the young girl paled at the unalloyed hate emanating from Larkin's mind, most of it directed at her. Two other kids in the group got some attention, but Larkin focused on Amber more than anyone in the class. It scared her so badly that she felt nauseated, like she was close to a bad smell and unable to move away. She felt her chin quiver with anticipation at having to talk to Larkin if she was called upon, which she naturally was.

"Miss Morrison, please stand up and recite your first two metaphors."

Amber slowly got to her feet, but she was unable to speak. She tried to shut off the raw waves of loathing coming from Larkin, but the talent was still too new; she had never experienced anything comparable to Larkin's hatred before. Thoughts skittered wildly in her head, the ones from Larkin cold and fearsome and heavy with a burgeoning desire to see her subdued.

"Well?" Larkin's voice was cutting, heavy with sarcastic hatred, though Amber doubted anyone other than the two kids of the group could tell, and even they weren't feeling what she was.

Amber stood mute.

Larkin cocked her hip in a disparaging attitude. "Didn't do your assignment, is that it? Very well, sit down."

An impression of gloating satisfaction mixed with the still perceptible hatred immersed Amber's mind like a malevolent miasma settling into her mind. She covered her face and forced it away, closing it up behind an imaginary door.

Larkin ignored her obvious distress and went on to the next pupil.

"Mister Meekins, perhaps you deigned to compose a couple of metaphors for us?"

"Yes Ma'am," the boy said and began reading from his PPC.

Amber was visibly shaking by the time the class was over. She brushed off attempts by other students to find out what was the matter with her, longing desperately for the lunch break.

Even then, she wasn't left alone. Jeannie was on the opposite lunch period. Amber and Jimmy were sitting by themselves in a corner, holding hands across the table and talking between bites of their lunch. Their seclusion and attitude told their classmates almost as plainly as words that they wished to be by themselves so long as other seats were available. Amber was telling Jimmy of how intensely Larkin hated the group in general, the three of them in particular. She was so immersed in relating how she had finally been able to shut off Larkin's seething hatred and gloating that she failed to notice Jordan Rhieman, the

overage eighth grader approaching. His deep, confident voice startled her when it interrupted.

"Hey, Gamehen Cutie, this underage Duncie ain't got the nuts and bolts for Practice. Meet me at the arbor after prison, and I'll show you some real gravitizing."

Amber squeezed Jimmy's hand. He was holding his temper in check with admirable restraint, just like the martial arts classes taught. Amber looked up at Jordan and, for the second time that day, was sickened at the ferocity of someone else's thoughts. Jordy was running degrading images of her through his mind like a succession of porno flipclicks. She shut it off as quickly as she could and said, "I'd sooner go wallowing with a pig, Jordan. Why don't you go somewhere and clip your dirty toenails? Or maybe just turn it backward. That's about all you're good for."

Jordan's face flamed as he realized the conversation had been overheard from a nearby table and that he was being laughed at

Jimmy couldn't help grinning. In the parlance of teen slang, Amber had just told him to go screw himself because no one else would.

Jordan glared at Jimmy. "Later, little man."

"Oh, shupcreek. Now he'll be after me," Jimmy said.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy; it just popped out."

"Don't worry about it; he had it coming. Besides, he's a broke rock if I ever saw one, and he's not as tough as he thinks he is."

Amber examined Jimmy across the table from her. In her mind's eye, she could grasp a gestalt of him. It was surprising; she suddenly realized how much he had matured lately. His shoulders were widening and muscles stood out beneath his shirt from the martial arts training. He was also getting taller. *It's like me developing into a woman. We're growing up*, she thought.

Jimmy smiled at her as he caught the vagrant thought, and she returned it with a mental gesture that said, "Kiss later."

\* \* \* \*

For Amber, the rest of the week passed in a haze of barely remembered classes while she and Jeannie and Jimmy learned how to control the new path their minds had taken. She and Jimmy spent more time together than the three of them did, leading to their talent getting ahead of Jeannie's. It irked the other girl, but there was nothing Amber could do about it other than try to spend as much time with her as she could. She wanted to encourage Jimmy to do the same, but it wasn't that easy. With the talent came an awareness that Jeannie wanted Jimmy almost as much as she did. She had known of the attraction before, of course, but now it was even more in the open with the three of them. The worst part of it was that, in the back of her mind, Amber thought Jeannie would wind up doing something foolish when she realized finally and fully that Jimmy belonged to her and no one else.

On the way home from school Friday, after Jeannie had peeled off at her street, Amber and Jimmy continued on, not talking much but holding hands and play-bumping hip and shoulder. It felt so good being with him that she wished Jeannie had a boyfriend, too.

"Am I your boyfriend?" Jimmie asked, seriously.

Amber stopped to kiss him, and they continued on. "Uh huh," she said. "I guess we'll get married one day. No one else would suit us."

"That's a long way off."

"I know." They halted again in front of Jimmie's house.

"Have we decided what to do yet?" Amber asked, already knowing the answer.

"Let's give it some more time," Jimmy said, knowing she was speaking of revealing the new development to Bailey and her mother. "They might take it wrong."

"I don't think they would, not that much. Mom and Bailey want to protect us."

"I still say wait," Jimmy said. "Why hurry with it before we have to?"

"I guess so," Amber agreed reluctantly.

\* \* \* \*

Amber was eating an early lunch, waiting on Jimmy to return from his ball practice and stay the afternoon while his parents were gone. Jeannie had already told her she couldn't come though she was evasive about her reason for why not, and it was impossible to tell what she was thinking over the phone from where she was at the big mall across town. The distance from which they could touch each other's mind was gradually increasing, but it didn't reach that far yet.

Amber was just finishing her glass of milk when she felt the impact of Jimmy's unrestrained mind in a confrontation with ... Jordy Rhieman! The unexpected shock was forceful but not as wrought with anger as the first time.

"Something's going on outside!" Bailey said, looking up from his easy chair.

Amber could hear it too now that she concentrated on the noises rather than thoughts. Shouts and epithets being hurled like spears at Jimmy! She had the door open and was preparing to race outside when Bailey caught her arm.

"Wait," he said from the open door.

Amber stared at him wildly for a second then realized that Jimmy was in no real danger. She looked past Bailey and partway down the street to where Jordy and one of his friends had lain in wait, intending to give Jimmy a beating. Instead it looked more like a superbly skilled matador playing with two confused young bulls.

Jimmy was laughing at them as he avoided every single swing or kick by the other two boys, dancing just out of reach or stepping to the side or ducking at the last moment.

Bailey watched for several moments while holding Amber. It was only when he felt the presence of Pat behind him that he finally moved. "Stay here," he said.

When Jordan and his friend saw Bailey coming near, they broke off the fight, such as it was. Both were huffing and puffing from exertion while Jimmy had hardly stirred a hair on his head.

"Go home," Bailey told the older boys sternly.

They hurried away, looking glad of an excuse to retreat while they had a chance and before Jimmy decided to really fight.

"Come inside," Bailey said to Jimmy. He had watched the confrontation carefully before deciding to break it up. What he saw was disturbing. Jimmy hadn't even had to see the assailant when either of them



tried to rush him from behind while the other tried keeping him busy from the front. It was like he had eyes in the back of his head—or something equally alien.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Those devil-bred children are not normal," Nora Larkin insisted. "I swear they can read minds, and the Morrison girl and her boyfriend, that Jimmy Gomez, are the worst. I'm afraid of them. The government should do something." Larkin sipped at the coffee she had brewed when Sean Casey came to her home.

"Unfortunately, the government doesn't seem interested, Nora. That's why I resigned from the FBI; I want to protect us normal people." Casey had progressed to a first name basis with Larkin and Caralee Shaeffer, still the principal of Mountain Grove Middle School. "However, I wanted to touch base with you again this weekend because I've managed to get in contact with some organizations which *do* care about normal people. Believe me, they do." He eyed her over his coffee cup, thinking how easy she was to manipulate. Like most people who got a fixed idea in their mind, she hung on to it like a bulldog. Though, in her case, he thought it was justified. The more he learned about the kids from the terrorist attack, the ones who had been very young then, the more he liked it—now that he saw a way where he might gain financially from them.

Larkin sniffed, an embellishment to speech she used frequently. "Well, someone should care. In any case, I have something new for you. I told you about Jordan Rhieman, the boy I have reporting to me. He called me last night because something odd happened."

Casey leaned forward. "Tell me."

"Jimmy Gomez insulted Jordan, and Jordan and his friend Henry Keller were going to teach him a lesson." Anger suffused her features as she remembered the conversation.

"I take it that the lesson didn't work?"

"Hah! That devil boy is a mind reader, I tell you! Two against one and they couldn't even *touch* him, much less strike a blow! Tell me that's not mind reading!"

"Tell me more, Nora, please." This was getting even more interesting. Casey was working as a broker for a big distributor of counterfeit drugs, a huge, world wide business. He had been amazed to learn that up to a third of all the drugs in the world were counterfeit, most of them made with more or less the right ingredients but without a license or patent to do so and with little quality control. They were sold wholesale to middle men who packaged the bulk contents and provided counterfeit labels. It was such a widespread practice that governments simply couldn't stop it, not with the price of prescription drugs spiraling ever upward. What would his bosses pay for someone who could ferret out government agents or customs agents susceptible to bribes? Millions, he'd found. The narcotics trade would be worth even more because he suspected his boss was connected to the barons of the narcotics industry. Since that bastard doctor had forced him to leave the FBI, Casey's standard of living had gone up. He was enjoying the fine life now and had no intention of ever going back to an ordinary job, even if he could. He had thoroughly convinced himself it was Bailey's fault he had failed to be promoted, and that was the reason he had resigned. He couldn't admit to himself that fear of exposure was the primary reason.

Larkin continued her story. "As I said, the other boys couldn't touch Jimmy, even when one of them got behind him. And that's not all. One of the school counselors is a friend of mine. She says a couple of those damned kids, the boys, are taking advantage of ordinary girls. It's horrible! They read minds and know just what to do in order to seduce them!"

"Is Jimmy one of them?"

"No, I told you he has a girl friend, that slutty Morrison brat. They're probably doing it in alleys if you ask me. Little bitch, always reading my mind and knowing what I'm going to ask on tests. She and her friend, Jeannie Burger. Talk about a slut; she's even worse!"

Casey let the school teacher ramble and rant while he tried to sort out whether and when she was revealing facts or simply complaining. Most of the time he felt she was truthful though misinterpreting some of what she had learned. Shaeffer's reports told much the same story. He had them both eating out of his hand, partly for spite and partly because now he could supplement their meager salaries. Teachers were even more underpaid than FBI agents. Still, he knew he had to move carefully. He thought he had retrieved all the data that Greenleigh bitch had hacked for the doctor, but he couldn't be sure, even after all the injections and forced questioning before he killed her. Remembering her always gave him pleasure. She was so small and petite that it had been almost as good as having a young girl gagged and tied up for him to play with. The thought that he might be free to act in ways like that again motivated him now—especially in light of the latest developments. He stopped Larkin's accusatory complaints when she began repeating herself.

"Nora, let's get back to that fight. Do you think the Rhieman boy was being truthful or maybe exaggerating because the Gomez kid was whipping both of them?"

"I watched Amber Morrison in class today. I saw the look on her face when I thought certain things. Every time, she blanched. I did the same thing with the Burger girl when I passed her in the hall and got the same reaction. I tell you, they can read minds! I think maybe all of them can, but I'm absolutely certain about those three."

Casey nodded. He began wondering what he could do to confirm Nora's certainty. Then he saw it. Of course! She was telling him exactly how to do it. All he had to do was show himself to the three kids and think about what he'd like to do to them in order to see how they reacted! It wouldn't be giving anything away since he was here under his very carefully assumed new identity. Suppose the kids did report it? What could they do? He wouldn't be doing anything illegal, and there certainly wouldn't be a record of him even being in Mountain Grove this time. Not under his real name, anyway. Once he confirmed they were actually reading minds, he knew just who to see after that. Brazos, his boss. It would mean going deeper into the realm of the drug cartels since he was all but sure Brazos was connected, but he didn't mind. He could take care of himself.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey wasn't really angry, but once inside the house, he spoke sternly to Jimmy. "Son, don't you know acting like that will get around? Those boys won't take lightly to being made fools of. Now they'll really start people talking about you being mind readers, and from what I just saw, I'm not so sure you aren't."

Jimmy glanced at Amber before thinking, confirming what Bailey had surmised. Bailey sighed. "Look Jimmy—and you, too, Amber. I know I've told you to keep this stuff to yourself, but if you've learned something new, Pat and I need to know so we can protect you." He eyed the youths with his kindly gaze, hoping they would continue to trust he and Pat with their talents, which appeared to be expanding if what he had just seen was an indication.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Bailey. I guess I wasn't racking very good. Those broke rock idiots were thinking bad stuff about Amber, and she called them on it. I was sitting with her and got involved. I guess they were trying to take it out on me."

Bailey almost laughed at the mixture of slang with contrition and at the boy calling him "Doctor Bailey" as if he were still a patient, but he did interpret the slanguage correctly.

"Did you ... uh ... hear what they were thinking too, Amber?"

"Yes, sir." She looked toward her mother. "I'm sorry, Mom. We didn't want to say anything yet. It's still so new and ... well, sometimes it's embarrassing. It's not really like hearing. It's more ... more..." She stopped, bewildered. She was at a loss trying to explain a phenomenon confined to the three of them, one she didn't fully understand herself.

"Is it embarrassing just for you, or would other people be embarrassed, too?" Pat asked, wondering just what her daughter was turning into.

Amber had trouble meeting either of their gazes and hesitated to say anything. It was Jimmy who broke the silence.

"I guess we better tell them now," he said.

"Hmm. Tell you what," Bailey suggested. "Pat, why don't you get the youngsters a Coke or some tea while I make us a drink, and then we'll talk." He grinned at the boy and girl. "You two are going to cause me to have to buy some more bourbon if this keeps up." He and Pat went to the bar and kitchen respectively.

Amber readily perceived that whatever they said, Bailey could deal with it. She thought her mother could, too. While they were out of the room, Jimmy touched her arm. She turned to look at him and after a moment nodded. Words weren't really necessary, but she used them anyway. "Yeah, we better 'fess up. Don't be shy about telling how this started, Jimmy. You know they just want to help us."

Jimmy nodded. Amber was sitting next to him, and, before Pat and Bailey returned, her hand inched over and fitted inside his. Their thoughts flowed together in a pleasant blend that was becoming more enjoyable all the time.

Since it was her home rather than Jimmy's, Amber went first. She was almost crying as she described how she had been awakened during the night that first time.

"I didn't want to be there, but I couldn't help it! It was like being at the movies, sorta, but in my mind instead of on a screen. I tried to hide from it ... from you, but I couldn't!" She began crying then and had to stop talking. She gripped Jimmy's hand so tightly that she felt him wince in her mind. She loosened her hold and leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Oh mercy, baby. Please don't cry. We'll work something out." Pat was trying to remember everything she and Bailey had done that night after too many drinks. And the next time, too. She must have heard that one, too.

"We're learning to shut out what we don't want to hear, Mom. I did it the other night, mostly. And we're getting better at it. I won't listen, or whatever it is we do again. Honest."

"You don't have to convince us, Lumpkin. We always believe you."

"I know you do," Amber said, already feeling better. "I saw your last thought 'cause I was upset and not concentrating. We know we shouldn't invade people's minds without them knowing." She paused before going on with their main concern about Jeannie not taking it seriously enough.

"We'll talk about that later. Go on with the details now," Bailey encouraged. "When you're finished, Jimmy can talk. I may need another drink by then though." The joke helped lighten the mood, but both Amber and Jimmy knew Bailey was as serious as ever.

They could see he was being truthful. Amber continued telling their story, not leaving anything out, especially about Mrs. Larkin and how much she hated the group in general, Jimmy, Jeannie, and her in particular. "She thinks everyone in the group can maybe read minds, but she's absolutely sure about the three of us. And Bailey, Mom ... she seems to be gloating beneath the hating, like she knows something that will hurt us."

Bailey nodded. He didn't doubt it. He and Pat had had several run-ins with the teacher the last few years. He had liked her less each time and did even more so now. However, he wanted to hear everything. He looked at Jimmy. "What about you, Jimmy? Does she hate you, too?"

"Yes, sir. It's like Amber and Jeannie said. She saw me yesterday, and I got the same impression. It's hard not to notice when she has such strong feelings. I still don't understand why, though."

Bailey let Jimmy continue with his experiences while he tried to think how to explain Larkin to thirteen year olds. She was the type who loved being the center of attention yet had no attributes to put her there. From the moment the children, rather than her, began getting so much notice, she had disliked them, and that made her pay closer attention to them than anyone else, except perhaps for Casey. Bailey noted with wry amusement that he and Pat were holding hands as tightly as the kids. He deliberately lifted their intertwined fingers into the air enough to let them see that adults sometimes needed comfort and closeness too. It was the right move. Jimmy spoke more freely after that. Bailey continued running the events through his analytical mind.

"Let's go back a minute, Jimmy. You, too, Amber. Am I getting it right that, so far as you know, it's just the three of you who can do this?"

"Yes, sir," they both said, their voices blending into one. Amber went even further. "Bailey, I don't know how to explain this, but, for some reason, I don't think the other kids will ever be like us. Their minds are ... different, I guess is the only way to say it. Jimmy, Jeannie, and I thought for a long time we were just better at knowing what people were going to do and how they were going to act, you know, like our mirror neurons were bouncier than theirs or something. Now that we've talked, I guess maybe we really started reading minds a while ago and didn't realize what we were doing."

"I think so, too," Jimmy said. "And Amber's right. The other kids won't be able to do it like we do. They're ... *different* from us."

"Now why should that be?" Pat asked with a puzzled frown.

"That's what we need to find out," Bailey said. "And in the meantime, I'm probably going to embarrass you guys. Please don't think I'm prying. Okay?"

Both of them nodded, already knowing what was coming. And abruptly, seeing them holding hands and sitting so closely together Pat realized what it was, too. She bit her lip but didn't try to stop him.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I guess you've already started discovering some of the benefits of being able to read each other's thoughts, haven't you?" Bailey asked.

"Yes, sir," Amber admitted, knowing what he was getting at. "We haven't done anything yet, though. Not much anyways."

"You will, though. This is making your minds grow up even faster than your bodies are, I think. Both of you are much more mature than other kids your age already, you know. In fact, you're more mature than lots of adults I know, and this will only speed up the process."

"They are more mature," Pat agreed. "But why?"

Bailey tried to explain the best he could. "Actually, I don't see how it could be otherwise. Most of the kids in the group have been much more aware than normal children ever since the attack. Part of the maturing process is a gradual realization of how other people have personalities too, with all the conflicting emotions, feelings toward others, the likes and dislikes, the different areas of knowledge, and a thousand other things involved in giving each person a unique mind. But now..." he gestured at the two youngsters "...now these kids are having it thrown at them in huge amounts at once, more than some people would realize or understand in a lifetime. It can't help but speed them on the way to adulthood."

The youngsters both nodded, admitting as much. As they did, their minds touched, remembering their last embrace. Amber felt that pleasant awareness of Jimmy's presence again, like a part of her mind sitting next to her. She could sense that he was feeling much the same way.

Bailey continued. "How does Jeannie feel about the two of you being so close? Is she feeling left out, do you think?" Bailey had identified that as a possible point of trouble. If Jeannie was indeed like these two, she would soon be feeling mighty lonely. Sex and youngsters was always an explosive mix, and not having someone she could relate to in a sexual way, with all that mind reading implied, might turn her sour if it weren't handled right.

Amber answered, looking back and forth between Bailey and Mom. "I guess she does feel left out some, but it's not a problem yet Bailey."

"Well, be sure and stay close to her and include her in as much as you can." He squeezed Pat's hand. "I'm speaking here without really being able to grasp all you two—or three—I should say, encompass, but I know how personalities work, at least as well as anyone does. When a person is excluded from important happenings they think they should be a part of, it can make them bitter and cause them to respond in ways that aren't healthy."

"Bailey, is all this necessary just yet?" Pat was having a hard time making the jump in her mind that Bailey had already had made. She looked across at the two children—still children in her thoughts—and tried to envisage them being in love, having sex, acting as adults. It wouldn't quite jell.

Amber caught Pat's concern. "Mom, it probably is." She stopped short of going further, not wanting to conceal her thoughts from her mother but not wanting to upset her either. What she and Jimmy were thinking and feeling was personal and private.

Bailey saw Amber's hesitation and decided to move on to another area; he could talk to Pat later. "Now let's try to figure out why the three of you should develop this talent when none of the other kids have."

Did you all eat the same things that day? Did you do anything different from the other kids? Can you remember anything different about you three and no one else from back then?"

Amber and Jimmy both shook their heads. Nothing came to mind.

Pat searched her memory of that awful time, trying to think. It was such a long time ago, and so far as she knew, the three of them had simply played together and went to school together, just like all the others who had fallen ill back then. There had been nothing different. The weekend before they had been at her house Saturday afternoon, but that was just ... "You all three got poison ivy the weekend before the attack!" Pat burst out wildly with the remembered occurrence. That Sunday before the attack the next day, Amber and Jimmy had begun itching. The rash looked suspiciously like Poison Ivy to Pat, having had it herself, and she had treated Amber.

"Did you give them anything for it?" Bailey asked, a sudden tenseness apparent in his voice.

"Just ointment and Benadryl. I gave it to Amber, and when Melissa asked, I gave her some for Jimmy. They took it Sunday and the school nurse dispensed some more Monday when I asked her to. I don't know whether Jeannie got any, but I did call her mother and tell her what I had done for Amber and Jimmy. I remember she told me Jeannie had Poison Ivy, too. That stuff can drive you crazy with the itching."

"Diphenylhydramine," Bailey exclaimed.

"What?" Pat asked.

"Diphenylhydramine. That's the generic name for Benadryl. Pat, how about calling Mrs. Burger and seeing if she remembers—no, don't. There's not that much hurry." He turned to Amber and Jimmy. "I'm going to ask you to keep this a secret for now. Don't even tell Jeannie. It's not that I don't trust her, but I don't want to take even the slightest chance of this getting out. I don't know that there's a connection, but if there's not, it's pushing coincidence to the limits!" Bailey couldn't quite contain his excitement. He had the formula the terrorists had originally used, the one the FBI had kept secret and which had caused such unintended consequences, and now perhaps he had the formula that would produce mind readers at will—providing the drugs were given at an early enough age and parents were willing to risk their children. It could even react the same way if given to older people though he doubted it. All that was a long way off though. In the meantime, he knew someone who could experiment on animals and see what happened and also keep a secret. That was if he could have the nerve agent manufactured without being tagged as a terrorist. While running that through his mind, another thought formed. The kids probably caught it, but if not, it was just as well. And it might not help, anyway.

Amber did miss the thought, just as Jimmy did. While Pat and Bailey were on that subject, she touched minds with Jimmy in the way that was becoming easier and easier. She was excited, too, but for a different reason. The way this discussion had developed, it was as though she and Jimmy had almost been given *permission* to have sex or at least to consider it soon, if that was what they wanted. Well, Bailey had. Mom was still wavering. She didn't have to read her mind to know that much.

Jimmy's mind showed the same eagerness as Amber's, yet she could sense the confusion and apprehension normal for most young, inexperienced boys. He held a yearning hope that she would like it when it happened, and a perfectly normal worry all young men have over whether he could do it right when the first time came.

Amber squeezed his hand while assuring him mentally that it would work for both of them. She wanted it to be good for both of them as much as he did when the time came. She also told him without words that he was really sweet and the thoughts in his mind weren't nearly as self-centered as those she had

perceived in other boys.

Pat stood up and came over to where Amber and Jimmy were still looking at each other. She waited until she had their attention, and Amber stood up too, followed by Jimmy. Pat reached out and pulled her daughter into an embrace while a sudden spate of tears trickled down her cheeks. She reached up and wiped her fingers across her face and tasted her tears with her lips. Their saltiness seemed to epitomize the quandary she felt, the dichotomy of her emotions. On the one hand, her little girl was growing up into a healthy, mature young woman; on the other hand, she knew she hadn't been prepared for it, not this soon.

"It will be okay, Mom," Amber said, trying to ease her mother's mind.

"It's all right, baby. We'll have a talk tonight, just the two of us. Okay?"

"Sure, Mom," Amber said, unable to avoid her mother's thoughts as they skittered around various subjects, some of the images in her mother's mind a surprise as she suddenly realized she didn't know quite as much as she thought she did.

\* \* \* \*

That night, Pat lay in Bailey's arms, using his embrace as a source of strength. She had talked with Amber after the evening meal, just the two of them. It had been one of the hardest conversations she had ever had with her daughter. She had been amazed and appalled at the depth of her daughter's knowledge concerning sex and relationships, yet she had still been able to fill in some glaring weaknesses in Amber's comprehension of the subject. She felt as if she were sending her daughter to a woman's bed far too soon, even though Amber assured her she still wanted to wait a while. Pat hoped so. She would turn thirteen during the coming week and have her Turnteen party in her home Saturday night.

"Bailey, I can't really imagine how the kids must feel. I mean, what would it be like if you and I could merge our minds completely when we wanted to?"

"I think it would be wonderful in some ways, but I suppose we'll never know."

"Never?"

"Hmm. With what we deduced today, if Jeannie also took Benadryl, I guess I shouldn't say never, but it appears as if a person has to be fairly young to get the kind of results those three did. Anyway, I think we do pretty good as is, don't you?" To demonstrate, he pulled her closer for a lingering kiss and caress.

Pat accepted it, holding back only a moment at the thought that Amber might be "listening" then forgot it in the rising pleasure of Bailey's stimulation. Soon their minds were merged as thoroughly as normal humans could ever achieve.

\* \* \* \*

Casey found a vacancy in an office building near the school that was perfect for his purposes. Inside, he could look out the tinted window and observe the children as they came and went from school without being spotted himself. He put a small deposit down in order to gain access and moved in a few items of cheap furniture in case he needed to stay overnight sometime. After that, he used the spot to clandestinely watch the school children for three days. He had no problem picking out Amber Morrison and Jimmy Gomez or the Burger girl who walked with them after school to the first intersection. He also memorized the others in the group from school photos and personal identification data furnished by Larkin and Schaffer. That took three weeks before he was ready to confront the three prime candidates for his plans. Before that happened, he found out something even more interesting.



He was at Larkin's simple home again, drinking her coffee and wishing for something with alcohol in it. Since resigning from the FBI, he had taken to having a few drinks during the day when he had time and liquor was available.

"You can confirm who they are, Mister Casey, as well as see that I know what I'm talking about. They won't be invited to Morrison's Turnteen party this weekend. Isn't that a silly name—and a silly practice? I swear, kids these days..." Her voice trailed off as she again thought of how unfair it was that children—*children!*—should have been granted such powers. Why couldn't it have happened to adults, persons like herself who could use it for practical purposes, like finding cheats and teachers with unsavory sex practices. According to her, there were lots of uses that were simply going to waste.

"You're saying these seven kids" he tapped the sheaf of printouts with photos Larkin had furnished him, "are a little antagonistic group within the main one, huh? And they're bad, you say?"

"Correct. Those four boys and three girls are always in trouble, but the little demons use their powers to avoid punishment. Why, Jordan Rhieman and Henry Keller have actually been arrested! The charges were dropped though. Can you imagine? And the girls! They're nothing but sluts. They'll wind up as streetwalkers by the time they're sixteen, mark my words."

Casey nodded, knowing Larkin would think he was approving of her sentiments. What he was actually doing was forming a plan involving the "bad" kids and Maybe the Burger girl, too, if he could play her right, even though she wasn't one of the subgroup of wayward children. Kids never had enough money to spend on their music, games, and other entertainment somewhat more removed from the mainstream such as drugs and alcohol.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"My Turnteen party isn't as popping as we thought it was going to be, is it?" Amber said. She was standing next to Jimmy in the garage where they were taking their turn to steal a few kisses out of the sight of adults.

"No," Jimmy replied. "I guess we're growing up too fast. But you look real scorching." He touched minds with her and provided an image of her from the vantage point where he had admired her a few minutes ago.

"Thank you," Amber smiled up at him. She was dressed in new clothes in the current spring fashion. Her bright red jeans had a line of upright ovals cut away from the outside of each leg to show bare skin beneath. The matching red blouse's buttons didn't start until a portion of the slopes of her still growing breasts were revealed. She wore a flimsy bra beneath the blouse, which simply provided support below to keep her breasts from bouncing too much if they began dancing. So far, only one couple had.

Jimmy touched the soft waves of her light brown hair that tumbled around her shoulders then bent and kissed her, but not too hard. He didn't want to get excited enough for it to show, and it was time to go back inside. He took her hand and pulled the door open.

The garage door opened into the living room where dozens of teenagers, all older than Amber, mingled and talked and watched portions of a movie being played while they consumed an enormous amount of food and drink. It was traditional that kids who hadn't turned thirteen yet weren't allowed at Turnteen parties. Another couple had started dancing, using their earpieces to listen to music of their choice that only they could hear. They swayed and bounced in a peculiar rhythm vaguely resembling some African tribal dancing but was set to a typically fast American beat.

Pat, Bailey, and Melissa Gomez were the chaperones, along with two other friends, but Pat insisted that they not be obtrusive. The party was a rite of passage, but this one was a very mild version of some of the Turnteen parties the adults had heard of. Jimmy's had been the same type of gathering as Amber's and had taken place only a month ago.

"Let's go talk to Jeannie for a minute," Amber suggested, looking around to see where her friend was. She couldn't find her in the living room. She waited, thinking Jeannie might have gone to the bathroom, but when she saw another teen coming from there, she knew that wasn't it.

"She's outside," Jimmy said positively. "And..."

Amber knew, too. The three tried not to pry into each others' mind, but did use their talent to know where another person was, if need be. Jimmy and Amber had done that at the same time but had backed off immediately.

"Oh, damn and desolation!" Amber exclaimed. "She's smoking green matter, right out in the front yard! Right in plain sight and with the porch light on! Come on, Jimmy. We have to stop this before she hits a snag."

Amber hadn't paused to find out who Jeannie was with. When she saw the two boys, one on each side of her, she stopped abruptly, causing Jimmy to almost stumble into her. The anger she had felt toward her friend changed to puzzlement.

*Jordy Rhieman and Henry Keller! What were those two broke rocks doing here?* She thought.

Henry was bad enough, but Jordy was horrible. Amber took a deep breath. The boys hadn't seen them yet, but she knew Jeannie had sensed their presence immediately.

"Hey!" Amber shouted.

All three turned around.

"You two broke rocks weren't invited," she said angrily to the boys. "Get off my property, *right now* or I'm calling the cops." She reached for her phone.

"Yeah?" Jordy sneered. "I don't think so, you little goodyslit. You wouldn't want to see your friend arrested, would you?" He deliberately took another big hit from the marijuana cigarette.

Amber sensed Jimmy's intentions and grabbed his arm before he could attack Jordy. The other boy had just used an epithet for her worse than a curse among teens.

"You'd better go," Jeannie said to Jordy and Henry, knowing how mad Amber was and how close Jimmy was to forcefully breaking away from Amber and slugging Jordy. She didn't want them to cause a ruckus here.

Jordy acted as if he were debating the decision, but he really had no intention of tangling with Jimmy again, not unless he was armed. "Okay, but only because you say so, realtimer, not little goodyslit, there." He deliberately took another hit from his smoke and tossed it into the grass. He chuckled Jeannie under the chin and casually dropped his hand down to her breasts. He stroked her there, winked, and departed, not at all in a hurry.

Amber was speechless for a moment, but her mind was hectic with questions. "Realtimer" was an expression denoting a girl or boy who was willing to experiment with drugs and sex, sometimes more. It also meant a girl who would give a guy a good time. Finally, Amber said, "How long has this been going on?" It was all she could manage.

"Well, you and Jimmy are liplocked. I want to have some fun, too," Jeannie said defensively. She shrugged her shoulders, almost causing her strapless bra to slip.

Amber could read the defiance and the sense of embarrassment behind Jeannie's words, but she could find very little shame there. She sighed, not knowing what to do about it just then. "We can talk tomorrow, Jeannie. Come on, let's go back inside."

Jeannie had very little choice since her mother wasn't due to pick her up for at least another hour, probably more. Back in the living room, she tried to brush off the incident by flirting artfully with almost every boy there except Jimmy and avoiding being close to either of her two closest friends. It made for a depressing atmosphere since all the others could sense something untoward had happened but weren't exactly sure what.

"Is everything all right?" Bailey asked his stepdaughter a little later when he made a quick appearance to let the kids know adults were still around.

"We had a party crasher, but it's okay now. I'll talk to you about it later, Bailey. Okay?"

"Sure, Lumpkin. Have fun." He retreated, knowing as well as the gang of perceptive kids did that Amber was very upset.

\* \* \* \*

"You were right, Bailey," Amber admitted desolately after all the kids were gone and she had kissed

Jimmy good night.

"About Jeannie?" Bailey was sitting across from Amber and Pat, finally having a drink now that the kids had departed.

"Uh huh." She leaned her head against Mom's shoulder, taking comfort from her mother's nearness, even if she was maturing so quickly. She looked at Bailey and told what had happened. "She was smoking some green right out in plain sight, and what's even worse, she told those two broke rock boys they could drop by when she knew I didn't want them here. I think she's jumped, had sex, with one of them. That's the impression I got, even if she was trying to hide it." She clutched her mother's forearm and hand with both of hers. She felt a tear slide free of her lashes and trickle down her cheek. "Mom, she's ... it's like if she can't have Jimmy, she doesn't much care what she does! And it's all happening so fast!"

Pat had changed into a simple housecoat after the guests all left. She adjusted it while putting her arm around Amber, unsure of how to handle the situation but knowing Amber needed her support and love. She looked to Bailey to see what he thought.

"I suspect you and Jimmy are already pretty well bonded, what with being able to see into each other's mind, aren't you?" he said.

"Oh yes. It just gets better all the time," she said enthusiastically. "We call it being liplocked, but..." Amber had to pause for a moment to let Mom and Bailey chuckle over the teen slang, but she was entirely serious. "...but it's deeper than that. It's like..." She struggled to explain what she and Jimmy felt for each other in words. "...like we're each part of the other. It's like what you and Mom felt for each other when ... well, you know, like when I was there that first time but didn't now how to not look. It's like that but not so intense all the time. It's always there when we're near each other." The young girl got a puzzled look on her face as if she were seeing an emotion or hearing love. The experience was plain to her, but language had no words to describe it. "I'm sorry, I don't know how to explain any better, but it's not something we can share with Jeannie. It's like we *own* each other. Does that make sense?"

Bailey nodded sadly. "Lumpkin, I'm sure it's wonderful, but you don't have to try explaining any more. It's like we're blind, and you're trying to describe colors to us. It's probably something everyone in the world would love to have if they knew what it was, but in the meantime, we have to figure out what to do about it."

"To keep us safe." Amber said seriously, her pretty young face no longer carrying its usual elfin expression.

"Exactly, and I don't like what happened this evening a bit. You and Jimmy and most of the other kids seem to be developing fine, you and Jimmy especially. But those others you said were acting terribly; they're learning how easy it is to manipulate normal humans, and they obviously haven't had much moral guidance growing up. They're going to get you all into trouble." Bailey's expression was a grim counterpart to Amber's seriousness. He stood up and began pacing. "I wish we could just take you and Jimmy and his parents and go somewhere else where we wouldn't be noticed, but it's probably already too late. And I still feel responsible for the rest of those kids."

Pat remained silent. Bailey continued, turning directly to Amber. "Lumpkin, this may be a situation you can solve better than adults. I guess you know we've already talked to Melissa and Joe about what we should do, and they have no more idea than we do other than they're aware that you and Jimmy don't intend to be separated. They're both in denial about your talents, mind reading aside, but you probably know that, too, so I want you two to think about everything and help us come up with a solution if there is one. I'm awfully afraid that there might not be one."

"Bailey, we have to try something. If we just sit and wait for a crisis, we're avoiding responsibility," Pat said. There was a hint of desperation in her voice.

"How well I know." He glanced at his watch. "Well, we don't have to do anything tonight. Let's all get some rest and come back to the subject in a few days. In the meantime, we'll all keep it in mind. Sometimes the subconscious will produce answers if you don't force it."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Casey stayed in his hotel room, venturing out only to eat and to gather more information on the children. When he had enough to satisfy him, he decided it was time for his final act before temporarily leaving the area. It was a Thursday afternoon, more than two weeks after Amber's Turnteen party. He was waiting, disguised by sunglasses, a fake mustache, and casual clothes: a brown shirt and green slacks, easy colors to forget. He didn't want to be recognized by the kids so he could get a good reading on whether they actually could read minds—the three Larkin had fingered in particular. He sat on the bus stop bench at the intersection inside the alcove where some of the kids stopped for a quick kiss and grope on their way home, or if they were allowed, waited there for their bus.

At three o'clock, Casey stood up and walked to the edge of the alcove where he could see the students coming and where they could see him. He undressed and did mortifying things to several of the younger girls in his mind as they passed. Only one paid him any attention, a member of the group that Casey recognized, though not one of the three he was primarily interested in. The girl happened to glance at him then took another look as she perceived part of the content of his attention. She speeded up her steps so she could mingle with a group of kids ahead of her.

Amber was strolling slowly along with Jimmy, hand in hand. They passed the well-disguised Casey without paying him any attention. He waited until they were a few steps away with their backs to him and then let the full force of his fantasies loose. He didn't have to fake the images or emotion he felt. Everything he thought of was something he would love to do to the girl.

Amber caught all of Casey's degraded imagination full blast when he concentrated his attention entirely on her. It startled her so badly that she juggled and dropped the print book she had been carrying in the hand not entwined with Jimmy's. She let out a short, involuntary cry of disgust and moved closer to Jimmy, almost causing him to trip over her feet. She didn't have to look around to know who was responsible.

"Oh God, it's that Casey Creeper again!" she said to Jimmy, her voice low and shaky with fear. "Come on, let's get away from him!" Now her whole body was trembling in reaction to the vivid images from Casey's mind. When she reacted, his emotion made the images all the more vivid.

Jimmy's face flamed red with anger and embarrassment as he caught the truly repugnant lasciviousness of Casey's mind himself as Casey mentally stripped Amber of her clothes and performed unspeakable acts on her naked body.

Jimmy stopped momentarily, anger making him want to attack the former FBI agent regardless of the danger he represented. He couldn't help turning around for a moment.

"Jimmy, come on! Please, he's horrible." Amber tugged at Jimmy's hand, feeling a nausea building in her middle, like she had eaten some rotten food. Even after practice, it was almost impossible to shield her mind from all of Casey's loathsome thoughts.

Jimmy glared his hatred at the perverted mentality of the man but let Amber hurry him away from the bus stop, almost running. Neither he nor Amber had to look back over their shoulders to know that he was following them with his gaze, an evil grin plastered on his face.

Casey now knew for certain that those two truly were mind readers, implausible as it was. All the younger children subjected to the nerve agent had grown to be unbelievably perceptive, but the talent these two had was mind-boggling. He could hardly contain himself with thoughts of what he could do

with people like that assuming he found a way to control them, and that could be done if he went about it in the right way. Espionage agents had spent untold years and huge amounts of money researching and practicing how to manage and control spies both for and against their own interests. The best way was usually with subtle but undeniable threats of harm to their loved ones accompanied by cash, but he had to be careful. He shuddered with the thought of how a former FBI agent would be received by other inmates of a prison should he get caught. Better not to be so direct with these kids.

Larkin and Shaeffer had told him that there appeared to be a rupture in the relationship between the paired Morrison and Gomez kids and the odd one of the threesome, Jeannie Burger. He intended to try working on that. He waited. The girl was hanging out with a couple of boys Larkin said were "Juvenile Delinquents." Observation over the last two weeks had shown him that Jeannie Burger passed his waiting point a few minutes behind the other two. He prepared some new images quite different than what he had used on the other brats.

\* \* \* \*

To observers, Jeannie would have appeared to be a typical middle schooler, relieved and happy to be free of classrooms for the day, having fun flirting and bantering with the boys in the small group of students she was walking with. Inside, Jeannie was confused and unhappy and jealous. She couldn't help it. Amber and Jimmy enjoyed a continually growing closeness to each other that she envied and wanted to experience herself, but there was no other boy, or even a girl, with their talent. She was beginning to feel like a pariah in reverse, as if she were a higher cast Indian having to live among the "untouchables" like the ones they were studying in social history class this week.

The boys she was fooling around with were perceptive and they were inducing her to try some experiences that were disconcerting in a way but gave her a thrill at times. Like doing green. And sex. She picked Jordy to show her that since she knew he was more experienced than Henry. It was okay, but she knew from vagrant thoughts Amber let slip in the one class where they were together that she and Jimmy were enjoying themselves much more, and they hadn't even skipped the rope yet! They were still just petting the kitty. It was frustrating and left her not only resentful, but also feeling unchallenged. Everyone except Jimmy and Amber were so easy to manipulate.

Jeannie's musings were interrupted by images from another mind thrusting strongly at her, as if someone was aware she could pick up the thoughts. *Casey! The FBI man Amber said did bad things! But ... ?* That wasn't what he was thinking at her! Instead, he was telling her silently that he could provide her with almost unimaginable wealth and fun and could prepare her for assimilation into the ranks of the elite women of the world, all in return for using her talents now and then. She slowed her walk, seeing the frown lines above Casey's sunglasses as he concentrated mightily to convince her he was truly wanting that and nothing more. Some of his thoughts were vague and fuzzy, encompassing things she knew little about as of yet, but enough got through.

Jordy and Henry saw Casey, but their perceptive ability told them little other than that he seemed to be propositioning her in some weird manner. His thoughts were so concentrated on Jeannie that they had little inkling of what he was really up to. Both of them started to urge Jeannie away from him but then they saw she was smiling.

"Go ahead," Jeannie said. "I'll catch up with you later."

When the boys hesitated, Jeannie said, "It's okay, really." Jordy still showed a reluctance to leave her alone in Casey's presence until she stood on tiptoes and whispered a promise into his ear. He nodded and tugged Henry on with him, grinning lasciviously.

Jeannie kept her distance but listened to the former FBI agent when he began talking. She could easily

tell that he was sincere, so far as what he wanted from her was concerned. He wanted the same thing from Amber and Jimmy, but didn't think he could get it short of force or vile threats—that thought leaked from his mind as he was talking, an acute reminder of what kind of man he was. She told herself she would be careful. She found out quickly that he was working for a man he was certain could provide all he was offering if she cooperated. He had the way all prepared. All he had to do was show proof of her ability, and the world would open in front of her like a path into fairyland. She saw that even he didn't know the full extent of what he, with Jeannie as his partner, could garner, but even what he was sure of was enough to tempt her.

"How would it work?" Jeannie asked. "I couldn't just up and leave on my own, you know."

Casey grinned. "Don't worry. Just as soon as I get our support lined up, I'll have one of the companies we'll be dealing with offer to hire your parents for enough money that they'll jump at the chance to move."

"Where to?"

"Los Angeles, probably. Right near Hollywood, but far enough away not to have to mix with the riff raff. Sound good so far?"

"So far, yes." Jeannie said, envisioning herself as an enormously wealthy movie queen. "Just one thing: you keep your distance from me, or I'll turn you in. You know what for."

Casey nodded, and Jeannie saw that he was sincere even though he couldn't keep some of his background fantasies from getting loose, wistful thoughts of what he would enjoy doing with her if he weren't after a much bigger prize.

"When?" Jeannie asked.

"I'll be in touch. A rep from the people I work for will check you out. After that, we're home free." Casey looked around and saw another throng of kids moving toward them. "I'm leaving now before I attract any more attention. You'll hear from me, don't worry." He walked away, secure in the knowledge that at least one of the kids would cooperate. Some of the merely perceptive ones surely would, too. Casey began whistling a tune and dreaming of all the things he could do when he had enough wealth and power to act as he wished without fearing arrest and prison.

Jeannie slowed down as she walked toward where Henry and Jordy were waiting. She was wondering if she could handle the proposition Casey was offering by herself without having to deal with him. Despite knowing he was sincere right now, there was no way of anticipating what he might do in the future. By the time she joined the boys, she decided she didn't know enough to try what Casey was proposing alone. She would have to let him get it set up. After that, though? Maybe he could be discarded and she could make arrangements on her own. Even if not, she was thinking of one demand she was going to make.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm going to tell Mom and Bailey that Casey's hanging around here again," Amber said to Jimmy as they stood on the sidewalk in front of their homes, reluctant to part. With concentration or moderately intense emotion, they could each touch the other's mind while each was at home. They were getting better with practice, but being near each other was still a far superior way to communicate. Speech was also still better than a mind touch for conveying specifics and detail.

"I don't know whether I need to tell my folks or not," Jimmy said, his arm still around Amber's waist in a protective hold. They had walked like that since encountering Casey. "It's you he wants to ... well, you know. He ought to be shot or drowned or something. If he ever tries bothering you, I'll do it myself. I



swear I will." He held her waist more tightly as he spoke.

Amber leaned against him. "Why don't you just wait and let Bailey see your mom after I talk to him and Mom? Your mom likes Bailey, you know."

"Uh huh. So do most of the kids. Okay, I'll wait." Jimmy didn't comment on her not mentioning Joe Gomez, his father. Mister Gomez was home less and less these days. Jimmy had reluctantly told Amber that his father was probably having an affair somewhere on his sales route.

Amber turned to face him and tilted her lips up for their parting kiss. She wanted to linger in his embrace with his lips on hers and their tongues playing gentle games. It felt so wonderful, like the delicious taste of good food when you're ravenous or the sensation of sudden warmth from sunlight after being chilled to the bone. It was an emotion she didn't think she would ever tire of.

As they stepped back, Amber said, "I wonder if this is what twins feel like?"

"Couldn't be," Jimmy replied. "They couldn't possibly feel as good as we do, no matter how close or how well they know each other. This is special."

"Mmmm. I agree," Amber said as she kissed him once more for good measure and ran up the sidewalk to home.

\* \* \* \*

"You've got a look on your face like the cat that stole the cream," Bailey said as Amber came inside. "You must have just been with Jimmy." He grinned at her and winked to show he still approved of them being together.

"I was. Bailey, I wish you and Mom could know what it's like being so close to another person. Jimmy was just wondering whether it was like having a twin, but we agreed that twins couldn't possibly feel like we do. Bailey, it's so good that I bet there wouldn't be any wars or stuff like that if everyone could do it." She gave him a hug, as she always did when arriving home.

Bailey loved his stepdaughter as much as he thought he would have if she were his own. He stepped back and frowned. He kept his hand on her shoulder. "Now you look like the other cat, the one who didn't get any cream. Problems, huh?"

"Uh huh. That's the bad part. Me and Jimmy can see how horrible some people are. Bailey, you're almost as perceptive as the kids in the group," Amber said, feeling a sudden rush of affection for her stepfather. "Let me run change, and I'll tell you what happened."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

After listening to Amber and talking to Pat with Amber present, Bailey decided they had to do something about Casey.

"I can arrange to take a few days off. I think I'll make a trip up to Little Rock to talk to Casey's former supervisor and tell him Casey's hanging around school kids now."

"There's nothing illegal about it, per se," Pat said.

"Uh huh, but getting information from school authorities on a closed FBI investigation might stir them up. Amber, did you notice whether he's still using his real name or not?"

"I didn't think of it. I just wanted to get away from him. He's dirty."

"Bailey, should you go off and leave us alone right now? With that pervert hanging around?" Pat looked pointedly in Amber's direction.

"I'm going to notify the police and tell them to watch for him. The kids can give us a description of what he looks like now. But maybe I'd better wait a while at that. I'll see if I can set up a telephone conference."

\* \* \* \*

Bailey tried doing exactly that after dinner, but found that Ray Hetrick was in the process of retiring and was "unavailable." He didn't want to talk to anyone else, knowing they wouldn't believe him. He spent some computer time and finally tracked down the agent's home phone number.

"Mister Hetrick, I'm Doctor Bailey Jones. I'm calling in regard to that terrorist case from four or five years ago that you were in charge of. I have..."

Hetrick cut him off. "I'm sorry, Doctor Jones, I'm retiring. You'll have to talk to someone else."

"I know you're retiring Mister Hetrick, but we still need to talk. There have been some developments involving a former agent of yours, Sean Casey."

"Casey, you say? What about him?"

"I'd rather not say on the phone, but believe me, it's important. He's hanging around the school in Mountain Grove, watching the kids and soliciting information from the teachers."

Hetrick thought for a moment. Sean Casey had been a bit odd. He wouldn't mind knowing what he was up to, and he certainly didn't have anything on his agenda now. His wife had died a year ago, and he was alone in the world. "Are you still practicing in Mountain Grove, Doctor Jones?"

"Yes, but I'm in private practice now, and, please, call me Bailey."

"Well, as it turns out, I have a trip planned as soon as I finish all my retirement business, and it'll take me down your way in a couple of weeks. How about if we meet then?"

"That would be even better, and, Mister Hetrick, please don't talk about this, at least until after we've met. Okay?"

"I can do that much. Give me your phone number and email address."

Bailey did so, thanked the man, and replaced the handset. He got up and went out into the den where Pat and Amber were watching a movie. Though it wasn't apparent, Amber was following the movie with part of her mind and using the other part to practice mind touching with Jimmy while he did homework in his room next door.

Pat touched the pause button when Bailey came into the den and sat down beside her.

"Casey's old supervisor, Ray Hetrick, is retiring, but he said he'll come by here and talk to us in a couple of weeks. That might be even better than trying to convince someone on active duty of the danger, at least right now."

"Good. You've done what you can. Now sit down and enjoy the movie with us."

\* \* \* \*

Amber tried approaching Jeannie several times over the next week with only partial success. She wouldn't talk much and kept portions of her mind tightly closed.

Finally, Amber came right out and asked, approaching Jeannie during morning recess. "Jeannie, please tell me what's bothering you. Jimmy and I are your friends, you know."

Jeannie avoided eye contact, and more importantly, mind contact. "You can't help anything, Amber, unless you want to share Jimmy with me."

Amber couldn't answer in words, but her mind said it all.

"See?" Jeannie said. "That's the problem. I don't have anyone to share it with like you and Jimmy. Besides, we're probably going to be moving."

That was the first Amber had heard of it. "Moving? Where to? When?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe soon, maybe after school's out. Listen, I've gotta go. Jordy's waiting for me, and we only have a few more minutes before class." She turned and walked away, a finality in the stance of her body motions that saddened Amber unimaginably.

Amber followed Jeannie with her gaze until the bell rang and she disappeared into the building amidst the throng of hurrying students.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey answered the door bell when it rang almost a month later, shortly after their evening meal. Ray Hetrick had called earlier in the day and said he was in the area and could talk. Bailey had immediately invited him to their home.

"Bailey? Ray Hetrick."

"Hi. Thanks for coming by." They shook hands and he let the retired agent into the living room where Pat, Amber, and Jimmy were waiting. He had wanted Jimmy there when they talked. Melissa wouldn't be home from her job until late, and he doubted she would be much help anyway.

"This is my wife, Pat, and two of the kids who were involved. Amber is ours. Jimmy lives next door."

"Glad to meet you all," Ray said. He shook hands with each, displaying an affable friendliness. His grayish blue eyes set beneath fading and thinning blond hair had a permanent tired look to them, but his gaze was penetrating and attentive for all that.

Amber and Jimmy had cause to be suspicious of FBI agents. Together, they gently scanned his mind then retreated as soon as they found his surface thoughts were concerned only with questions about Casey and the old terrorist event. Both had found that mostly it didn't pay to try going too deeply into another person's mind. There was too much unwholesome baggage even in the best of individuals. They relaxed and simply waited on Bailey's next cue.

"Drink, Mister Hetrick?"

"Sure. It's been a long day. Whatever you're having. Call me Ray," he said with a grin. "I'm retired now."

"I've mixed a concoction we like. If you don't care for it, we have other choices," Pat said.

"I'll try it, thanks."

Pat left and returned a moment later with a pitcher and glasses on a tray along with iced tea for the youngsters.

Once relaxed with a drink and small talk, Bailey leaned forward in his easy chair, foot rest down.

"All right, Ray, let me tell you a story, and you can tell me what you think."

Bailey proceeded to relate what they had discovered about Sean Casey's private life and how he had used it to make him back off, not neglecting to tell how he had obtained the data. He was interrupted when he said Wanda had been murdered.

"Hold on a minute, Bailey. Murdered you say? Casey a child molester? Do you have proof of all this?"

"I did once, but our home was broken into by a professional and it was taken. That was about the same time I found out about Wanda's murder by a so-called burglar and that all the information on Casey disappeared from the Internet sites where he was active. Now he's back in Mountain Grove, and we're scared."

"You think he's after young girls here? Why here, where he's known? That would be stupid, and whatever else he may be, Casey was never stupid."

"No, he isn't, and he isn't after young girls now, not for purposes he used them before at any rate. No, we think he's trying to recruit the kids who were in the terror attack."

Bailey paused, waiting to see Ray's reaction.

"But why? Wait a minute! You think there's some basis to what he tried to convince me of? That there's something special about those kids?" He looked over at Amber and Jimmy and saw nothing unusual except two young people who were being exceptionally attentive in the presence of adults.

"That's right; there is. The ones who were in first through third grade at the time have developed unusual perceptive abilities. Some of the teachers—and Casey—think they're actual mind readers."

"Whoa. This is a bit much to take in all at once. Let's stop a moment and regroup, shall we?" Hetrick glanced at Amber and Jimmy again, silently calculating their ages and concluded they fell in the group Bailey had mentioned.

Amber smiled at Hetrick and nodded her head, indicating she knew what he was doing. It wasn't even mind reading, just the perceptive ability.

It took Hetrick a moment to comprehend it all, and he felt his muscles tensing as if he were preparing for

an assault on a fugitive holed up somewhere. "You two are perceptive? More so than ordinary people?"

"Yes, sir," Amber said, speaking for both of them.

"Can you tell me more about it?"

"Bailey can tell you," Jimmy said, feeling Amber's hand creeping into his.

Hetrick turned his attention to the doctor. He raised his brows just enough to indicate he was prepared to listen but not necessarily to believe.

Bailey related how Amber and some of the other kids had fingered Casey as a child molester almost immediately when he began the second investigation.

"So the, uh, talent didn't develop right after the attack? Is that what you're saying?"

"Apparently not, or at least it wasn't a conscious ability at first. But six months later, it certainly was. And here's how it works. It's the mirror neurons." Bailey related how the nerve agent the terrorists had thought would kill the kids simply made some of them ill and stimulated the mirror neurons in the younger ones, as shown by PET scans. "Actually, it stimulated the mirror neurons in all of them, but apparently only in the younger ones did it cause them to multiply past the normal point and become hyperactive."

"I'll be damned. Can you explain the mirror neuron thing to me a little more and tell me places to look up information?"

Bailey did so. He had very carefully not said anything about the three who had imbibed the nerve agent on top of the Benedryl they had been given for poison ivy nor what that had apparently led to.

"Seems like I've read something about mirror neurons in the popular literature, but I was an English major. Most science passes me by. Regardless, would Amber and Jimmy be willing to demonstrate some of their, uh ... perceptive ability?"

Bailey and Pat exchanged glances. Here was the crucial point. He had to get someone involved with the problem who would be on their side. Just the perceptive ability alone was already causing problems, but knowledge of the three who had gone on to develop mind reading ability was potentially so earth-shaking he had doubts about revealing it. And there was only one way to be sure.

"Amber, Jimmy? Can he be trusted with everything?"

Amber touched Bailey's mind briefly to be sure of what he wanted. She nodded to Jimmy and they both entered Hetrick's mind. He felt nothing at all, but a frown crept over his face as the two teenaged children stared silently at him for a long moment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The strange silence ended when Amber finally spoke. "He's okay, Bailey. We can trust him with just about anything. He may be able to help, too."

Ray stared, frown still in place. "You two determined that just by looking at me?"

Bailey remembered the burglary and how camcorders and listening devices could be hidden so effectively because of their small size now. "Let's go outside to talk," he said.

It took only a few minutes for Amber and Jeannie to demonstrate that they could indeed read Hetrick's mind without him feeling their presence.

"Incredible," he finally said, realizing just how inadequate the word was. Images of mind reading agents stealing secrets from governments, financial institutions, and individuals raced through his mind. Even those with the perceptive ability would be useful, and yet, the two children seated across from him didn't look the least bit dangerous. He found himself hoping they had developed a very good sense of ethical behavior to go with their ability.

"Yeah," Bailey agreed with a wry smile. He lit one of his rationed cigarettes. Hetrick looked at it longingly then pushed the craving aside. He had quit several years ago, finally succeeding after several attempts, and he knew from bitter experience that all it took was one slip to re-establish the habit.

"So you want me to help. How?"

"We think Casey is a shill for some other organization that's going to try suborning the kids into working for them, particularly Jeannie Burger, the other of the trio who can read minds, and before you ask, I'm not going to reveal why it happened to them and not the others, not just yet. Anyway, whoever Casey is working for will be after any of the really perceptive kids. They'll want to use them to check on the honesty of employees at a corporation somewhere or use them to root out spies in their midst. Something like that, I think."

"Those are rather innocuous uses for them, and not illegal so far as I know."

"Uh huh, but knowing Casey, we suspect he's fronting for dishonest organizations."

"Couldn't the kids—Amber and Jimmy, I mean, find that out from Casey?"

"They weren't looking for it at the time, and he hasn't been seen since they found out he was back in the area in disguise."

Jimmy spoke up. "Mister Hetrick, it's not nice to go into someone else's mind without their permission, and it's bad sometimes. Scary, even. We learned fairly quickly to keep the talent mostly to ourselves. It's better that way."

Ray Hetrick found himself warming to the two teenagers. They were quiet, attentive, and well mannered. Besides that, they didn't appear to be enamored with themselves because of their remarkable talent.

"They're good kids," Pat said, "but they're really not so much kids like you're probably thinking. They're mature young adults now. The perceptive ability pushed all the young kids to mature quickly. Amber and Jimmy have gone even farther. In a different context, they could be considered as adults."

Hetrick rubbed his temple. He had finally gotten the long-delayed eye surgery that corrected his need for glasses, but he still had the habit of trying to adjust them by grasping the frame there. "Why don't we go in the house and talk some more," Hetrick said. "I don't know about you folks, but I could use another drink."

\* \* \* \*

Several houses down the street, an observer put down the telescopic camcorder and shotgun microphone he had quickly gotten into action when the group from Bailey's home came outside. It was problematical about being able to record all of the conversation from the microphone, but supplemented by lip reading from the enlarged camcorder images, he thought he had a good chance of getting most of it for his boss. Inducing the family to move out had taken quite a lot of money, but it had been done just in time. He would like to have chanced an intrusion and planted a recorder in the Jones' house, but his request had been vetoed.

\* \* \* \*

Inside once more and with fresh drinks, Bailey told Hetrick of the little bit of animal research his friend had gotten started on and how the combined chemicals might have worked on the three children who could now read minds. He still didn't reveal that Benadryl was almost certainly the second ingredient.

"I can help you on the research, for sure," Hetrick said. "I've got lots of contacts and people I trust."

"We don't want this getting out," Bailey warned. "It would be horrible for Jimmy and Amber and Jeannie."

"I imagine. Still, we'll have to do more than research if your suspicions about Casey are correct. This is so big we need to find out all we can. And frankly, Bailey, I think you need some protection."

Bailey sighed tiredly. He and Pat had gone over all this between themselves. "What can we do? Surround the kids with guards? Change our names and try to hide? I asked for help, Ray but we don't want to call attention to this."

"It's going to come sooner or later," Ray said positively. "Nothing like this can be kept a secret forever. It's better if we try to control it, but you're right; the less attention, the better."

"So what do you suggest?"

Ray touched his temple reflexively, feeling for the glasses that were still not there. "Mrs. Jones, how do you feel about home schooling?"

Pat had thought about it before. Her main objection to home schooling was the lack of contact and interaction with other students. On the other hand, Amber and Jimmy were special cases, and her mother's instinct was telling her it might be much safer.

"How would you two feel about it?" Pat asked them.

Jimmy waited for Amber to speak. She squeezed his hand, causing their minds to buzz momentarily with pleasure before getting back to business.

"It would be okay with us, Mom. We're finding we have less and less in common with the other kids anyway. They seem so immature now."

"The problem is that I have a job. I'm a teacher," Pat told Ray.

"I see," Ray said. "I guess most couples today have to both work to have a decent living. My wife did, I

know."

"It's not that, Ray. We're not hurting for money. It just so happens that I like teaching."

"The students are fortunate to have you then." He grinned sympathetically at her. "You know, teaching is one of the few professions where just about everyone in the world thinks they could do a better job than the ones who actually know what they're doing—the teachers."

Pat laughed, but it was all too true. "Thank you. Not many people realize what a difficult job it is or how much time teachers spend outside of school hours at it."

Ray grinned again. "I do. My sister is a teacher." He glanced at his watch. "Is there anything else you want to go over tonight? I have some ideas, but I'd like to think about this and do some checking with a few people I trust."

Bailey stood up. "Go ahead and get some rest. We need to toss around the idea of home schooling and security ourselves. Can you give us a hint about what else you're thinking of?"

Ray debated with himself and saw no harm in telling them a few more ideas. "Oh, maybe the witness protection program, a move to a more secure home, bringing in some of my retired friends to help, arranging for more research and the like. Just ideas so far, but don't worry about me or any of my friends spilling the beans intentionally. Anyone I bring into this, you'll be able to trust. If I'm not absolutely certain, I'll bring them by for Amber and Jimmy to test. It's the ones we don't know about that worry me."

"Us, too."

"All right, I'll say goodnight, then. Amber, Jimmy, I'm very glad to have met you, and I'll do everything I can to help you keep your freedom. So will your parents, I'm sure."

"They will," Amber said positively.

Bailey and Pat shook hands and Ray left.

\* \* \* \*

Nothing untoward happened for the next two weeks, but one day while Amber was out of school for a followup to check on how she was tolerating the birth control implant she had gotten the month before, Jeannie approached Jimmy at recess. She touched his mind, indicating she wanted to talk.

Jimmy allowed her to steer him toward a corner of the school yard where no one else had congregated then stopped.

"I know what's on your mind, Jeannie. I'm sorry, but it's Amber I love."

Jeannie smiled as brightly as she could. "I know that, silly. I wouldn't want to break you up, but I don't see anything wrong with sharing occasionally." She stepped closer. "Wouldn't you like to have a little experience before skipping the rope with Amber?"

"We'll manage," Jimmy said. His voice cracked. Jeannie was standing very close, her breasts almost touching him.

"Sure you will, but Amber wouldn't mind if we did it. She knows boys need relief more than girls."

"No," Jimmy said.

"Oh, come on. My parents won't be home until late. We can use my bedroom. Please?" Jeannie



accompanied the plea with a vivid image of how good sex could be with her, showing him likenesses of herself naked as she had been with Jordy and using all her mind power to convey the pleasure Jordy felt when he touched her and played with her body.

Jeannie thought he was weakening. She added another incentive. "It won't be for long and then Amber can have you all to yourself. Dad has a job offer in Los Angeles he's going to take soon as school's out. I'll be leaving. Wouldn't Amber want me to leave happy? Wouldn't you?"

Jimmy wasn't wavering. Jeannie, in her enthusiasm, was misinterpreting his reaction. In reality, he was thinking that it would be nice if three people could merge their minds and become permanent partners, but it wasn't working like that. Amber was his girl and she was the only one he wanted to be so close to. He knew with absolute certainty that Amber felt the same way.

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jeannie. I wish we could just be friends. I wish you weren't going to leave, either. You're the only other person like us."

"That's the problem," Jeannie said.

"What company is your dad going to work for? We had a vacation planned for the summer. Maybe we'll be coming your way."

"Not likely," she said, giving up on Jimmy for now. She turned and left him without another word.

Jimmy continued standing in the same spot. Jeannie was angry and had let a thought slip out. Casey was the one arranging the job for her father. He muttered angrily to himself, wondering how she could stand to associate with the man, even to that extent. At the same time, he found himself feeling sorry for her. He knew she missed the intimate contact the three of them had enjoyed until he and Amber's pairing. One other thing he wondered about was how much longer he and Amber would wait. Both their bodies were demanding release from the constraints of incomplete sex. They had delayed so far out of respect for the wishes of their parents—mostly Amber's parents—but he also knew they couldn't last much longer.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Gomez is going to accept the offer," Casey said, presenting an air of satisfaction and competence to Brazos, the man he was working for. He was sitting across from him in an office located among a cluster of identical buildings, four and five story non-distinctive structures of brown imitation adobe or old mirrored siding. Offices of this type on the southern fringes of Los Angeles were where all kinds of nefarious business activities, both legal and illegal, took place. First, he had gone to see one of the vice presidents of California Pharmacies, the big conglomerate which included pharmacies, manufacturing, and distribution facilities.

Casey had very carefully picked a distribution specialist which careful research showed was vulnerable in his personal life and combined that trait with both ambition and a love of money. His instincts told him there would be others like him in the company who worked their own sidelines without top management being aware of them. In truth, Casey knew that management probably suspected but didn't *want* to know so long as the stock price stayed up, they collected their bonuses, and their names were never mentioned or put on any kind of documents. Casey's instincts had been right. That first contact had led to others, culminating with Brazos. The man sitting across from him was very secretive, but Casey knew how to elicit information from junkies and prostitutes. The street talk had Brazos' tentacles extending into much of the narcotics and counterfeit drug trade. He was also reputedly working for one of the huge drug cartels in Mexico, helping them with their smuggling operations.

"Very good," Brazos said. We've also checked your facts, Mister Casey. It appears that what you told us is true." He slid a slip of paper across the desk. "Keep this in a safe place. It's your overseas bank account identification number and instructions on how to set up your security. Do I need to mention that you now work for us and that we would be very unhappy if anyone learned of it?"

"You don't need to mention it," Casey said, though he wasn't exactly who else he *did* work for.

"Good. Now, tell me, do you recognize this man?"

Brazos produced a print from a camcorder, showing Bailey, and next to him..." *Hetrick!* he shouted inwardly. *That sanctimonious sonofabitch!*

"That's Ray Hetrick, the SAIC of the Little Rock field office."

"Fine. We'll check into it and see what he's doing now. You do the same because he's somehow connected with those kids. In the meantime, go back and continue your activities. Get as many of the special kids out here as you can and continue your work on the personal lives of their parents. I'm sure you of all people understand there's almost always things in a person's private life they wouldn't want made public. *Comprende?*"

Casey felt his face color and wondered if Brazos knew of his own predilections. "I understand. There's another half dozen besides the kid I'll be working on. They're the ones I believe will cooperate with little need of compulsion other than money, of course. I'll get them first."

"Of course," Brazos said. All during the conversation he maintained the same countenance. His brown face never cracked a smile or showed any kind of expression. His straight black hair, narrow nose, and full lips gave his dark brown eyes a look of restrained violence, as if he had spent his childhood tearing wings off flies and torturing small animals before graduating to more satisfying methods of expressing his personality.

Casey had met men of his type before, usually in interrogation rooms where he had the upper hand. This was his first experience at being the supplicant, and he wasn't sure he liked it, even for the money.

\* \* \* \*

Amber had no sooner opened her eyes Saturday morning when she felt Jimmy's mind touch. Without words, or without going into details, he conveyed the need to see her as soon as he could. Amber rested in bed for a few moments, letting the flow of Jimmy's mind merge with some of hers and allowing some of their body senses to intertwine. This was something new they were practicing. It had already given them a startlingly different perspective of how they each viewed their own selves, but it was early; she wanted to shower and dress and brush her teeth before seeing Jimmy. She gave him the mental equivalent of a kiss and broke contact as she flung the covers off and swung her feet to the floor.

A little later, she went outside to meet Jimmy. The way they liked to touch and kiss and enjoy bodily contact was still a little embarrassing in the presence of their parents, though a brief embrace in front of them was becoming commonplace.

After the initial hug and kiss and the pleasant mental warmth of their minds touching, Jimmy took her hand and they began walking around the block, their usual weekend routine. It gave them a chance to talk about private matters and to stop at the bus stop alcove for a few minutes if no one was waiting there. When they could, they took this opportunity to sit and kiss and touch deeply.

Every time they did this, Amber felt her senses reeling with the pleasure of such closeness.

It was Jimmy who broke the contact first for a change.

Amber looked at him with desire still plainly etched on her features. "Jimmy, I don't think I can wait much longer," she said.

"I can't either, but for different reasons. Dad has a new job in California. We're moving."

"Oh, no!" Amber could hardly stand the thought of it, of being separated. "Jimmy, you can't go! I couldn't stand it."

"Neither could I, not for long. I don't know what to do, though. We're not even fourteen yet, nowhere near legal age. The law would make me go with them."

They and their classmates were aware of the legal aspects of being underage. Some other cases had come up like theirs. One girl had been sent to reform school for continually running away to her boyfriend who had moved, and a couple of boys were on the verge of being incarcerated for skipping school too often and refusing to obey parental restrictions.

Amber had a sudden thought. "Maybe your mom would let you live with us!"

"Mom might, but I doubt Dad would. He's funny."

"Jimmy, you hardly ever see your dad."

"I know, but they've talked about it when he was home. Both of them think it'll be a good thing. They've had problems, you know."

"Uh huh. But what will a new job do?"

"Mom thinks it will help them be happier, and she thinks maybe moving away would help me forget all this stuff about being special."

"Oh, Jimmy, she knows we can't forget it. She..." Amber's voice trailed off and she simply leaned against Jimmy. A tear slid down her cheek. She was as aware as he was that Mrs. Gomez was becoming increasingly less responsive to their special status. She would like the whole thing to go away, and Mr. Gomez was even worse. He didn't understand it and didn't *want* to understand.

Jimmy said nothing, simply using his mind to try comforting her and doing a poor job of it because there was no realistic way out of the dilemma other than both of them running away.

"We can't run away," Amber said, picking up his thought. She sighed and forced herself to consider what else they might do. Finally, she said, "Jimmy, let's go talk to Mom and Bailey before they leave. Maybe they can think of something to do."

\* \* \* \*

"This is Casey's doings, I'll bet," Pat said when Amber told her of what they were facing.

"Probably, but that doesn't change the facts. Jimmy, would talking to your folks help if I told them what we think Casey is up to?"

"No, sir," Jimmy responded immediately. "Dad thinks it's a great opportunity and so does Mom. They don't believe it's me they're probably after. Mister Jones, please try to think of something to do. We can't bear to be separated."

"Bailey, he's right. We just *can't*. We'd run away first," Amber said.

"Oh no, baby, you can't do that!" Pat exclaimed. She clasped her hands tightly together, her mind racing to think of arguments to dissuade them. "Listen, it would be only two and a half years, and you'd both be sixteen. Jimmy could come back here then. In the meantime, we could take our vacations to wherever you're going, but you just *can't* run away. You have no idea of what it would be like, and you'd be caught before long and separated anyway."

"Mom, you know it wouldn't be very easy to catch us. We could manage somehow."

"Wait a minute," Bailey said. "Kids, just hold tight and let me think."

Amber and Bailey passed the few minutes of silence with their minds tangled together in an apprehensive alliance.

"First of all, I think Pat and I need to know just how close this relationship is. I know you've tried to tell us, but is there any way you can make us *feel* it?"

"We could try, I guess," Jimmy said.

"It would be something new," Amber admitted. "Really, we never even considered whether we could show you like that. Let us think a minute, okay?"

The adults nodded and watched as Amber and Jimmy looked deeply into each other while they mentally mapped out the way to proceed. Like the young people, Bailey and Pat were holding hands. Bailey looked down and didn't even remember when it started. He smiled at his wife, trying to reassure her, and found himself wishing that he could do it as easily as the kids could with each other.

"We're ready to try," Amber said. "We can't do it to you both at the same time, though. Who wants to go first?"

"Try me," Bailey said immediately and protectively, his first reaction being the urge to take any danger

from the process away from Pat if it did prove to be harmful.

"All right, just relax and close your eyes, Bailey," Amber instructed.

Bailey did so. Presently he became aware of another presence in his mind. He shied away at first but forced himself to accept it. The sensation wasn't painful, and it captured his total attention. His mind was awash with the powerful impression of the children's closeness to each other. It went on, growing even stronger. He could tell how enthralled they were with each other, how wonderful they felt being together. He got an impression of how strongly their bodies reacted when they kissed and touched with their minds merged. From somewhere far away, he sensed that they were actually kissing. The combined emotional storm almost overwhelmed him. It was somewhat akin to sex with Pat, but different in a way he knew he would never understand fully. It was easy to tell how binding such passion could be—stronger than any marriage bonds, deeper than normal love, more satisfying than any sensation he could conjure up from memories of the most pleasurable emotion he had ever experienced. And still it grew. He slumped down in his chair, trying to break loose from the contact, and suddenly, he was free.

Bailey shook his head to clear his mind. He grinned feebly at the children and then at Pat. "Whew! Watch that first step, honey. It's a big one!"

Pat reacted in much the same fashion as Bailey had, but when it was over she was shaking.

Amber got up and went over to sit beside her for a moment, letting her mother hug her, wanting her to be comforted and seeking some comfort of her own. When she thought her mother was able to continue, she returned to her seat beside Jimmy. She took his hand and leaned against him. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. It was simply unthinkable that they could be parted. Demonstrating their feelings to the adults only reinforced the reality.

Amber added one more comment before seeing what the folks would say, though in truth, she and Jimmy pretty well knew already. "That's how we feel now, and we haven't even had sex yet."

Bailey looked at Pat and nodded. She remained silent, knowing with an inner sadness that someone else now occupied the primary focus of her daughter's love.

"I'm convinced," Bailey said. "We'll think of something, I promise." He glanced at his watch. "Right now, though, we have to go. I've got a patient with problems who couldn't get off during the week, and Pat has a meeting at school. We'll talk some more when we get back. Be sure and keep the door locked."

Amber hugged them both before they left, but her parents surprised her. Pat hugged Jimmy and kissed him on the cheek. Bailey put his arm around Jimmy's shoulder and squeezed briefly, letting him know he approved.

"Is your mom home this morning?" Amber asked as soon as she heard their cars drive away.

"No, she's working today."

"Then come on. If there's even a slight chance we might be separated, it's not going to happen without us having made love." She took his hand and led him back to her bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Their first coupling was somewhat clumsy, but Pat's frank talks with Amber gave her the knowledge that made it easier than most first times. That, plus the fact that their minds were merged, helped them to feel their way into the experience, and, as might be expected, the first time was over all too soon. Nevertheless, it was still the most intense emotion either had ever experienced.

The second union was so overwhelmingly passionate that it was almost unbearable. Their minds were locked together even more tightly than their bodies, and each of them was able to experience some of what some of the other was feeling.

Amber thought it was the most wonderful sensation that could ever be possible, and it went on and on, rising to an intensity that finally exploded over her body with a flood of emotion that made her cry tears of joyful pleasure and excitement. Jimmy's body became part of hers, and he absorbed hers in the same way. Both had been unintentional participants with Pat and Bailey having sex when they first realized they were able to see into other minds, but their own experience went far beyond that. Amber knew it would be impossible to explain or even use a mind touch to show anyone else what it was like. It was unique, only possible to those who could delve into each other, body and soul and mind.

Even after it was over, Amber didn't want to lose the closeness; she snuggled against Jimmy, staying as near him as possible, thinking dreamily that it would be nice to not to ever have to move away. Her eyes closed, and gradually, Jimmy's embrace loosened as they drifted into sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Amber woke and immediately sensed that Mom and Bailey were back home. She started to sit up and realized that she was still loosely entangled with Jimmy's naked form. She pressed against him for a moment, long enough to bring him to awareness.

"The folks are back home. I guess we better get up and wash off and get dressed, huh?"

"Uh oh," Jimmy said. "They'll know what we've been doing."

"It's okay; I think they knew we were going to do it before they left." She kissed him and got out of bed, heading for the bathroom. Sex with Jimmy was wonderful, but even the talks with Mom hadn't fully prepared her for all aspects of it—and the after effects.

\* \* \* \*

"Bailey, those kids still seem so young. This is going to take some getting used to." Pat smiled gamely and gestured toward the bedroom.

"Are you sure that's what they've been doing?"

"Of course. Bailey, I knew what was going to happen before we left. Didn't you see how they were looking at each other? They had just finished showing us how close they are, and we were still talking about them being separated. What would you have done in their place?"

Bailey munched some cashew nuts and took a sip of the beer he had opened when he returned. "The same thing, I guess. Pat, I doubt we can even come close to imagining how good it must be for them. Just think of what they showed us, and project that closeness to a sexual union. We have to do our utmost at keeping them together."

"Well, I'm all for that. I want Amber close to us, Jimmy too. They may be mind readers and as mature as

adults in many ways, but they don't know everything. They're still going to need us for a few years."

Amber's bedroom door opened and she led the way out. At first, Jimmy had trouble meeting the adults gaze, but when they showed no antagonism or resentment, he relaxed.

Pat intended to talk to her daughter later, but in the meantime, she did her best to act as casually as possible. She greeted them, went to the kitchen, and began bringing back packets of Chinese takeout food she had picked up on the way home. It was still warm enough to eat straight out of the cartons.

It was Bailey who got them back on the subject of Jimmy being forced to leave. He pushed his plate away and popped the cap off another beer. "Jimmy, are you absolutely sure talking to your folks won't help? Suppose I tell them I'm almost certain it's your talents Joe's new employer is after and not your dad's?"

"I tried, but he wouldn't believe me. Mister Bailey, I hardly know him; he's gone so much, and he doesn't believe. He doesn't *want* to believe there's anything special about me. He's almost convinced Mom, too."

"You could show him like you did us."

"If I did, it would just make him mad and resentful, and Mom would suffer. There's something else I didn't tell you. Mom is pregnant, and she wants to move away from here. She's scared the baby might turn out like me if she stays." The young man shook his head. "It doesn't matter how illogical it sounds. We're learning that people believe things without a reason ... or for reasons that have nothing to do with reality. It's so strange to us. It's hard to understand."

"I imagine so," Bailey said. "What did you kids have planned for today?"

"We were going to walk over to the mall and go to a movie and then come back and do some stuff on our comps," Jimmy told him. At first, he thought the term "kids" for he and Amber no longer applied. Perhaps his face showed it, for Bailey spoke up.

"Relax, Jimmy. You'll be "kids" to your parents until the day they die, just like any children you have will be kids all your life."

Jimmy thought about it and saw that he was right. He nodded that he understood.

"And so long as you're going to be a part of the family, I think it's about time for you to call me Bailey like Amber does. You can drop the Mister."

"Yes, sir."

"Be back by six. We're eating then, and Mister Hetrick is coming by to talk to us some more."

"We will," Amber said. She gave her mother and Bailey a quick hug, and they were gone.

Pat blinked back tears. Bailey saw them and drew her into his arms. "It's hard losing a child, but it's good to know we prepared her well for a life of her own."

"I know, dear, and it's not as if Amber is going to move out. The kids can't do anything until they're a little older. It's just that all this is happening so fast, it seems."

"Well, look on the bright side. We won't have the usual trouble with teenage angst and misunderstanding."

"There's that. I'd better get some papers graded before Ray gets here."

"Go ahead. I'll fix dinner."

\* \* \* \*

Ray Hetrick arrived right on time. Once he was settled in with a drink, he looked around. "I was expecting Jimmy to be here, too."

"His dad told him to stay in tonight," Amber said. "It doesn't matter; I'll be in touch with him, and he can follow what's going on."

"Good. First thing, I got the research started. It turns out that pudding had nothing to do with the results when the nerve agent was mixed with it. It stimulates mirror neurons anyway, in chimpanzees at least, and I checked back on the analysis of the substance we did right at first. It seems to be a derivative or offshoot of one of the nerve agents manufactured during the Cold War. What apparently happened was that the terrorist chemists made a mistake in their production, and instead of being detrimental to nerve tissue, it just stimulated the mirror neurons. Perhaps, in younger children, it also caused them to multiply, but we haven't gotten that far yet. If you want me to go into the mind reading business, I'll have to know what other substance was present that may have changed Amber, Jimmy, and Jeannie."

Bailey shook his head. "Not yet, Ray. It's not that I don't trust you, but I'm doubtful about losing telepathy on the world. It seems to be fine for our two kids, but Jeannie ... well, I'm not sure. At any rate, I don't want to let it get out yet. Besides, we don't even know why it took five years for the mind reading ability to appear in them. What I would like is a sample of the nerve agent to run a few more experiments myself."

Ray Hetrick eyed Bailey closely. He thought he knew what Bailey had in mind, but he simply nodded. This was one time he had to just ride with the flow and do what he could to control it. Even though he was retired, he still felt a responsibility, and this was certainly the most interesting thing he could ever have imagined doing in his spare time. "Okay, I'll get you some. Next subject—"

Bailey held up his hand. "Before you go any farther, you need to know something. Jimmy's father has suddenly been offered a job from out of the blue that appears too good to be true. We suspect it's Casey's doing, the same way he enticed Jeannie's parents to move."

"You hadn't told me that."

"We learned this since the last time we spoke."

"You need a number to get in contact with me when things like that come up." Ray wrote two numbers out and handed them to Pat who was nearest him. "I've got some retired agents who're willing to help and use their contacts while we see exactly what Casey is up to. I need for Jimmy to know as soon as we can where those jobs are and with what companies."

"Los Angeles," Amber said. "They're both going there. Jeannie wouldn't say, but we found out that she's working directly with Casey. Getting her parents out there was just a way for him to get their hooks into Jeannie. I bet it's the same with Jimmy's folks, too."

From the way it looked, Ray didn't doubt it a moment.

"Okay, get me more information. Call me when you learn anything new. Now, that other subject. I spotted a tail when I came over here. I had one of my friends with me. We pretended to be local cops and pulled him over. He wouldn't talk, and there were no grounds to notify local authorities; however, this sounds like something to do with the recruiting that's going on."



"More recruiting?"

"I haven't been idle. I already knew Jeannie's folks had been offered a job, as well as a few other parents of the most perceptive kids. I didn't know Jimmy's parents had though. That's kind of strange in itself. The others are who the teachers are terming 'bad kids.'"

"I probably know just which ones they are, then," Pat said.

"Me, too," Bailey added. "So where do we go from here?"

Ray laughed. "It sounds like you two are mind readers. How well off are you financially? If you can afford it, I can have a couple of men keep an eye on the school and your home at night. They want something interesting to do and jumped when I told them a little about the situation here, nothing about mind reading per se."

"We can stand it for a while. Dad left quite a bit of money behind when he died."

"Good. I'll get on that. A couple more friends will nose around and find out more about who's hiring, or trying to hire, and why, but I suspect we already know why in a general sense."

There was more talk, but the essence had been taken care of. It was Amber who brought up the one subject that had been avoided just as Hetrick stood up and was ready to leave.

"Mister Hetrick, is there anything you can do to keep Mister Gomez from taking that job?"

"Nothing that's legal, I'm afraid. I take it you and Jimmy don't want to be separated."

"We're not going to be, regardless," Amber said firmly. "Not for long." She endured Pat's and Bailey's scrutiny and reinforced what she had said. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. Somehow we have to fix that."

"It's all right, Lumpkin," Bailey said gently. "We're going to move to Los Angeles if I can't talk sense to Mister Gomez."

Amber stood silent for a moment, communicating with Jimmy, and then ran to Bailey and her mother. They gathered her into their arms while Ray quietly let himself out.

"You're the best parents in the whole world," Amber said through her tears. I just wish you could be like us, so you'd know how important it is."

"I think we do," Pat assured her. "You showed us, remember?"

"Yes but that was before Jimmy and I ... well, you know. It's even more wonderful than I thought it could possibly be. We'll never be separated for long, not while we're alive."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sunday afternoon, Amber, Pat, and Bailey went to the firing range to practice with their weapons. Jimmy was refused permission to come along with them. It made Bailey decide to present Jimmy with a gift of an automatic pistol of his own, the same model as Amber's, with the admonition his parents weren't to know. He realized he was taking a chance, but the boy was going to be in a situation where he might *have* to protect himself.

Amber revealed that he was coming along with them, in a sense, as he had already done a couple of times. He could follow her actions in his mind, getting some grasp of how it felt to handle and fire the pistol. She had already gone over the mechanical handling with it late at night by mind touch, while they were each in their own rooms.

When they returned, Joe Gomez was home and out mowing the yard, shirtless in the heat of early summer. After greeting him, Amber asked, "May I visit with Jimmy for a while?"

"May as well," Gomez said. He shrugged. "You won't be seeing him much longer."

"I know," Amber said. "He told me." She went to the door and Melissa let her in. Bailey lingered.

"Joe, what company will you be working with now?"

"California Pharmaceuticals," he said, taken off guard and revealing the company before remembering he had promised to keep it secret.

"Hmm. Big company. How did you manage that?"

"I've got a good sales record, Bailey. They came looking for me," he said proudly. He wiped sweat from his face with the towel hanging around his neck.

"Maybe they were looking for Jimmy, too."

Gomez put his hands on his hips, making his rangy figure look like a stick man. "Listen, Bailey, I've had about enough nonsense about my boy being "special" and all that crap. He's perfectly normal. All he's got on his mind is girls. You ought to know that, of all people."

"Joe, I've got reason to think the people you're dealing with aren't that reputable. They..."

"I don't want to hear, it Bailey. California Pharmaceuticals? You think they're not reputable? Besides, I don't know if you heard or not, but Melissa's pregnant. We want to raise the girl away from all this special kid nonsense, so excuse me for being blunt. Butt out. Okay?"

Bailey saw that there was no sense in going further. His mind was made up. "As you wish," he said and went on in.

"I just made my attempt to talk to Joe. It's no good. They're going, so I guess we better start our arrangements."

Pat had a drink ready for him. When they sat down together she said, "I didn't think talking to Joe would do any good. I had a chat with Melissa this morning but didn't want to mention it until you had a shot at Joe. She told me about being pregnant while I tried to pretend it was a surprise. Then she said she wanted to move, that she was thinking of the future, whatever that means, and didn't want another child

to grow up here and be thought strange.” Pat brushed at her hair, a gesture she unconsciously used when she was trying to put over a difficult concept in class. “She’s got the idea in her head that if she moves away, Jimmy will go back to being normal. It’s sad, but that’s what she thinks.”

"I know," Bailey agreed. "Denial is an escape mechanism. Fairly common." He shrugged his shoulders; he knew that, without a person's cooperation, there was little to do about it.

"Bailey, while we're on the subject, won't Casey find out what we're doing? Moving to Los Angeles, I mean? Do we have to worry about that?"

"Sooner or later he'll know, but we can keep it quiet for a while. We'll have the house handled by a real estate agent after we're gone and have our mail sent to us by a forwarding company. We'll plan on following them as soon as possible, but it may wind up with Amber and Jimmy being separated for a while, regardless of what they want."

"They won't like it."

"I'm sure they won't, but I think they'll be okay so long as they know we're going out there, too. In the meantime, we can let them have as much privacy as possible. You know how it is when you first start having sex."

Pat grinned. "Uh huh. Like you personally invented it." She moved closer. "And I'm in the mood tonight, so you get a light supper and a couple of extra after dinner drinks."

"You can twist my arm if you like, but it's really not necessary."

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, they lay together, both replete but not yet sleepy. Pat wondered idly if Jimmy or Amber had inadvertently picked up on their emotions during the height of their coupling. *It had certainly been intense enough*, she thought. Even if they did, it no longer mattered. They were doing the same thing themselves when the opportunity presented itself, and she knew neither of them would deliberately tune in. Thinking of Amber led her into another subject.

"Jimmy said Joe had one more trip to make before school lets out. That'll give the kids some more time together without him interfering, but you know what? I feel sorry for him and Melissa both, with them not wanting to believe anything nefarious about Joe's new job. I'm afraid they're in for a rude surprise."

"Me, too," Bailey replied. "I've thought of one scheme to upset Casey's apple cart, but I want to talk to Ray first and see what he thinks."

"What scheme is that?"

Bailey told her.

Pat thought long moments, remembering, then finally pulled him to her. It was an awful decision to have to make if they decided to go through with it, and she could hardly believe Bailey had been the one to come up with it.

\* \* \* \*

At the same time as Pat and Bailey were talking, Amber and Jimmy were still awake, their minds together. Knowing they might be separated for a while despite everything, they were trying to gauge how far they could extend their minds while locked together mentally. Surprisingly, they discovered that of the group still awake whom they knew well, they could sense each of them as far away as the other side of town, though the contacts were very foggy. Then they tapped into Mrs. Larkin's mind. It wasn't foggy at

all; they were too used to her.

"She's with Casey! They're in bed together!" It wasn't words they used, but a sudden awareness of what was going on there. Quickly, they backed off. Neither of them were intentionally reading minds; they were simply seeing if they could sense thoughts from a distance. Both of them withdrew as quickly as possible.

*That's a new development, Jimmy!* Amber thought.

*We'll tell Pat and Bailey about it tomorrow. Bailey will call Mister Hetrick. Maybe he'll know what they're planning,* Jimmy replied

*It's not ethical, but maybe we should try finding out from Larkin,* Amber suggested.

*It wouldn't do any good to try now, not with what they have on their minds. He's sure got her fooled, doesn't he?*

Amber touched Larkin's mind briefly again. *Uh huh. She thinks she's in love with him, but he's just using her. He's sick.*

*We already knew that.*

Jeannie was the final person on their list of persons they wanted to contact, and with her, they wanted more than just a distance gauging mind touch because they were hoping she would communicate with them. They had saved her for last, but she was sleeping by then.

\* \* \* \*

Amber told Casey about the liaison of Casey and Mrs. Larkin the next morning before leaving for school.

"We weren't deliberately reading minds. We were just seeing how far we could reach with our minds separately in comparison to when we're merged, I guess is the best word. Anyhow, we thought you should know."

"Thanks. I'll pass it on to Ray. Do you go to school full days all week?"

"She doesn't. I do," Pat said. "Teachers will be busy with lots of stuff, but Thursday and Friday the kids get out at noon. Speaking of that, Amber and I need to get going." Pat sipped the last of her coffee, kissed Bailey, and grabbed her purse. She took the car; Amber walked so she could be physically with Jimmy for that period of time.

As soon as Amber joined Jimmy, he kissed her then said abruptly, "We've got a moving date. Two weeks after school lets out. Dad called us this morning early."

Amber felt her heart jump in her chest. She wished Pat or Bailey could read minds so she could tell them immediately that they needed to speed up their preparations.

\* \* \* \*

Surprisingly, Jeannie joined Amber and Jimmy for the walk home that evening. "Hi guys," She said, and, at the same time, touched minds with them in a friendly manner.

"Hi Jeannie," they both said, delighted that she wanted to mingle with them again.

She appeared to be balancing something on a precipice in her mind but let it go. "I'm sorry I haven't been very friendly lately, and Amber, I'm sorry I tried to seduce Jimmy. I was just lonely and wishing I had

something like you two have."

"It's all right," Amber said. She could sympathize, if not entirely forget the matter. She didn't pry, but thought Jeannie was holding something back. That was her privilege though. Even she and Jimmy had some private compartments in their minds they still kept from each other: embarrassing incidents, errant thoughts, and especially some of the fantasizing daydreams that all humans are subject to but would never want made public. Even so, they were opening up more and more as time went on, and they found, accidentally in most cases, that other people were like them in that respect.

"No, really. I'm sorry," Jeannie continued. "We're going to be separated maybe forever before long. It's going to be awfully lonesome for me." She let them see her thoughts deliberately. She really was lonely and wanted to enjoy the mind touching sensation as much as she could before leaving, but beneath the veneer of her thoughts, she knew she was simply laying a foundation for later and what she hoped would come true.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

All that week and the next, Jeannie remained friendly with Amber and Jimmy. The three of them spent lunch hours and recess together as well as some afternoons, but Amber and Jimmy kept to themselves the afternoons when they were home but the teachers were at school. It was their only time for complete privacy where they could continue learning and enjoying each other's bodies. It only got better. Even as normal teenagers would, they found themselves thinking about each other and what they had done and would do again almost to the exclusion of anything else. They hardly missed Jeannie the last week before she left for California, nor paid much attention to how she was spending her time. Bailey and Pat had encouraged them to use Amber's bedroom whenever they could. Melissa had objected at first but finally relented. Joe didn't seem to care.

\* \* \* \*

"You were right, Jordy. Green stuff does make it better," Jeannie said one afternoon. Her parents were at the real estate office signing papers on the house and for a change they could enjoy sex in her bedroom.

"Told you," he said, while playing with one of her breasts.

Jeannie had no great qualms about reading other people's minds, though she didn't make a point of it because such a big proportion of a person's thoughts was either uninteresting or downright disgusting. Just like Jordy. She gently pried, and she could see that he cared much more about his satisfaction than hers. To him, she wasn't much more than an attractive body he had access to. She used her new talent to avoid giving away what she really thought of him, which was only someone to learn sex from. Jordy was sure he was the dominant one of the union, but he couldn't be more wrong. She was simply exploiting him. Boys—and men, as she had found out—thought about sex much more than girls and women, but she had to admit she enjoyed it. Especially with the mood alteration the marijuana provided. It intensified the concentration and pleasure, but she was sure it still couldn't be anything close to what Jimmy and Amber felt, damn them both. Why couldn't there have been four of them, two boys and two girls or even just her and Jimmy? It wasn't fair, but if she had her way, she wouldn't be left out all her life.

\* \* \* \*

Casey had done all he could in Mountain Grove for now. He shook hands with the Smiths, the last set of parents of the perceptive he had managed to hire. As he walked back to his car, he reflected on how the job was going. Two of the kids had left with their parents immediately after school was out for the year. Already, he had received word back that the boys had no scruples about using their ability in return for cash and drugs and that it must be paying off handsomely already because Brazos was pleased. He wondered what tasks they had been started with. He had recommended they be disguised as young pre-interns and worked at innocuous jobs at first then gradually expand their use. He didn't know if that was being done or not. Brazos didn't reveal much about his activities. He did say that Casey's biggest job was yet to come, that of arranging security for the ones being used, and to help prevent competitors learning of their identity and ability. He looked forward to it. That was more in keeping with his line of work.

He laughed to himself as he thought of Larkin. After seducing her, she had revealed far more about the perceptive students, both the good and bad ones, than she should have. It had made his work much easier, but he was glad to be rid of the damned old maid. When he thought of the way she was probably crying and carrying on since he stopped seeing her and returning her calls, he laughed out loud. It made him feel good. A couple of passengers boarding the plane with him looked at him curiously, but he didn't give a damn. Before this was over, he intended to be rich, and, if he could, he intended to pry the secret

of mind reading out of Jeannie Burger. He quickly stifled that thought. Best to keep it out of his mind as much as he could until the time was right.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry, Lumpkin," Bailey apologized. "We just couldn't wind up our affairs quickly enough to follow Jimmy and his folks close enough for you to stay in touch. One more week." The three of them had just finished breakfast and were cleaning up.

"It's going to seem like forever," Amber said. Jimmy had gone beyond their ability to sense each other after their first day's drive. He had been past the range of mind touch only three days, but already it seemed as though a vital part of herself was missing. It had gotten to the point where it was hard for her to understand how normal people could go about their lives without a lover, a friend, a confidant, almost an alter ego to share everything with, someone who knew the foibles and advantages and disadvantages of being the opposite sex. That was possible only with the mind reading ability.

Something about Amber's expression made Bailey suspect how great a trial the separation was. The longing he saw in her eyes and face was almost palatable. He put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. "We'll try to hurry."

"Thanks, Bailey. You and Mom have been so understanding it makes me ashamed to complain, but ... I'm sorry. I don't think I can make you understand."

"Probably not," Bailey said. He wiped the table and returned the dish cloth to its hanger. "One thing I'd like to know. What's your take on how the world would function if everyone had your ability? I don't mean politically or how governments would work; you don't know enough about that yet. I want to know how *people* would manage. Have you thought about it?"

"Oh, sure," Amber said as she followed him and Pat out to the den. "Jimmy and I have talked about it some. It would probably work best if kids started out that way. I think adults would have a pretty hard time of it if it happened suddenly. I know Jimmy and I did right at first, but I guess they could get used to it. Probably it would wind up pretty much like the group did. Mostly good, some bad. I guess everyone would have to try to be a little more honest. Maybe. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Mostly," Bailey said. "Thanks. Pat, which room shall we work on next? Remember, the movers will be here in a couple of days."

"Let Amber take care of whatever she has in her room that she wants to keep private, and let's do it next. Go ahead, baby; we old folks need to rest after a meal.," Pat said and winked at her daughter.

"You guys should give parenting lessons," Amber said, smiling. She went to take care of what few items she would rather the adults not see—not that they were anything to be ashamed of, or not much anyway. While she was doing that, she thought of what a nice world it would be if every child had parents like her mother and Bailey. She barely remembered her own father now. He had never displayed the slightest interest in seeing her after the divorce. When the support checks stopped, Mom made no effort to track him down and make him pay, telling Amber that if he cared so little, they were all better off not having a reminder of him. Amber agreed. Bailey was such a good person that she didn't care if she never saw her biological father again.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie was bored the first few days at their new home. She had been looking forward to the move, but now she realized how much she missed the contact with Amber and Jimmy and even the other perceptive kids. It was like living in a world of dunces. Then Casey approached her while she was out for a walk to see more of the neighborhood. It was a nicer place than they had in Mountain Grove, but so far, she had

seen very few teenagers around, and of those he did see, none of them interested her.

"Hello Casey," said when she came upon him at an intersection. At the same time, she tried to see what he had on his mind. It was hard to tell within the maelstrom of his conflicting thoughts, and she had no wish to dig deeper. One thing came through clearly, though. He had a job ready for her.

"You're going to be a summer intern," Casey said, beginning to talk immediately in order to try keeping his other thoughts muffled.

"Oh?" Jeannie saw that was true and waited.

"Right. You're going to pose as a gifted high school student looking for advanced credit. Your school records from Mountain Grove will support that image. It will be with the same company your dad is working for. I've already briefed your contact. You'll meet him Monday. You can ride in with your dad the rest of this week while he's going through orientation and then we'll arrange transportation for you."

"What will I be doing?"

Casey's mind immediately formed an image. Spying. "You're going to be a spy, here and there. All the time you'll ostensibly be going through the different departments to see how things are done, but your real job will be to ferret out people who aren't loyal to the company or who suspect my boss has ties to the company and controls some of its employees. Do a good job; you're going to be watched."

"Don't worry," Jeannie said confidently. "When do I get paid?"

"You'll be on the payroll, but I'm the one who'll give you the real money and goods. Here's your first." He handed over a small cheap fanny pack then turned and hurried away.

Jeannie was very curious but she waited until she returned home before looking inside. Inside the pack found a bundle of twenty dollar bills, a small zip lock bag of already rolled marijuana, some methacoke pills, and a small vial of an illegal sexual stimulant. She took a deep breath. Did Casey intend to turn her into a dope addict? If so, he was in for a surprise. She put the money in her purse and hid the pills, cocaine, and all but one of the cigarettes. Knowing she had two hours before her mother would be back from shopping, she lit it and lay back on the bed, smoking and thinking.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie's first day at work wasn't pleasant. In Mountain Grove, everyone knew her at school and around the neighborhood. She wasn't used to being introduced to strange adults. The experience was disconcerting, especially meeting the men in the distribution department where she began work. It didn't seem to matter what age they were, whether married or single, their first impression of her would inevitably segue to a sexual image of one sort or another. It kept her from delving very deeply into their minds at first the way she was supposed to. She knew she had a good figure for a girl approaching fourteen. She also knew she looked older than that, but she had no desire to see herself as these old men saw her. Well, all except the two who were gay. They simply thought of her as a nuisance.

Jeannie's contact, a man who gave his name only as Borcham, had an agenda all laid out. He had gone over it with her before the introductions started. Borcham was a small man with streaked blond hair and pale blue eyes. His image of her wasn't pleasant at all. Not that he disliked her; he did. He admired her youthful good looks in a nasty fashion that would have made her shudder if she hadn't already learned not to linger in minds like that.

"Your job is to find out about everyone in this department. Take your time, but no more than two weeks. In fact, on Friday, I'll be meeting with you all day unless you turn up some spectacular type of disloyalty



or hear someone think about Brazos when we give you a tour of the plant. If you do turn up something like that, notify me immediately. Understand?"

"What are you looking for? Perverts? Thieves?"

"Anything detrimental to the company, but especially for industrial spies. Anyone whose loyalty is to a competing company. Anyone who came to work here under false pretenses. Anyone trying to get the goods on Brazos. Got it?"

"I think so."

"Be sure. Your pay will depend on how good a job you do, how much you learn about everyone. Casey said you could do it, so let's get started. As soon as you prove yourself, I have a bigger job for you."

"Alright."

That was when the introductions began. It was a long, boring, and sometimes disgusting day. Occasionally, she probed Borcham's mind and learned that wasn't his real name, not that she particularly cared. His thoughts were so focused on pleasing Brazos and Casey, along with aberrant fantasies involving harm to almost everyone he came in contact with, that she couldn't stand much of it. The next morning, before leaving she took one of the timed released methacoke tablets, a methamphetamine that was combined with a cocaine derivative to keep the high from showing. She had gotten the same type from Jordy a couple of times. The pill helped tremendously. She learned more the first two hours after taking it than she had all the previous day, and she knew she would be paid very well if what she was finding out was any indication. Nevertheless, it wasn't nearly as glamorous and exciting as she had visualized it being. She was still bored and lonely.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"I want you to get Jimmy out here, Casey. I don't care how you do it."

Casey laughed and Jeannie saw immediately that if she had gone deeper into his mind at their last meeting, she would already have known he was on his way.

"Damn you, why didn't you tell me? When will he be here?"

"Pretty soon, so don't worry. How was your first week on the job?"

"Boring. Where's my pay?"

Casey produced a paper bag. This time, she checked to see what it contained before letting him go. It was the same as last week; money, pills and drugs. She nodded and touched Casey's mind.

"Don't think you'll get me addicted; I can handle it," Jeannie told him. "Call me when Jimmy gets here."

"Won't you know?"

"It'll save me searching all the time."

"I'll send word to you at work or drop a hint on your personal phone. No more calls to the house line unless I have to. By the way, your dad was told you're making much more money than what the books show, but don't flash it around. People get suspicious of young kids with too much cash. They think they're either rich or dealing."

"No problem. You just get Jimmy where we can see each other, and you won't have to worry."

"He'll be here. In the meantime, why not try that big mall near where you live? Kids in the area hang out there on weekends, or so I'm told. Look for me at two o'clock sharp in the Barnes & Noble book store. Check the guy I'm with. See if he's being straight with me, and there'll be a bonus for you. After we meet, call this number at six sharp." He gave her a slip of paper with the number on it.

She said, "You'll need to give the person you meet a couple of cue words to make him think about whatever you're worried about, or I might not be able to tell."

"Okay, I'll do that. By the way, you got a good report for your first week. They had no idea Branderlin was taking money from another company, or that the research VP was suspicious that Mercer had ties to Brazos. Next week we're going to bring you by the CEO's office. Try to dig into his mind, and find out what walks his dog."

"I'll try. And by the way, you need to stop thinking about underage girls so much. It damn near shows on your face."

Casey blushed, but not too much. He had done it purposely, hoping she would look at those images in his mind and not others. As the young girl strolled off, he thought he had succeeded.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Burger drove Jeannie to the mall Saturday at noon and let her out with instructions to be waiting for her at the main entrance at five o'clock. Jeannie had wanted to stay longer, knowing lots more kids would be there later, but decided this would do for a start.

Jeannie had no trouble making friends or getting attention, but she was amazed at the difference, the sophistication of the teenagers here compared to those back in Mountain Grove. She saw almost immediately that her wardrobe needed improving and spent some of her time shopping, buying a couple of the transparent blouses she noticed were popular and colored bras to go with them. She bought tight shorts with ovals cut out on each side and below the navel, and some blouses and short skirts to go with them.

She met a number of young men and women and was again amazed at the plethora of drugs, alcohol, and mood altering pills that were offered for sale. She refused one offer when she saw the seller knew they were fake, but bought from another who was dealing in Jams, which she had heard of but never tried. Jams were supposed to not only increase sexual desire, but also make sex itself more intense. She hoped she could think of a way to slip some of it into Jimmy's food or drink when she got him alone.

She showed up at the bookstore at two and caught Casey's eye. She didn't know what he said to his companion, but it had the desired effect. He disclosed almost immediately an impending betrayal of Casey and Brazos himself by someone named ... Rudo? Yes, Rudo. That was all she got before Casey clandestinely passed an envelope to the other man and left.

After that Jeannie wandered around and met other teenagers. She exchanged phone numbers, but only with boys who displayed interesting possibilities beneath the veneer of their voluble, self-assured conversation. In all, it was a successful afternoon. She was still running over it in her mind that night in bed when she felt Jimmy's mind touch. He was here, and he was searching for her!

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy was pleased when he sensed Jeannie's presence, and she was receptive to him. He and his parents had arrived that day, but were staying in a motel until their furniture could be moved into the home the family was buying.

It had been days since the last contact with Amber, and Jimmy was antsy with longing. His only intention in seeking out Jeannie was the hope that the last friendliness she had displayed would continue out here. Despite his and Amber's closeness, they both agreed that it was nice to be able to communicate mentally with someone else, and so far as they knew, Jeannie was the only other person like them in the world.

With the mental equivalent of speech, they agreed to see if their parents would drive them to the mall she told him about on Sunday afternoon for a few hours.

When Jimmy's presence left her, Jeannie hugged herself. She would wear some of her new clothes and enthrall him with how much she already knew about the teenage culture in Los Angeles. Not the drugs, though. She knew he was pokey about that.

Jimmy had trouble going to sleep in the strange bed in a strange city with night noises continuing long past midnight. In fact, they never really stopped, but only slowed. He was worried about Jeannie. He sensed something not quite normal about her mind. He had no idea that it was the residual drugs still working in her body that skewed her thoughts. She had taken another pill before going to the mall, and it hadn't worn off yet.

\* \* \* \*

The man Casey had met at the mall so that Jeannie could test his loyalty was an infiltrator into one of Brazos' illegal organization, which dealt in funneling counterfeit and fake prescription drugs to wholesalers. Brazos was using California Pharmacies as a front and dishonest executives in the company as cover for that and other illegal activities, including a piece of the huge illegal narcotics trade. Unfortunately, Casey had revealed a bit too much about his activities and the abilities of the special group

of children being recruited from Mountain Grove to him before he learned of his impending betrayal.

Casey used a low level operative's phone to take Jeannie's report when she called to tell him that the man who was going to betray him worked for someone named Rudo. Casey knew the name Rudo. It was the code name for one of the biggest smuggler and narcotics dealer in the area and was used by the underworld and law enforcement officials alike. Rudo, in turn, worked for one of the big international cartels. It was easy to see that already word had leaked that a special source of information was shaping up that might put Brazos in control of all activities in Southern California and that other drug cartels were lining up to stop him. Unfortunately, he would have to tell Brazos about the infiltrator since Jeannie hadn't revealed enough information so he could hunt Rudo down himself. That was probably impossible anyway. He would be too well guarded.

Casey knew he was in a rather shaky position; he would have to tell Brazos what was happening, and Brazos was smart enough to learn that he had been a little too indiscrete with his own knowledge.

Casey debated with himself, but ultimately called Brazos for an emergency meeting. It was going to start an underground war, but, at this point, he didn't think he had a choice. He was just one man, and he needed the protection Brazos could offer. He made the call to Brazos even though he knew that taking out just that one infiltrator wasn't going to stop the impending violence or even slow it down much. He just hoped he could make his fortune and retire from the field before it got too bad.

\* \* \* \*

Sunday afternoon, Melissa took Jimmy to the mall. The request for a ride had been simple since she wanted to do some shopping anyway. They separated after agreeing on a time and place to meet later.

Jimmy and Jeannie had agreed to meet at the same bookstore where Jeannie had gone the day before. He thought nothing of it since they both liked to read, and Jeannie had mentioned it as a meeting place because she had bought clothes the day before and still wanted to pick up a book or two.

Out of some subconscious suspicion he was only vaguely aware of, Jimmy approached without making contact with her mind. He spotted her outside the bookstore, sitting on a bench with two older boys. They were laughing and talking. One of them had an arm draped around her shoulder. Curious, he touched the surface thoughts of the two young men, but quickly retreated. One of them was concerned only with the possibility of whether Jeannie could be enticed into sex while the other's thoughts were on how much money Jeannie might have and whether he could sell her some drugs for enough cash to feed his own habit.

*They're almost as bad as Casey*, Jimmy thought, just as Jeannie got tired of the attention. She glanced at her new watch and extended her awareness, searching for him. She sensed his nearness, looked around, and spotted him. She smiled at him, told her two companions a hasty good bye, and hurried in his direction.

At the same time as Jeannie got to his side, both of them caught a viciously self-centered mind concentrating on Jeannie with lethal intent. Startled, they couldn't help but searching the area to see what the person harboring those thoughts looked like.

As they did, the man's lapel camcorder caught their image. He stared at them from behind tinted glasses and a cap with the bill in front, partially hiding his face.

Jimmy retreated from the man's mind quickly, not liking the mental contact with such a twisted personality.

Jeannie maintained contact a few moments longer; she had become accustomed to reading others' minds.

Her mouth opened in surprise and fear. "Jimmy! I think that roach is planning on kidnapping me! Maybe even..." She didn't want to consider what else the man held in his mind. He thought it might become necessary to kill her.

Jimmy caught the concern. "Come on, let's get away from here," he said urgently. In the back of his mind, he could practically hear Bailey's admonition: *Don't attract attention!*

It wasn't that easy. While they had remained standing together, the two boys Jeannie had been seated with approached, blithely unaware of the dangerous individual nearby.

"Hey, kid!" The taller of the two spoke in what he imagined was a commanding voice. "I haven't seen you on the floor before. What campus?"

"I don't know yet. Come on, Jeannie," he said.

The other blocked their path. "What's the hurry, kid? We want to natter at the little one here. Decipher?" He took a step nearer, getting into Jimmy's space.

Jimmy made a mind probe and saw immediately that there was no use reasoning with them. They were both bullies and were *looking* for trouble. He scanned the area hurriedly and found no one but the man in sunglasses and hat paying attention. Quickly, he shifted as if turning to go then brought the four stiffened fingers of his right hand around in a short, powerful punch to the boy's solar plexus just as he had practiced in the martial arts classes. The boy doubled over with a whoosh of exhaled air. Before the other had a chance to react, he shoved the one who was struggling for air into the path of the other, causing him to fall. He grabbed Jeannie's hand and pulled her with him as he hurried away.

The man in the sunglasses made a note to himself. If the girl was with that kid at the time, they would have to be careful when they grabbed her. Maybe just dispose of him with a quick shot to the head or heart with an automatic.

Then he remembered. Both the kids had known immediately what he was, and he had never laid eyes on them before. Maybe the rumors were true!

"What in hell are you getting mixed up in, Jeannie?" Jimmy demanded as soon as they were out of sight.

"I don't know! I never saw that man before!" Jeannie declared. She was almost in tears, as much because Jimmy hadn't paid the least bit of attention to her appearance in her new finery as because of the possible threat to her life. That was already fading now that they were out of sight of the strange man.

"Well, you better stay away from this place. He might be back, and those broke rocks you were with ... you do better than that!" As soon as the last words were out of his mouth, Jimmy caught the reaction from Jeannie. She could indeed do better than that, and it was still him she was after.

"Jeannie..."

Then she did burst into tears.

Jimmy had no idea what to do. Instinctively, he put his arms around her when she fell against him. He held her while she cried, glaring at shoppers who hesitated then hurried on when they saw the look on his face. He didn't attempt to pry into her mind. Whatever was tormenting her besides his unavailability was her business.

Eventually, Jeannie wiped her eyes, and they went on. She tried to be happy at being with Jimmy while Amber was still back in Arkansas, but the thoughts of the man who wanted to kidnap her returned and

spoiled the remaining time they had together. Even the mind touches they both had been craving were tainted because she had to conceal so much.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Bailey met with Ray one more time before they embarked on the trip west. He had gotten a good supply of the nerve agent from Ray the day after he had asked for it some weeks ago and quickly got his trusted friend to begin work in the animal research lab where he was employed. Starting with white rats and chimps, he had already discovered the optimal dose of the agent required to stimulate the mirror neurons in the chimps, and it did something he thought might be similar with the rats. He also carried out Bailey's suggestion of giving the adult chimps even higher doses, and Bailey was pleased with the results. Next, Bailey supplied him with some liquid Benadryl, transferred to a bottle with no label and asked that it be added in varying increments, along with a request not to try discovering the formula for it, just as he already had requested that he not investigate the nerve agent's composition. He trusted John Woods not to do so in both cases, promising to reveal everything at the proper moment. Bailey discussed the situation with Ray at the local library where they had agreed to meet this last time.

"My friend is already excited about the results, Ray," Bailey said. "So am I, for that matter, but I'm going to have to think about what to do with the data. You've been a great friend, and I don't want to keep things from you forever. In fact, when I get ready to tell you about the results of the experiments I'm having done, I'm probably going to need to consult with you before going any further."

Ray grinned. "We've been experimenting too, Bailey. What we'll do when the time comes is just compare notes. By the way, I talked to Mrs. Larkin and told her about Casey. She is one pissed lady, but she only half believes me. No telling which way she'll jump or what she'll do. I hope I haven't put her in danger. I thought my shadows had quit tailing me, but then I spotted another one. There's more recruiting going on, too, but Casey seems to have vacated the area for the time being."

"Who's doing the recruiting now? And for whom?"

Ray shrugged. "Most of it on behalf of Casey, I'll bet, but there's another player, too, who isn't with any legitimate company. One of them is a known mid-level illegal drug distributor who's probably acting for someone higher up the food chain. There may be more for all I know."

Bailey thought about this development for a long moment. "Ray, my main concern is keeping my own kids safe. I hope you understand that. If word gets out of what they can do..."

Ray nodded, face grim. "Then they wouldn't be safe anywhere, Bailey."

After they parted, Ray sat at the table in the library for a while longer. He felt guilty for not telling Bailey he had traced the samples he'd mailed to his researcher friend and was well aware of what he was doing. He had come to like and admire the family, but this was too important to be left in the hands on one person. It had national and world implications, but he was like Bailey in one respect: he didn't want knowledge of real mind readers getting out either, not as long as three teenage children were the only ones in the world who were capable of it.

\* \* \* \*

The day before they left for California, Bailey had a phone call from a woman. She was friendly and pleasant over the phone and wanted to meet with him and Pat and offer them a great package. Interesting and very well paying jobs for each, she said.

"We're satisfied now," Bailey told her and hung up. *So, he thought, now it's us they're after. Do they know?* He didn't think so, but it was obvious that whoever she represented was well aware of Amber and the group's extraordinary perceptive ability and wanted the parents as a means of access to the kids.

All of them, not just the wayward ones. Word was spreading, perhaps slowly, but as inexorably and remorselessly as the flow of lava down the slope of a volcano.

\* \* \* \*

When Jeannie reported for work Monday morning, she had a surprise coming. Borcham led her to a door in a dead end hallway. It had no nameplate to indicate what was inside, but Jeannie knew even before Borcham produced a key, unlocked the door, and handed it to her.

"Be back downstairs in half an hour," he said and left.

Jeannie stepped confidently inside.

"Fancy meeting you here," Jordy Rhieman said, a huge grin plastered over his face. His eyes roved over her figure with unconcealed longing.

"Jordy, what..." She got no further before he stepped forward and began kissing her and feeling her breasts.

Despite herself, Jeannie felt her body responding. Jordy was full of foam, but he knew what he was doing when it came to sex. Finally, she broke away and looked around. The room contained a small refrigerator, a long wide couch of some velvety material with a covering over the seat cushion, a single affair that extended the length of the couch, unbroken. Other than that, there were two chairs and two coffee tables and a bathroom with a basin and a shower. The door to it was standing half open. She could see it was furnished with plenty of towels.

"What is this place?" Jeannie asked, even as Jordy's mind told her.

"This is an executive getaway room, where the big boys come to jump rope. It's ours every day from eleven to twelve, but Borcham said we had a half hour right now. We don't have to wait."

Jeannie didn't have to think very long about it. Sex with Jordy might not be the best thing in the world, but it certainly beat fooling around in the minds of drug distributors while pretending to be interested in what they were doing. She nodded and began unbuttoning her blouse while Jordy locked the door to the hallway.

\* \* \* \*

"You should have told me about Larkin," Brazos said. His eyes glinted with malevolence.

Casey faced Brazos in a chair across from the desk his boss was sitting behind. Brazos' forearms splayed out on its surface as he leaned forward.

"I did tell you! I said she was the one that identified all the kids, didn't I?"

"You didn't tell me you were screwing her. Would you like to guess what happened when you dropped her without even an attempt to ease her feelings?"

"I didn't think it was necessary," Casey said. His mind raced frantically, trying to think of what the damned old maid might have done or said.

"It was. You tell me everything you do from now on. This is your first and last warning. Understand?"

"I got it. What did she do?"

"It's not what she did. It's what one of our competitors did. They heard about her from one of those



perceptive kids and went after her. When they discovered you had shafted her, they didn't have much trouble recruiting her for a job the old broad would love, but she's not going to live long enough to do it."

"What?"

"Being in charge of the kids they recruited, some of the ones you ignored. The way I understand she feels about them, she'll do anything those people tell her to so long as she can give the kids orders and control their perks. Especially after they told her you played on her feelings to pry information out of her. We can't have that."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know it would come to this."

"Sorry doesn't get it in this organization, Casey. You're either right or you're gone, and when I say gone, I mean gone as in not ever coming back. Like Larkin will be before the day is out. I'm sure you realize by now this is the biggest thing we've ever found to fight the feds and the competition."

Casey nodded, afraid to speak.

"Alright, I've started some repairs. Those three kids who can actually read minds are the ones we absolutely *have* to have. Make sure Jeannie Burger is well protected while we round up the other two, and while they're helping us identify turncoats, feds, and double agents, we're going to find out how they do their little mind reading trick if we have to take their brains apart cell by cell. I've got little Jeannie's boyfriend here now to keep her happy, but we need to get the other two mind readers."

"How about Rudo?"

"You did well identifying his spy, but I'll deal with him. Here's what you do to get the boy into our camp without attracting attention." He gave Casey his orders. "If that doesn't work, we'll use the other girl as soon as we can locate her. They're on the road, on the way out here. I'm giving the orders now, so there'll be no delay once we pin down their location."

Casey nodded. Inwardly, he sighed. He knew this was how the management end of the illegal supply chain maintained such tight control. Once in, there was no way out. Not this side of the grave. However, he wouldn't be part of that operation. After all, the Jones girl and her parents would most likely be in a motel somewhere. It would be easy for Brazos to send a crew to come in the dead of night and take care of what needed to be done. And at this point, he didn't want to tell Brazos that it was really Jimmy Gomez whom Jeannie wanted, not that juvenile delinquent Brazos had given her. He wasn't even a mind reader.

Casey departed and drove to another building within the complex, the one where Joe Gomez was still being oriented. Gomez didn't know it yet, but his job description was going to change.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy was scared and had no one he could talk to. Amber was still beyond the range where he could contact her mentally, and, certainly, he couldn't talk to her parents. In his room, he took out the Glock Bailey had given him, a twin of the handgun Amber had gotten as a present when she turned thirteen. His parents had no idea he owned it. He checked to be sure it was loaded and had a cartridge in the chamber then stuck it under his pillow. After that, he called Amber. Talking on the phone was better than nothing.

\* \* \* \*

Ray Hetrick was worried. Larkin was suddenly gone, moved from her rented home almost overnight, and he had no idea where she was heading. If he had to bet, he would put his money on southern

California. What he didn't know was whether it was Casey's group or another who had gotten to her. More of the perceptive kids and their parents were leaving, too. Apparently an all-out recruiting drive by competing organizations was underway, all of them offering what appeared on the surface to be legitimate jobs. The whole situation was getting out of hand. Regardless of Bailey's and Pat's wishes, he needed more help than his retired friends were able to provide. The FBI was too hidebound with bureaucratic bottlenecks and turf-protecting prima donnas in upper management to even think about bringing them in. Same for Homeland Security. The National Security Agency was better, but like all the agencies grouped under the anti-terrorist tent after 9/11, it had to answer to politicians. In ordinary circumstances, Ray understood and approved, mostly. In a democracy, government agencies had to be subordinate to elected representatives. This was different, though. If he broached the subject with any of them, inevitably, there would be a leak and explosive publicity, which left just one option: Project Omega.

## BOOK THREE

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Project Omega was given its super-secret charter after 9/11 by its founder. Its funding was supported by a trust set up by a billionaire who realized that, on occasion, action needed to be taken completely outside the bounds of government; indeed, its very existence derived from that concept. The original director was still running Project Omega under guidelines outlined by its wealthy benefactor. Its mission was stated simply: *What is necessary must be done*. Its money came from numbered Swiss bank accounts, and it answered to no government. The personnel and field agents were screened very, very carefully and offered employment in such a way that even if anyone working for Project Omega was apprehended while on one of its missions, there was no way to link them to their superiors. Even had they confessed completely, they wouldn't have been believed. The whole concept was too outlandish.

Ray Hetrick had been offered a job with Project Omega as soon as he was eligible for retirement. He had been considering it when the situation involving Casey and the perceptive kids came up. Now, he thought it was time to contact them again. If there was ever a job the foundation was fitted for, this was it. He called the Arkansas Gazette in Little Rock and placed a classified ad. It was completely innocuous, but it would attract the attention of someone in Project Omega. After that, he waited.

\* \* \* \*

Casey set Gomez up beautifully. First, he made the arrangements, and he dropped by the little office that had been assigned to him. He acted as if it was a casual visit.

"Hi, Joe," Casey said after knocking and coming into the office.

Gomez brightened when he saw Casey. They had met several times in Mountain Grove while Casey lined him up for his new job but only once since he arrived.

He stood up and came around his simple desk to shake Casey's hand. "Hey man, good to see ya! What's going on?"

"Just stopped by to see how you're getting along. Got a few minutes?"

"Sure, sure! Sit down. Want some coffee or a Coke?"

"Coffee would be good."

Gomez had a little carafe already filled from the coffee maker residing in a corner on a small cabinet. He poured for them, and as soon as they were seated, began talking. "Hey Sean, I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but the more I learn about my new job, the more it looks like I'm going to be bored stiff. Hell, there's nothing to it, arranging truck routes after the reps get the contracts signed. I'll hardly ever see anyone in person and won't do any selling myself. I thought it was my ability as a salesman this place was after. Soon as I get all the highways and cities sort of mapped out where we'll send our shipments after the new customers are on board, I won't have much to do."

Casey beamed ebulliently. "That's kind of why I dropped by, Joe. I've been talking to management and the folks who've been orienting you, and I believe we underestimated your ability. I think we could use you better as an evaluator."

Gomez frowned, hoping Casey wasn't considering him for a position out of his depth. He pretty well knew his own ability. He was a good salesman, but his education was limited to a high school diploma.

"Don't frown, Joe; I know what I'm doing." He glanced at his watch. "Hey, tell you what, why don't we go for a drink or two and a bite to eat and discuss the matter. I know a good place right near here."

"Fine with me," Gomez agreed, glad to get out of the confines of the office. He really was bored.

Casey drove him to a fairly high class restaurant where he had already made reservations. Before going in for their meal, Casey steered them toward the lounge.

Joe looked around, somewhat uncomfortable at the opulent surroundings and plush chairs and tables. They were widely separated instead of being pushed close together in order to crowd more customers into limited space, as he was accustomed to seeing at his usual haunts. When he saw the prices, he understood how they could afford it.

Casey saw the look and laughed. "Don't worry, it's on my expense account. You'll also have a very generous one, by the way, if you accept this offer."

Casey gave the order to the waitress while Joe gazed at the woman serving them. She was tall, beautiful, and well-endowed. In order to avoid the appearance of gawking at her, he looked around the place. It was only about a third full, but more than half the customers were very attractive women, sitting together mostly, but a number of them apparently alone. "Lots of good looking broads in here," he remarked.

"That's why I like the place," Casey said and laughed.

The drinks were strong and appeared quickly. Casey avoided Joe's attempts to talk about the prospective job change and concentrated on telling him what a great place this was to have a good time, pick up women, and perhaps score a hit or two of Jams or other products along that line. By the time they were into their third drink, which Casey had previously paid the barmaid to make stronger than usual for his companion, Joe was very relaxed. He saw nothing untoward in Casey sending a couple of drinks over to a table inhabited by two very good looking blonds in their twenties. A little later it seemed perfectly natural for the women to be sitting at their table, laughing and joking with them. Joe wasn't even suspicious when it turned out that the one named Evie worked for CP, too.

After one more drink, they moved to the dining room. By the end of the meal, served with a very good house wine, enough for the two men as well as Evie and Carol, who were sitting with them, Joe found that Evie was concentrating her attention on him. She leaned forward when he spoke to her, displaying considerable cleavage. She touched his arm and played with his knee under the table while smiling enticingly. By that time, Joe didn't want to hear any more about the prospective job. He barely noticed when Casey and Carol quietly departed, merely nodding and grinning when Casey told him to stay as long as he wanted and that everything would be taken care of.

Later that night, Joe tried Jams for the first time. After that, he was ready for anything, even the other drug Evie produced from her bedside table.

Joe Gomez saw Evie twice more that week and each time became more enamored. She was young, undemanding, and had a magnificent figure. By the time Casey asked him if he could get Jimmy to come to work for the company, he was ready to do anything to keep up with his new woman, even though he still refused to believe there was much special about his son other than his being rather remote and somewhat bookish, unlike himself.

\* \* \* \*

"Dad, can't you see you're being set up? This whole thing was just a ploy to get me."

"No, it's not. Besides, why should you care? You need something to keep you busy during the summer

anyway. Take their job and earn some money for a change. It's no sweat off our balls if you can't do what they think you can. Just play along."

Jimmy could tell there was no use reasoning with him. "All right, Dad, I'll try it, but just for a week." At least he could see what kind of environment his father was working in and what they wanted of him.

"Great! That's my boy. By the way, there's a good looking young girl about your age working as an intern there. I'll try to arrange for you to meet her, how's that?"

"It won't be necessary, Dad. I'll find her myself."

"A chip off the old block," Joe said and realized Melissa was listening. He shrugged, uncaring. Melissa had been acting very coldly the last few days just because he came home late and a little wobbly.

Melissa didn't say anything. She had found lipstick stains and the smell of perfume on his clothes. She knew he was already up to his old ways, and they had hardly gotten unpacked. She turned away, wishing Pat was out here so she could talk to her. She realized now that it was she who had been wrong. She should have known Joe wasn't going to change.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy woke up two days later; it was Saturday. They had gotten moved in finally. He had gone to his room after lunch to listen to some music and muse over the problems surrounding him. Jeannie and her yearning for him. The "job" he had reported for Friday that he hated almost immediately and had told Dad he would not return to. Mom's unhappiness and brooding silence. Jeannie's increasing involvement with drugs and her revelation that Jordy was out here. The need to talk to Pat and Bailey. And, most of all, the lack of contact with Amber. He dozed off wondering where she was right then, what she was doing, how far away they might be by now, and how soon they would arrive. It wouldn't be long now, he knew. No more than a day or so.

His eyes opened wide, wondering whether it had been a dream, then realized that it hadn't been; it was real. *Amber! It was Amber!* Immediately, his mind was suffused with hers as they exchanged mental endearments that were impossible to describe in words. It was more of an overwhelming, all-enveloping awareness of how much they loved each other and needed to be close. The contact wasn't even sexually oriented, but as their minds remained merged, each had impressions of the others' body sense. There was a mutual longing for physical contact.

In her motel room, while Amber was happily renewing the ambrosial mind-to-mind contact with Jimmy, other events were taking place. The man at the mall in the sunglasses and baseball cap had clandestinely taken a picture of Jimmy with his phone and passed it on to his superiors with the information that he had been identified as a threat almost immediately by the children even though they had never seen him before. That gave Brazos a way to find out where the Jones family was. He had already discovered they were on the way to Los Angeles by having their real estate agent strong armed, but his hackers hadn't found any record of credit card use at motels along the way. They must be paying with cash.

Jimmy's phone number was easy to find, and a contact with the phone company relayed a list of the numbers he had called. There was only one. From there, Brazos initiated a trace, using an operative with fake FBI credentials. The license plate of the van Amber and her parents were traveling in was also easy to obtain. By the time Amber finally touched minds with Jimmy, the telephone traces had the van's location pinpointed. The pre-planned operation, which had already been put together, was well under way.

\* \* \* \*

The first Amber knew of impending danger was when the pleasurable miasma of Jimmy's mind was

penetrated by an image that intruded, faded, then intruded again, closer this time. Someone was both thinking of her and trying to avoid doing so.

*Wait!* Amber mentally telegraphed Jimmy. She broke contact with him except for a tendril of thought she left entangled with his so he would know what was going on. It didn't take long for her to find out.

*Jimmy! Some people are coming for me! They're going to kill Mom and Bailey!!* she shouted inwardly. The minds she felt drawing near were horrifyingly direct in their intentions, so much so that they betrayed their presence, and there was very little time left to act. She flicked on the light by her bed and sat up.

At first, Amber was blinded by uncertainty, but she remembered what Bailey had told her one time. *In an emergency, do something, don't just stand there!* Instinctively, she sought protection from the nearest strong male—Bailey. She grabbed her phone and dialed his cell phone number, knowing it would take forever to go through the switchboard. To her, it seemed to take just that long before he answered, while all the time she was frantically trying to get through to him mentally. She held the phone to her ear while she slid out of bed, dressed only in panties and one of Bailey's old soft tee shirts. She hurried to her suitcase and rummaged in it for her gun while the ringing went on, and the men bent on kidnap and murder came closer and closer. She was just getting ready to dart out the door and try to stop it all herself when Bailey answered.

"Bailey!" she screamed, both vocally and with all the force of her mind. "Get your gun! Men are coming to kill you and Mom! No, wait—one is a woman, but—Bailey, she'll kill, too! Hurry, Bailey! Get Mom out of sight!" Sensing Bailey's intentions and realizing the mistake she had made she screamed again, "No, no, don't turn on the light!"

Amber dropped the phone on the bed and clutched her automatic in both hands. They were trembling, but she managed to slide the action back enough to see that a round was chambered. The Glock had no safety, leaving it ready and deadly.

The three men and one woman closing in on their rooms on the ground floor of the motel were already in the parking lot by then, out of their car, and walking toward them with the confidence of professionals. Two of the men stopped at Pat and Bailey's room while the third man and the woman went on a few paces and halted at the door to Amber's room.

Amber dropped behind the big bed, gun in hand and aimed at the door. She knew exactly what was coming and what their intentions were. At the same time, she did her best to let Bailey know mentally what was happening. It was much harder than simply telling him; she was still unused to having to make anyone other than Jimmy or Jeannie understand her that way. It took all the mental effort she could muster.

Outside, the four assassins made eye contact and then acted in unison. They already had cards to open the doors, having obtained them from the night clerk who now lay dead in a pool of blood. Both doors were unlocked and thrown open at the same time.

"Shoot them, Bailey!" Amber screamed, even as her gun bucked in her hand. The noise was loud and startling without ear protectors. The scent of gunpowder she was familiar with from the range tingled in her nostrils. Being able to sense the lethal determination in the minds of the man and woman who had come for her made it easy to pull the trigger. She shot three times, one bullet each as they burst through the doorway and one more for the man after they fell. He hadn't died as quickly as the woman. Amber waited no longer. She rushed out of the room, jumping over the corpse of the man as she went. Next door, she knew Bailey hadn't fared as well.

As quickly as Bailey realized he wasn't dreaming, he reacted quickly, grabbing his gun from the night stand and literally shoving Pat off the other side of the bed. He rolled off on top of her then got back to his knees and faced the entrance from behind the bed just as Amber had. The door sprang open just as Pat realized something was badly amiss.

"Bailey, what..? Then she felt the presence of Amber's mind, almost incoherent with concern for their safety.

Unable to sense the evil in the minds of the men intending to kill him, Bailey almost lost his life by hesitating until he saw the men were indeed intent on shooting him. Only Amber's gunfire from next door saved his and Pat's life. The unexpected burst of shots from the room where the kidnapping was supposed to be taking place startled the gunmen aiming at Bailey for just an instant, long enough for Bailey to fire his weapon. Unlike Amber, one of his shots didn't hit squarely and his opponent was still able to fight back. He dropped to the floor and fired his pistol, keeping Bailey and Pat down while he retreated toward the door in an attempt to escape. He got no farther than a foot or two beyond the entrance when Amber shot him down. She did not hesitate, not at all.

"Bailey!" Amber shouted as the last killer fell. "Mom! It's me!" Cautiously, she eased forward and sensed Bailey's mind relaxing as she ran into the room. She dropped her gun on the floor and ran to her mother, tears streaming down her face. She and Mom embraced while she sobbed with relief that they were all alive. She was still trembling and her ears were ringing from the loud noise.

Pat put aside her own emotions in order to comfort her daughter, not yet aware that Amber had killed two people and assisted with the third's death.

While Mom petted and hugged her, Amber filled Jimmy in on the details mentally, those he wasn't already aware of. She tried desperately to make herself calm down enough to be understood by him. Eventually, she succeeded.

"Are you okay, sweetheart? Lumpkin?" Bailey asked Pat and Amber as he searched for his phone. He was already calming down, and the sound of sirens in the distance made him realize that some kind of explanation to the authorities was going to be needed quickly.

"I'm okay, Bailey," Amber said. "So is Mom. Go ahead with what you have to do."

Bailey began dialing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Tarker Blackmon was a retired Major. He had served in the Army Special Forces, first as an operative until a wound put him undercover in the Pentagon's Office of Special Investigations for his last year of service. He finished law school before retiring early and immediately went into the FBI, fully recovered from his wound. He stayed only long enough to become disgusted with the ultra-cautiousness at the management level of the agency. They protected the agency's image first and the public second. He was looking for more challenging work when Project Omega recruited him. Now he was just finishing the brief conversation with Ray Hetrick.

"I'll have a couple of men there as quickly as I can Ray, just on your say so. They may be too late to keep the incident out of the papers, but no one will ever learn exactly what happened. I just hope this is important as you say it is. We don't like short circuiting the regular law enforcement agencies unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Good. I'll tell you all about it soon as I can get out there. You won't be sorry, believe me."

"Good enough. It would help things if you come aboard, though."

"Consider me recruited, as of now."

"I'll pass the word upstairs. Okay, glad you're with us. Meet me there."

"Where will I find you?" Ray asked.

"It's a small town. I'll find you. Just get there soon." The phone went dead.

Ray smiled grimly at the abruptness. His old friend never was much for long conversations and hated wasted time. Tarker Blackmon was a tall, brown skinned mixture of Caucasian, Amerindian, and African American heritage. On him, the mixture appeared to have been well stirred. He was soundly built and handsome in the rugged fashion that attracted women. *For all the good it did them*, Ray thought. He had been married to the same woman since he was eighteen and his wife seventeen. Tarker would get the job done. In the meantime, he had other calls to make, but he was extremely grateful that he and Tarker had become friends during the man's brief tenure with the FBI, or he might never have heard of Project Omega. Tarker had attempted to recruit him right after he retired. The mind reading phenomena had been the convincing factor. Ray made some more calls as he headed toward the airport. From there, he would fly to Los Angeles and rent a car.

\* \* \* \*

Before the police arrived, Bailey told Pat and Amber not to speak to them but to let him do the talking. He realized they could be in some major trouble as a result of the killings. Even if they managed to absolve themselves by claiming self-defense, they could still be arrested for carrying weapons in California without a license.

"They were trying to kill us. All we did was shoot back," Bailey repeated over and over to the county sheriff. They had no attorney to call here, but he knew he would have to find one quickly. At least Amber would be able to pry into his mind when the time came and decide whether he was competent and honest. That was one good thing.

The police separated all three of them over Bailey and Pat's protests. As they were led to separate patrol cars, one county and two local, he said "Remember, don't talk to anyone until I can find an attorney."



Amber and Pat nodded as they were urged away from him.

All three were still sitting alone in the back seat of each of the patrol cars thirty minutes later. Crime scene technicians were going over their rooms and the adjacent area when a commotion began. A large, dark gray sedan pulled into the parking lot and two middle-aged men got out followed by a woman a few years younger. Bailey had to crane his neck sideways at an uncomfortable angle to see what was happening.

One of the men and the woman produced what were apparently some kind of credentials while the other man made his way in the direction of the county sheriff. Shortly, all of them were engaged in conversation. It went on for almost a quarter hour before one of the men came over to the car Bailey was in, accompanied by a disgruntled looking detective. The detective spoke to the patrolman in the car.

"Let him out. This is some sort of federal business."

Bailey heard the order and breathed a sigh of relief. Without asking who the man was, he followed him. Even before talking to him, there was something about his confident stride and bearing and the simple clothing that made Bailey want to trust him. Amber only reinforced that feeling when she smiled at the stranger and quietly said "Thank you." He knew he could trust her impressions.

They collected Pat, and as soon as they were out of hearing of any of the officials, the man halted and finally spoke to them.

"We're friends of Ray. You're coming with us. Give me your keys so someone can collect your luggage and weapons and bring your car later without attracting attention. I'll explain on the way."

"Where are we going?" Pat asked as Bailey handed over his keys.

"To some place that's safe for the time being. I don't know enough yet to make any other decisions."

All this time, Amber had kept in mental contact with Jimmy. It was his invisible comforting presence as much as her parents' that had kept her from extreme emotional distress. He helped her to avoid thinking of the way the woman had looked when the bullet hit her just below the throat. In her hurry, she had aimed a little high. She slid into the back seat of the big sedan with Pat and the woman while Bailey sat in front with another of the men. None of them had given their names yet.

Amber suddenly thought of how Jimmy was living in an unprotected neighborhood. She turned to the woman. "Can you protect a friend of mine? He might be in danger, too."

"Where does he live?"

"Los Angeles."

"Address?"

Amber had to get it from Jimmy. It took a few seconds to make sure she was getting the image of the numbers and street correctly then she gave them to the woman.

"We'll try to take care of it," she said while taking her phone out of her purse, "though from the looks of that scene back there, you people—whoever you are—seem able to take care of yourselves." The barest hint of a smile graced her stern countenance, making her look younger and more feminine. She dialed a number and began giving instructions. After she put the phone away, she said, "It may take longer to get to him than it did for you folks. We don't have that many field agents free right now."

"Thank you," Amber said. She would breathe easier now knowing Jimmy was going to be safe. She didn't mention Jeannie. From what Jimmy had told her, she doubted that Jeannie needed protection.

\* \* \* \*

The lookout and secondary driver for the assassins drove away when he saw the shambles the operation had turned into. Who would have thought some damn doctor and a teenage girl would be armed and capable of not only handling their weapons but killing with them, too? He knew from his army combat service, before he was thrown out, that many people froze when the moment of truth arrived. These people certainly hadn't! As soon as he was safely out of the area, he called his superior and reported the development.

Brazos got the word an hour later. He considered the situation for a moment and decided it was time to take the boy into custody rather than waiting until his father was gone. He cursed himself now for not giving the order as soon as the brat declared he would not return to work. Well, from now on, he would do what he was told, like it or not. He met Casey in his alternate office an hour later. Casey was nearby. He called him in to reinforce his orders.

Brazos didn't greet Casey when he arrived. He was keeping his temper very carefully under control. He still needed Casey, but he knew he would have to dispose of him soon. Already, he knew too much. "The Jones kid and her family got away, damn them. Is the Burger girl pretty well under control?" He asked immediately.

"Yes, she's getting in too deep to back out now," Casey said, trying to control his relief that Brazos wasn't raging over the failed mission to grab Amber. This was the first he had heard of it. He didn't even try correcting Brazos' mistake. The girl's name was Morrison, not Jones. The doctor was only her stepfather.

"Okay, we can forget her for now. There'll be three of our men showing up here in a few minutes. Go with them and help. Bring the boy back here. Dispose of his parents just like I told you; make it look like a crash and carry where the homeowner resisted, and make damn certain the scene is cleaned up. You know what the field technicians look for when they investigate. Make sure they don't find anything. Is that all clear?"

Casey turned white. The moment he had been fearing had come. He felt nauseated and swallowed the bile trying to rise in his throat. "Look, Brazos, I didn't sign up for anything like this. I want—"

Brazos rose halfway out of his chair. "Yes, you did. You knew it. Now get the goddamned job done, or you'll find yourself out in the desert fertilizing a cactus. *Comprende?*"

"Alright," Casey said resignedly. As Brazos said, he knew what he was doing, even if he hadn't admitted it to himself until now. He excused himself and went into the bathroom.

Behind the closed door, Casey took out a small vial, poured a tiny heap of powder onto the counter next to the basin. He leaned over and sniffed heavily, taking it all up into his nostrils. A few seconds later, he felt the powerful rush of methacoke washing over him, making him feel controlled and confident. It was a great sensation and worked much quicker than the pill. No wonder it was addicting. Not for him, of course; he was only using it occasionally.

Outside, Brazos stared at the closed door and smiled knowingly. Someone else loved those drugs, too.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy couldn't have gone back to sleep had he wanted to. Amber was still emoting, and it impacted him almost the same way it did her. The emotion was so strong and engulfed so much of his mind that it took

a while for him to realize he might be in immediate danger, too. He slid out of bed and dressed. He started to leave his room to go wake his parents, then stopped. He remembered what had just happened with Amber and her parents and went back to his room. His gun was hidden in the recesses of his closet where Melissa wouldn't find it while hanging up clothes. He brought it out, chambered a round, then stuck it under his belt and let his shirt hang out to conceal it. He knew his parents wouldn't let him carry it if they knew. He left his room this time and went to warn his parents.

"You had a bad dream, Jimbo. Go back to bed," Joe Gomez said sleepily.

Jimmy shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. "It wasn't a dream, Dad. Some men did try to kill Amber and her parents. They may be coming here, too."

"It was a dream, I said."

Melissa was awake. "Joe, maybe he does know how to read people. Maybe we ought to—"

"If he could tell what people were thinking, they wouldn't have fired him the first day of that so-called job. They found out pretty quick he couldn't do that."

"It isn't that I couldn't Dad. I just wouldn't. It's not nice to pry at other's people's thoughts. Besides, it's scary sometimes."

"Yeah, right. Listen, I'm tired of this. If it'll make you happy, I'll get my gun out and put it by the lamp here. Okay?"

Reluctantly, Jimmy left Joe and Melissa's bedroom and went back to his own. Rather than sleep, he brought his computer online and began playing a game, one where he didn't have to think much and could keep part of his mind alert for intruders. He tried to contact Jeannie and see if she knew anything then drew back. She was asleep, but the normal pattern of her sleeping mind was different.

*Drugs. She's still doing them*, he thought miserably, wishing he could do something about it. Despite his good intentions, by early morning he dozed off, with his head on his crossed arms where he had rested it for a moment on the surface his computer desk.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Even though he hadn't said anything, Casey knew Brazos was furious at the outcome of the attempt on the Jones family. He also knew that he had better not foul up himself, or he would be on the receiving end of that anger when it boiled over. He remembered Brazos' parting words: "After we grab the Gomez kid, maybe we'll have some leverage over the Jones girl, too."

Casey was surprised when Brazos called him again.

"After you've finished this job, come back here. If I haven't gotten to it yet, I want Jeannie Burger in my custody too, along with her parents. If you get the assignment, bring her and her parents to my place."

"Do you want the parents alive?"

"No, you fool, bring their bodies here. *Of course* I want them alive. Now get busy."

\* \* \* \*

*This is almost too easy*, Casey thought as he followed one of his men silently inside the home and toward the master bedroom of Joe and Melissa Gomez.

The other two men split up to check the two smaller bedrooms, not knowing which one Jimmy was in. Casey waited behind his partner while he slowly and gently turned the doorknob and eased the door open, using only a penlight to see by.

Casey had supplemented his last hit of methacoke when they arrived, and now, he was riding a double high. He shoved the other man toward the larger figure visible in the dim light while he moved toward what must be Melissa's side of the bed. Just as he was raising his silenced weapon, a voice split the darkness.

"Mom! Dad! Wake up!"

He fired as Melissa began sitting up, a half second behind his partner's shot. Neither paused to see the result, for a louder gunshot reverberated through the house. Casey led the way out of the bedroom, running and cursing. *The boy must have woken up*, he thought. *Why didn't those idiots silence their weapons?*

Jimmy awoke with an overriding sense of danger blurring everything else in his mind. He had done so in enough time to save himself, but not Melissa or Joe. He barely had time to scream a warning and pull his gun from beneath his shirt when the door to his room was flung open. He was waiting. He fired immediately at the man who was holding a weapon. The noise startled him. He barely regained his senses in time to shoot the other man, the one holding the handcuffs and duct tape. At the same time the awful impression of bullets crashing into his parents' skulls almost overwhelmed him. The full sensation of their minds being shocked suddenly into death was stunning in its impact. It paralyzed him for a moment, but knowing there was nothing he could do for them allowed him to escape. He ran from his room and out the back door just ahead of Casey and the other killer. Behind him he heard Casey yell as someone fired a gun. The bullet whistled past him and impacted somewhere beyond.

"Don't shoot, you idiot! We have to have him alive!" Casey yelled angrily, not the least because he knew Brazos would be even angrier than he already was if Jimmy escaped.

Jimmy ran down the alley and sprinted between his house and the one next door toward the street. He heard footsteps thudding behind him and ran even faster. He jumped a hedge and cut across the lawn of

their neighbor's home and then across the street. He darted between two other homes and down another alley. At first, he didn't know where he was going; his first impulse was to simply get away because he had no idea if other gunmen were near and simply not emoting at a level he could detect. A couple of minutes later, he realized he had instinctively headed toward the little park a couple of blocks from home. He kept weaving in between houses and running down alleys while keeping part of his mind focused on Casey. Before long, he reached the park and got out of sight, going to ground behind the bank of a little depression where short stubby trees hid him from sight. There he waited.

Amber was still asleep, as was Jeannie. He wanted desperately to let Amber know what had happened and to warn Jeannie if she ever came out of her stupor. Jimmy lay still, trying to slow his breathing so that no sound escaped. Casey and the other man were still searching, but he could tell Casey was frantic now and had no idea where he was. He kept trying to wake Amber and Jeannie, but it was after daylight before he felt the touch of Amber's mind.

\* \* \* \*

Amber and her parents had been taken to a house in a sparsely populated neighborhood beyond the western outskirts of Los Angeles. Amber hadn't paid much attention to where they went because she had been busy embracing Jimmy's mind from a distance. They had all been shown to bedrooms and assured they were removed from any other danger. Pat and Bailey were still sleeping when Amber opened her eyes and began moving. The first thing she did was try to contact Jimmy and find out how he was faring. Seconds later, amidst commiserating with Jimmy over his parents' death, she was running toward the big bedroom where Pat and Bailey were. Knowing they were sleeping, she knocked loudly once then burst inside.

Bailey sat up, reaching for his gun.

"Bailey! Mom, it's just me. Wake up!"

As quickly as she was certain they were functioning, Amber told them what had happened. Bailey slid out of bed and donned his trousers and shirt. He met one of their guardians on the way out of the bedroom.

The woman, who had finally introduced herself as Betty Porter, met him at the entrance to the den.

"What is it?" she asked, holding her weapon down by her side, eyes alert and searching for signs of danger.

"It's Amber's friend, Jimmy. The one we told you about. Gunmen just killed his parents and tried to kidnap him."

Betty Porter eyed him sharply. "How do you know?"

"Never mind that now, we need to do something about Jimmy. I thought you people were going to protect him. What happened?"

"They must not have gotten there soon enough. We don't have enough manpower to cover the country like a glove. Where is he now?"

Bailey looked to Amber.

"He's hiding in a little park near their home. The men who were chasing him finally gave up, but he's still scared. He thinks they're going after Jeannie now."

Again the Omega operative peered sharply, this time at Amber, but ultimately decided that questions

about the origin of her information could wait. "Okay, I'll get the crew that's on the way to collect him. If you can contact him, tell him to stay where he is until someone calls his name."

"I will," Amber said, already telling Jimmy mentally, but she headed back to her room as if she were going to call him on her cell phone. Besides, she suddenly realized she needed to dress. All she had on was panties and a man's short sleeved shirt that she had slept in. Their luggage still hadn't arrived.

"What about Jeannie?"

Betty porter sighed. She was beginning to show signs of fatigue. "I don't know anything about her. Where does she live?"

"I'll go ask Amber," Pat said.

While Pat was gone, Betty sat down in order to get off her feet for a moment. She had been up all night. Her hair was mussed and her face showed lines beneath the old makeup. She had also shed the jacket of her suit, leaving the holster with her gun replaced in it visible. She crossed her legs and stared at Bailey.

"There's something funny about you people," she said. "Once we get you all safely out of harm's way, I'd like to know as much as you can tell me."

"You'll have to talk to your boss," Bailey told her. He smiled at her, knowing how curious he would have been in her place. "It's possible you really don't want to know," he said as Amber came back into the living room after pretending to have made a phone call. She had pulled on a pair of overlarge jeans that had been left for her but still wore the big shirt. Had she wanted to pry, she would have found out how really curious their protector was.

Amber told Betty the address where Jeannie lived. She and Jimmy still hadn't been able to get through to her.

\* \* \* \*

Brazos was furious that the only other known mind readers besides Jeannie Burger had been allowed to escape. The perceptive kids would be helpful once he got them all working, but only about half of the available ones could be counted on. Other agencies and cartels were after them, too. Word had gotten out among the parents and many of them were holding out for more money or trying to renegotiate contracts. One of his undercover contacts reported that the military intelligence services were snooping around, too. The industrial cartels wouldn't be far behind, if they weren't already on it. He felt like he was lucky to have gotten as many of the perceptive as he had. In the meantime, with Jeannie Burger the only one of the mind readers he had access to, it was absolutely essential to secure her permanently, no matter the cost. As well as she had done her job so far, he intended to keep her close to him from now on. With her near his side and under control, no one could get to him. He thought she might also be used to find the whereabouts of the other two so he could try again to capture them.

Casey was brought to his office and received orders to collect Jeannie and bring her and her parents to Brazos' clandestine headquarters, an isolated mansion in the hills above the city that was secured by a high fence, alarms, guards and attack dogs.

"Don't come back without them," Brazos warned. "You've fucked up once already. I'm sending some company along with you. Fail this time, and their orders are to dispose of you." He showed his teeth, but it wasn't a grin.

"It's kind of hard to sneak up on a goddamned mind reader, Brazos. That's what happened with the others, but I'll get these people," Casey said with more confidence than he really felt. If he did manage it,

he intended to ask Brazos for a session with Jeannie. She was a little old, but still desirable enough for what he had in mind. The little bitch deserved everything he intended to do to her.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie had gotten too high on drugs the night before. Neither Amber nor Jimmy, nor both in concert could wake her. She was still asleep when Casey came.

Casey got out of the van he had driven and scanned the area for observers. When he found none, he motioned for the rest of his crew. When they got out and joined him, he relaxed, as much as he was able to with the third hit of methacoke that night in his system.

This time the operation went as planned. Before the Burgers knew what was happening, they were handcuffed and being forced outside into the van with Casey guarding Jeannie and her parents while another of the crew drove.

Jeannie was fully awake by this time, though barely dressed and her hair uncombed. She was furious with herself for being taken so unaware. "What in hell do you think you're doing, Casey? You can't force me to work like this."

"Can't I?" Casey said, while an image formed in his mind of what he planned on doing to her. "You've got about three seconds to throw some clothes in a bag. Get moving."

Jeannie blanched and reached out with her mind, searching for Amber and Jimmy. She could tell them where she was and they could send help. She hoped she hadn't already alienated them beyond redemption.

Her parents were an upwardly mobile couple who spent little time with their daughter. Jeannie didn't feel really close to either, but nevertheless, she felt sorry for them when she was shoved into the back of a van and saw how scared they were. Her father had a rising bruise on the side of his face. Drops of blood were still escaping from a cut under his eye and trickling down his cheek. She could tell from their thoughts that they had no earthly idea what was going on, nor why they had all been kidnapped.

Inside the back of the enclosed van, Jeannie couldn't tell where they were going even by prying into the mind of the driver. He wasn't thinking of their destination, but simply concentrating on driving and watching for adversaries. She knew she might find out by tapping Casey's mind, but hated to delve into the cesspool of his thoughts. Her parents were totally in the dark. When her father asked what they were going to do with them, Casey told him to shut up.

Jeannie closed her eyes and tried to contact Jimmy and Amber. She felt a little better when she met their minds, but she knew she was in a great deal of trouble. She was startled when she realized Jimmy wasn't having a very good time either.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Ray Hetrick walked into the living room where the Jones family was sitting with Betty Porter eating a scratch breakfast from such items as they found in the refrigerator. He was carrying a suitcase Bailey recognized as his own. Behind him was another man, carrying two more.

Bailey and Pat stood up to greet them. Amber remained seated. Her eyes were closed. She was trying to maintain contact with both Jimmy and Jeannie while they were all separated, something she realized now that they needed more practice at if they all survived the burgeoning war over control of their talents.

"Good news," Ray said. "We have your luggage and car here and Tarker has people who'll pick Jimmy up in a little while. Your weapons are in your luggage."

"Tarker?"

"Oh, sorry. He turned to the brown skinned man behind him. "This is Tarker Blackmon. His people are the ones who were responsible for quieting down the locals back at the motel and providing this place to keep you safe until we can all decide on our next steps."

Bailey and Pat shook hands. Amber blinked her eyes open and stood up.

"This is our daughter Amber," Pat said.

Tarker strode forward, wanting to get a good look at the teenaged girl who was responsible for Project Omega's involvement.

Amber smiled at him. "Thank you for helping us," she said, taking his hand. "And for helping Jimmy, too. Your people just found him. He's already in their car."

Amber's smile suddenly disappeared. Despite being used to concealing her talent, she realized that she had given it away before stopping to think. She had been so happy over Jimmy's rescue that it caused her to slip. "Uh oh," she said.

"It's all right, Amber," Ray said. "I had to let it out to get them so involved, but Tarker is the only one so far who knows what you three can do besides me and that damned Casey, I guess." Ray was also a bit forgetful, realizing too late that Betty Porter was in the room. The other two had been resting. However, when he glanced at her, he saw that she was so tired that his remark passed her by.

"No there's another," Amber said. "The man Casey's working for knows. Casey just kidnapped Jeannie and her parents. Besides that, Jimmy's parents are ... they're dead." Her eyes became suffused with gathering tears. "He wasn't close to his dad, but he loved his mother. He's crying right now." A tear escaped and ran down her cheek.

Tarker suddenly became all business. "Excuse me a minute, I need to send some people and get Jimmy's absence from the scene taken care of and start the procedures for keeping him out of the hands of the Child Protective Services. He is underage, isn't he?"

"Yes," Pat said. "That poor boy. Can we take him in?"

"I'll fix it somehow." Tarker made a couple of calls while the others waited and spoke again, this time to Amber. "Alright now, tell me about this other girl, Jeannie. Do you know where they're taking her, Miss Jones?" He asked the question as if he already believed completely in her mind reading ability.



"Just kind of vaguely, but I'll probably find out exactly when they get there," Amber said. "And please call me Amber, Mister Blackmon. Also, my last name is Morrison, not Jones." She winked at Bailey.

Tarker blinked and nodded "Fine, but we'll wait to do anything about her. A car-jacking is too conspicuous. We've already shown our hand too much the last day or so."

"Can you really fix it where Jimmy can come live with us, Mister Blackmon?" Amber asked. "That would be wonderful!"

"It shouldn't be a problem, although I'll have to let my boss in on the secret to justify it. I can take action on my own, like I just did, but I'll have to tell him why as soon as the situation quiets down a bit."

"Can you tell me just who you are and who you work for?" Bailey asked, a little uneasy "Are you with the government?" He trusted Amber and Ray, but still liked the comforting presence of the Glock riding in a holster at the small of his back.

"No, and ordinarily, we do things without explaining why." Tarker grinned lopsidedly. "Although in this case I doubt it would do any good not to explain since the young people can read my mind." He ignored Betty Porter's presence, figuring she had probably deduced their talents by this time anyway, but he glanced at her and saw that she had fallen asleep on the end of the couch with her head on the armrest.

"We don't do it unless it's really necessary," Amber said. "At least Jimmy and I don't. Jeannie has sort of ... well, she's..." Amber didn't know quite how to explain how it worked and why Jeannie had been so resentful when Jimmy and she became a pair. No one but another mind reader could understand, not completely. She looked helplessly toward Bailey and Mom.

"Jeannie has gone a little bad, according to Amber. She's resentful of Amber and Jimmy becoming lovers and excluding her," Pat explained.

Amber blushed but nodded.

Tarker raised his brows minutely, wondering about her age and the way her parents seemed unconcerned about it. She was well-developed but still looked awfully young to be having sex.

"The perceptive kids are all more mature than their peers, and the three who have mind to mind contact even more so. Think about it, and you'll see why," Bailey explained after seeing Tarker's expression.

"I already am," Tarker said. "I'm thinking about a lot of things. In the meantime, is there any breakfast left? It's been a while since Ray and I have eaten."

"I'll fix you something," Pat offered. "Bailey, you and Amber go put our things up. I'll put on some more coffee, and we can all talk in a little while. Leave my gun out so I can check it."

Amber took the time to change clothes. She had showered that morning but had had to put on the same clothes she had been wearing. Now, as she removed garments from the suitcase, she laid aside fresh underwear, jeans, and tee shirt, along with a denim jacket to carry her automatic. The side pocket supported it nicely, and after the last day or two, she didn't intend to be without it. All the time she was dressing, she kept in touch with Jimmy and intermittently with Jeannie. When she returned, Ray and Tarker were seated in the living room polishing off scrambled egg sandwiches. Bailey and Mom were back, and they had changed clothes, too.

"Have you contacted Jeannie again?" Bailey asked as he came into the room.

"She's still in back of the van with Casey. Bailey, he's a slimebug. I don't like to touch his mind. It's nasty.

He's going to do bad things to Jeannie if we don't help her." She shifted and looked imploringly at Tarker, knowing he was the one to go to.

"I take it 'slimebug' means something pretty bad?"

"Yes, sir. Like the men you see on televid sometimes, those that grab little girls and kill them."

"Find out where she's located, and we'll try to rescue her. Are her parents still alive?"

"Uh huh. I think Casey's boss wants them so he can control Jeannie."

Ray shook his head, disgust evident in his features. "I sure wish I had known what kind of man he was when he was working for me. It would have saved us all this trouble."

"Let's concentrate on the present," Tarker said. "Amber, please let me know the minute you find out exactly where Jeannie is so we can plan on how to get her away from those people."

"I will," Amber said.

"Now, without going into details, I work for a private agency. It's very secretive, and the less you know about it, the better. Suffice to say, we're the good guys. We only become involved in extreme and unusual situations where we think we can make a difference in world affairs or help improve chances for human dignity and safety on a large scale. Ray convinced me that we needed to get involved, though I must say that once he mentioned mind reading, it didn't take much convincing." He smiled grimly. "I only wish we had known sooner, even about the perceptive kids, but that's in the past. Right now, if any of you have any suggestions, I want to hear them."

Bailey fidgeted, trying to conceal what he had done when he went to empty his and Pat's luggage. He didn't even want Amber to know yet. To help conceal what he had done from Amber, he brought up another subject, the same one he and Pat had discussed and that he had been mulling over the last week. "I have an idea," he said.

"Let's hear it."

"Go ahead and make what happened to the perceptive kids public. I've had some research done, and so has Ray. If we disperse that knowledge, along with the formula of the nerve agent and how to manufacture it, pretty soon there'll be thousands, probably millions of people who can do the same thing."

Tarker had to pause a moment to take it in. Ramifications of such an action raced through his mind and he remembered. "I thought that agent only affected younger kids? It made them sick too, if I remember right. Wouldn't releasing the formula be dangerous?"

"No," Ray answered for Bailey. "I've had friends working on it, too. The dosage needs to be adjusted according to age and body mass. That's why it originally only affected the younger ones. If what we've discovered in chimps carries over to humans, persons of just about any age could become perceptive."

"That's the same conclusion my friend reached, which is why I say release it," Bailey said. "Otherwise, there's just going to be more and more fighting over the perpectives we have now. Just think what would happen if everyone was as perceptive as those kids; it wouldn't make a difference."

"Whew! It's a draconian solution you're proposing, my friend. It sounds good, but it still doesn't help the situation now. As Ray explained it to me, it took several months before the younger kids began showing signs they were different."

"Actually, our research showed adults reacted very soon, given the correct dosage."

"Still, it's only in chimps so far," Tarker said. "How can you be certain?"

"I'm not certain," Bailey admitted.

"I am," Ray said.

Everyone in the room turned in his direction.

"A couple of our researchers were so intrigued, they tried it on themselves. They're already showing signs of increased perceptive abilities, and what's even better, there have been no side effects so far."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Amber had been following the conversation while staying in close touch with Jeannie, afraid she might miss the moment of her arrival and have to probe the dark depths of Casey's mind to find her location, assuming he learned of it. Suddenly she jumped to her feet, a huge grin creasing her face.

"Jimmy's here! Jimmy's here!" she shouted and ran for the door. She had been so involved with Jeannie that his arrival snuck up on her.

Just as she got there, it opened. A second later she was in his arms, holding him in a tight embrace while tears ran down her face.

"You kids can close the door any time now," Bailey said as he laughed. He and Pat went to meet Jimmy while he was still entangled with Amber.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy," Pat whispered, putting her arms around both of them.

"You're going to live with us," Bailey said, hoping it would ease Jimmy's pain a bit, but, of course, Amber had already conveyed the news.

Amber had, and she was also swiftly filling him in on developments the last few minutes. Those thoughts were interspersed with keeping track of Jeannie.

Once he was partially loose from Amber, Jimmy's first words were "I'm hungry."

"I'll make you some breakfast in a minute, Jimmy. I just need to run to the bedroom for a moment, first." Pat told him.

Once Amber and Jimmy were seated, sitting very close to each other, Tarker introduced himself and picked up where the conversation had left off.

"Okay, are we all agreed on releasing the news and the formula to the public?"

"Pat and I are," Bailey said, knowing she would agree. Anything to lessen the danger to the kids. They had also tossed around ideas of what the world might become like if everyone was as perceptive as the children were growing up to be.

"I think it's the right thing to do. I've already given some thought to what might happen should we do that. It's going to cause some awesome changes in the way society functions," Ray said. He gestured toward the outside with an open hand, indicating the endless number of people who would be affected.

"You don't know the half of it," Bailey commented from his perspective as both a psychologist and physician. "There's going to be giant upheavals, but, in the end, I think we'll have a better world."

"They've arrived," Amber abruptly announced. "Jeannie's getting out of the van. I don't know the address, but it's on a large hill. She can see some of the city down below. It's a great big house. There are men around with mean looking dogs."

"Damn, I hoped it would be somewhere Jeannie could see the address or a street sign. Amber, you or Jimmy may have to read Casey's mind to find out."

"He probably doesn't know, either. He's been in back of the van with Jeannie and her parents." She paused, closing her eyes and focusing all her attention while Jimmy did the same. A moment later, she

sighed. "I'm sorry. We can't read the driver's mind. We've never met him and don't know the ... the..." She looked puzzled. "I don't know how to describe what we were trying for. Once you've looked at someone's mind, there's a signal, I guess you could call it, but that's not really right. Anyhow, once you've touched a mind very deeply, you can find it again. Otherwise, it's like stumbling around in the dark in a place you've never been before."

"A man named Brazos is behind this," Jimmy said. "Jeannie learned that from Casey. If he goes to see Jeannie, she can find out from him. We'll know then."

Pat came in from the kitchen with more bacon and egg sandwiches. She was very carefully trying not to think of what she had done in the bedroom before going back to the kitchen. The kids wouldn't read her mind deliberately, but she knew they sometimes unintentionally picked up stray thoughts from those near them. "We need some more groceries," she announced as she extended the plate toward Jimmy.

Jimmy grinned and took a sandwich. "Thank you," he said and began eating ravenously.

"What are they doing with Jeannie and her parents now?" Tarker asked. "And while you're connected, try to remember each step they take inside the house. It might be important later." He was thinking silently to himself that if there were guard dogs, rescuing Jeannie would be harder than he anticipated. It was too bad they couldn't have pulled off a rescue while they still knew where the van was located, but there had only been one operative near enough to even try. It probably wouldn't have worked.

"They've been separated," Amber said. "I'm following her mom while Jimmy stays with Jeannie."

"What about her father?"

"Neither of us has ever met him," Jimmy explained.

"It doesn't matter," Amber said. "I can tell from her mom that they're together. They just got shoved into a bedroom. She heard them lock the door."

"Same for Jeannie," Jimmy said.

No one said anything else while the adults waited, their eyes on Amber and Jimmy. Jimmy had finished one of his sandwiches and was working on the other, hampered by Amber clinging to his arm. Eventually, Amber said, "Nothing else is happening now, but Mrs. Burger is looking around. There's a phone in the room, but it doesn't work."

"Is it live?" Ray asked immediately.

"Yes, but it won't dial outside. She tried. Wait. Now she's calling up some numbers that've been dialed."

"Memorize them!" Ray said urgently.

Amber did better than that. She still had her phone. She concentrated, trying to see the numbers in Mrs. Burger's mind. She thumbed them into her phone's memory, getting all of two of them and most of a third before the woman stopped fooling with the phone and began doing something else. "Okay, Mister Hetrick, here's what I got."

She read them off while Ray entered them into his PDA. "Great," he said. Now I can get a record of what numbers they've called in the past. If we're lucky, the people belonging to those numbers have called the place where the captives are being held and we'll get their location. We already know it's in the hills above the city. That narrows it down already." He dialed a number and presently was conversing with someone who had access to the phone company's records. After he was finished, he said, "Now we

wait."

"While we're waiting, we may as well start putting together a web page and a clandestine press release of the perceptive-inducing formula. How to manufacture it, the effect it has on people, and so forth. So long as we're all agreed, there's no sense in waiting," Tarker suggested. "Ray, I'll need you and Bailey to help, and I need to talk to my boss about this. I'm relatively certain they'll agree, but or something this big, I'd better check first."

"While you're doing that, may we be excused?" Amber asked politely, but she was already on her feet and tugging at Jimmy's hand. He got up, too.

"Just let us know if the situation with Jeannie changes," Tarker said absently. He was composing a report in his mind and at the same time trying to come up with a way to protect the three mind readers on a permanent basis.

Pat and Bailey watched them leave the room, arms around each other's waists. Each of the them was still thinking of how young their daughter was to be heading to a bedroom with her boyfriend. It seemed strange, no matter how mature they were.

\* \* \* \*

Later, Amber lay with her head resting on Jimmy's shoulder while he moved his hand gently over her body. She was still amazed at how wonderful it was to make love when their minds were merged as deeply together as their bodies were.

"I wish there was some way to make Mom and Bailey know how good it is when we're together like that," Amber said. She shivered momentarily as Jimmy touched her breast.

"Yeah. There's not, though. Even the perceptive kids can't feel what we do." His hand stopped moving, and his voice broke momentarily. "Poor Mom. She was never even very happy with Dad." He closed his eyes, thinking how grateful he was that Amber could fully share his hurt in a way no one else possibly could. She even understood how he could make love with her so soon after his parents' death and not feel a heavy burden of guilt, something he couldn't possibly explain to anyone else.

"I guess we better go back outside. Bailey just came back in." Amber hadn't been reading minds. Anyone she was as close to as Bailey and her mother emanated a mental aura that told her when they were nearby and when they moved around. It was like background information, not particularly important but always present. She got up and took her clothes into the bathroom.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jeannie was finally beginning to understand just what she had gotten herself into. It wasn't a happy realization, and she saw no way out of it except through Amber and Jimmy. She was also worried about her parents even though she wasn't really close to them. They had never had time for her, but she still supposed she loved them after a fashion. She checked on them periodically. So far, they had been left alone except for having food being brought in by an uncommunicative woman twice a day. They were provided glasses, but had to use the cool water from the bathroom tap to drink.

It was hours before anyone came to see her, and then it was Casey. He was gloating.

"Not so high and mighty now, are you?" Casey said, not so much a question as a declaration that he was now in control.

Jeannie refused to read his mind and wouldn't even give him the satisfaction of speaking until he suddenly lashed out, slapping her across the face with brutal force.

"Talk to me, you little bitch," he ordered.

The innate cruelty inside him was plainly evident in his voice. Jeannie didn't have to see it in his mind.

"What do you want?" Jeannie asked, holding the side her face.

"I want you, little dumpling, so get your clothes off."

"No."

"Then I'll—" He broke off as his phone rang. He took it out and held it to his ear for a moment then turned to leave. "Sorry, you'll have to wait, but don't worry. We're rounding up all you little mutants now. Maybe I'll take turns, but don't worry; you'll be first."

Casey left, but not quickly enough to keep Jeannie from reading his mind. He had been telling the truth. His boss had ordered all the perceptive kids of the group he could get his hands on to be taken into full custody. Casey didn't know what would happen after that, but he thought some of them would be shipped to Mexico and Canada or near the borders to help with identifying federal drug enforcement agents and other groups competing for the lucrative narcotics market.

Jeannie quickly passed the data on to Jimmy and Amber. She couldn't bring herself to reveal Casey's plans for her.

\* \* \* \*

For the next few days, Tarker Blackmon and Ray Hetrick were very busy. The complete story describing the ultimate results of the terrorist attack on schools over five years ago went out, causing a national uproar on the Internet that quickly spread to the print world. Newspapers and weekly magazines gave the story wide coverage, which only reinforced the Internet frenzy. After that the two men came and went at all hours, and while they were present, one or both of them were usually on the phone.

Tarker explained it while they were all together eating a scratch meal prepared by Pat and Bailey. "There are several organizations vying for the kids' services. Some of them are legitimate, others aren't. None of them trust the information we disseminated enough to leave the kids alone until other percepts are available."

"What are you doing to protect them?" Pat asked, a worry lines forming on her face. She was afraid for the children she had known and taught despite her complicity in releasing their story.

"Actually, we've got three operations going at the same time, and it's stretching us almost to the breaking point. First priority is rescuing Jeannie, of course. I have a team standing by ready to go if we ever pinpoint the exact address."

"Didn't the phone numbers work out?"

"No, it was a good idea, but we've checked all the addresses called and none matches what we know. We have several big houses as possibilities, but so far we're not sure enough to go in."

"Jeannie is watching Casey sometimes," Amber said. "He's got a gang trying to grab some of the group."

"We know. The second operation involves stymieing him, and so far, he's been successful only twice."

"With Brenda and LaTonna," Jimmy said.

"Uh huh. I'm sorry we didn't get there fast enough to prevent them from being kidnapped, but as I said, we're stretched thin. You did find out where they're being held, so we'll get them back when we can."

"Why don't you just kill that bastard Casey?" Pat said. "If anyone ever deserved to die it's that slimy son of a bitch."

"He's still the key to Jeannie, remember? If he would ever go back to where the Burgers are being held, we could have Jeannie or Amber and Jimmy follow him with their minds. He's driving most of the time now and sees where he's going."

"Jeannie passed word to Jimmy that Casey wants to get back to her, but his boss is still using him to find the last ones of the group. She didn't say why he's so anxious to see her, but we can all guess. Why didn't you bring the other kids here?"

Tarker glanced at Ray and sighed, wondering how to best explain the reasons to the worried teacher, which wasn't easy to do. "It's not that simple, Pat. Maybe you already know from your kids, but I'll tell you anyhow. Somehow, word has gotten out about the three full mind readers. You two are safe here, and we want to keep it that way. Besides, we have to have permission from the parties involved; we can't just barge in and carry them off; we're not into kidnapping. All we can offer is sanctuary and money, and even the money is short."

Bailey got up to help Pat gather the remains of the meal. They had eaten in the living room. "You look like there's something else bothering you, Tarker. What is it?"

"The military is getting into the act. So are foreign governments. Hell, even the terrorist organizations want a piece of the group, and all the ones who know about them want the three mind readers."

"So we just wait, huh?"

"That's all you can do for now," Ray said, his voice gentle. He knew the inactivity must be dragging on the family. Even Amber and Jimmy occasionally wandered about the house, looking for something to do out of bed other than watch television or surfing the net. They had asked for books that no one had time to get, and they certainly weren't being allowed out.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy gently shook Amber awake from where she was curled against him, spoon fashion.



"Hmm? Again, already?"

Jimmy chuckled, but it died quickly. "Jeannie says Casey's been recalled and is on the way to that big house where the dogs are."

Amber sat up in bed immediately and merged with Jimmy's mind. Seconds later, they were up and gathering their clothing. As soon as they were dressed, Jimmy headed for the room Ray was occupying. Fortunately, he had returned after going out and was trying to catch up on lost sleep. Tarker hadn't come back that night, calling to say he was too busy. While Jimmy was waking Ray up, Amber headed for her parents' bedroom. Both of them awoke immediately at Amber's first soft tap almost as if they had been listening rather than asleep. She opened the door and saw that Bailey was already sitting up.

"What is it, Lumpkin?" he asked without glancing in her direction.

"Jeannie says Casey is coming to where she is now. Can you or Mister Hetrick contact Mister Blackmon? If he has people waiting like he said he did, maybe they can rescue her now."

"We'll be there in a minute," Pat said, swinging her feet to the floor and standing up.

Amber headed for the kitchen to put the coffee on. She knew everyone would want some at this time of the morning, including Jimmy and her.

Within a few minutes, they were all in the living room, the odor of fresh coffee wafting in from the kitchen. Ray was already on the phone relaying information from Amber or Jimmy as they got it from Jeannie. Amber tried once to follow Casey with her mind but quickly retreated from the morass of sick thoughts. Did Jeannie know what he had planned for her when he arrived? Surely she must. No wonder she hadn't mentioned it!

Ray was halfway through his second cup of coffee when Jeannie relayed images from Casey's mind describing the last few hundred yards he had driven before turning off on an unmarked side road. When she described the gate where he stopped, and the German Shepherd dogs on the other side of the high, solid fence, Ray let an exuberant epithet escape.

"Got it. I recognize the gate! It was one of the possibilities. Damn, that's going to be a tough nut to crack. Let me call Tarker and see what he wants to do."

"Whatever it is, please hurry," Amber pleaded. "Jeannie is scared. Casey is planning on doing bad things to her. Awful things."

Ray took the phone from his ear for a moment. "Is his boss there?"

"No, but he's supposed to meet Casey. It's Brazos."

Ray talked another moment then put his phone away. "Tarker wants me to go help. We're going to need every able body we can scare up for this, and it still might not be enough. If we fail, we'll have to bring the army in on it to get her out."

"Then they'll grab her," Bailey said positively. "That's how they think."

"No matter. Better them than Brazos." He took his weapon out, checked the action, and put it back in its holster.

"Do you want me to come along?" Bailey asked.

"No. Stay here, and help protect the kids, just in case."

"In case of what?"

"In case they make Jeannie tell where we are. I'm surprised they haven't thought of it before now." Ray looked around until he found a pencil and a scrap of paper. He scribbled rapidly and handed it to Bailey. "This is the address of another safe house. Stay by the phone. Be ready to leave if I call. If I do, head for this place, and we'll send some people quick as we can to guard you." He ran from the room, and, a moment later, they heard the sound of his car starting. His tires screeched as he roared away.

In the house, Amber and Jimmy concentrated tensely on what Casey and Jeannie were doing. Pat and Bailey waited silently for them to relay tidbits of information to them when they could. Bailey looked at his watch. Four o'clock. Dawn would be breaking before long. Neither he nor Pat had corrected Ray. Perhaps he had forgotten how Amber and Jimmy had gotten away from their intended captors. The "kids" could pretty well protect themselves, especially with he and Pat on their side.

Bailey got up and left the room for a moment to concentrate. He nodded to himself and went on down the hall to the room where the computer setup was. He had it already prepared, and now he made the final decision. All he had to do was call up the file and post it. In a moment, it was done. There was no turning back now.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie frantically searched her room, looking for something, anything, to use as a weapon. There was nothing, and already Casey was past the gate guards and driving up to the house. She knew exactly what he had on his mind. It was so frightening it made her feel sick. As he got out of his car, she went over the room again. No weapons, no blunt objects. Not even a lamp; the lighting was overhead. With nothing to fight with, she began thinking of how she might escape. The only thing she came up with was to turn off the lights and throw a pillow to throw at Casey when he came in. He wouldn't dare shoot her. He knew Brazos would kill him if he did. Maybe the pillow would distract him long enough for her to get past him and run. She was grateful the handcuffs had been removed, but with the dogs outside, it seemed likely that no matter how cleverly she escaped, she'd never make it to the edge of the property.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Casey looked down at the floor in front of Jeannie's room. There should have been a light showing from beneath the door. *Little Bitch*, he thought, *she's turned off the light. She knows I'm here.* He stood still while he took out the big automatic he favored and removed the clip. No way was he going to give her a chance at a loaded weapon. He reversed the pistol and held it by the barrel to use as a club in case she resisted. He wasn't worried. Not even mind readers could stand up to superior strength, not in a closed room. He pushed the door open just enough to reach inside and flick the lights back on. He kicked the door on open, using his body to block the entrance. He grinned when he saw Jeannie hurriedly retreating across the room. She got behind the bed, putting it between them. He closed the door behind him and slowly advanced. That wasn't going to help her, not for long.

\* \* \* \*

Bailey was watching Amber and Jimmy. He could see the knuckles of their hands that were clasped together steadily whiten as they continued to monitor Jeannie. From their expressions, he knew Casey must be very near Jeannie now, maybe even in the room with her.

Amber gave out a small cry of despair and buried her face against Jimmy's chest. Jimmy held her close. His eyes were closed as he concentrated his attention on Casey. Amber joined him. They both held their breath and tried with all their might to mentally force Casey away from Jeannie.

\* \* \* \*

Casey felt the touch of another presence in his mind, but he treated it as no more of an annoyance than a pesky fly buzzing around his head. The fresh methacoke in his system allowed him to concentrate all his attention on the business at hand. He pushed the bed against the wall, trapping Jeannie then jumped across it to get at her.

Jeannie flung the covers at him, but it didn't work. He deflected them and grabbed for her. The first couple of times she avoided his hand or the clubbed pistol by knowing his intentions. Frustrated, Casey began swinging with both arms in a flurry of motion impossible for Jeannie to detect in time to avoid all the blows. The butt of the pistol caught her on the temple with stunning force. Red dots exploded in front of her eyes as she felt the strength drain from her body.

Casey grabbed with his other hand and at last had her in his grasp. He yanked at her arms and her body followed up onto the bed, which was just where he wanted her.

\* \* \* \*

"I can't watch!" Amber screamed.

Jimmy held her tightly, sickened by Casey's actions. He could stand it only seconds at a time himself as Casey straddled Jeannie and began ripping at her clothing. She and her parents had been allowed to bring a few garments hastily thrown in bags. Each time she tried to resist, he hit her with his closed fist. Lust and the flood of narcotics in his body maddened him. He forgot all about Brazos and what he might do when he saw Jeannie's body. He got her completely stripped and secured her hands with plastic cuffs again. He fumbled at his belt buckle, breathing heavily from the struggle and anticipation.

The only thing that kept Jimmy going back to Jeannie's mind was a feeble attempt to support her mentally by telling her help was on the way. It was all he could do.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy and Amber were so wound up with Jeannie's appalling predicament that it was Bailey, not them,

who first sensed danger. It came to him like a sudden intrusion in his mind, impulses of an impending assault on the family from very near.

Jimmy's momentary cry of triumph was overridden by Bailey's sudden shout as he realized with a shock what was happening. "Amber, Jimmy, Run!", he shouted frantically. "Go the back way before they block it!"

Amber was momentarily confused by Jimmy's exuberant yell and Bailey's frantic warning, coming to her both by voice and as a mental signal. *Bailey! He did it!* she realized before Jimmy grabbed her arm and pulled roughly. She came to her senses, and they ran, not toward the back entrance, but toward their bedroom. Neither of them had seen a need to carry their guns while Bailey and the other adults were armed. Their minds worked in perfect unison. They had no intention of leaving Pat and Bailey alone.

Amber heard Bailey's mental cursing almost with amusement as he saw where they were headed, but then there was no time to tarry and examine the new phenomena of him becoming a mind reader. She and Jimmy sensed the nearby danger themselves, even more powerfully than Bailey now that they weren't being distracted. At the same time, Amber caught a quick thought from Jimmy that the assault on Jeannie had stopped but there was no time to ask for details. Neither was there time to get out the back way, even if they had intended to run. There never had been.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie reached the depths of despair when she caught a momentary glimpse of another man entering the room. *Oh, God, not two of them!* she thought miserably, but then she sensed the man's intentions. She tensed and held very still. A puzzled look appeared on Casey's face as she stopped struggling. Then he grinned as he thought she was relaxing to the inevitable. He'd have her crying in a moment though. He liked it much better that way.

Those were Casey's last thoughts. He was so intent on Jeannie that he neither heard nor sensed the man as he came up behind him and extended his arm. He held a gun in his hand and fired a bullet into Casey's brain from two feet away.

Casey collapsed on top of Jeannie, saturating the sheet beside her with his blood. Casey's heart kept pumping for a few more moments. Blood spurted against Jeannie's chest from a major artery in his head that had been ruptured. Disgusted and relieved at the same time, she shoved him off her and sat up. The gunman stared at her nakedness as she slid off the bed and stood upright. Jeannie probed his mind. He was called Sharko and he had been sent specifically to kill Casey and dispose of the body.

Jeannie held out her hands. "Casey put these on me. Please take them off so I can wash and dress myself."

Still staring, Sharko reached into his pocket and took out a penknife. He returned his weapon to his chest holster while he opened the little pocketknife.

Jeannie could tell that he had no idea at all she was a mind reader nor that she could be a threat. She kept her mind focused on his thoughts. As soon as the plastic cuffs were severed, she also saw that he didn't have an inkling about her physical capabilities, either. He simply intended to leave her in the room as instructed should he find Casey there. While his attention was diverted by closing his knife and returning it to his pocket, Jeannie suddenly lunged violently forward, trying for an escape now even though she was still dizzy from Casey's blows. Small as she was, her unexpected assault knocked Sharko off his feet. Jeannie darted for the door, narrowly escaping an attempt to grab her leg as she passed. She was out of the room in a second and locked it behind her, just as her captors had done to keep her confined.

Jeannie knew the locked door wouldn't contain the man for long. He would decide to shoot off the lock if he couldn't get out any other way. She ran along the halls in the route she remembered from when she and her parents were first brought into this horrid place. When she reached her parents' room, she didn't knock but simply unlocked it and flung it wide.

"Mom! Dad! Get out of here and run! Help is coming! Hide somewhere else! Under a bed, any place they won't find you for a while!"

With that, Jeannie raced on, bare feet slapping the floor. She used her mind to scan in front of her, hoping she could detect the presence of others before she saw them or they saw her. She knew it would take an intense emotion from an unknown mind before she would sense the person. She would barge unexpectedly into someone unless she found a place to hide until help arrived.

\* \* \* \*

It had taken a major effort, but Brazos had finally tracked the other two mind readers to their safe house by using contacts and tracking devices for phones combined with hackers and computers attuned to key words. As soon as he was certain, he sent five men and a woman to take them into custody. He didn't tell the crew that they could read minds; he still wanted that kept secret. He waited impatiently for them to report back before doing anything else. Too many law enforcement agencies were now getting involved, and too many competitors, legal and illegal, since that damned doctor and his friends had given away the secret of the perceptive kids. He didn't know which way to jump. Then he got the report of Casey's death, which he had ordered, but also received the unwelcome news that the Burger girl and her parents were loose. He headed to the mansion himself to get the situation there under control. He had to; his own powerful bosses were demanding results, and they wanted them soon.

\* \* \* \*

Jimmy got to his gun just as he heard the front door crash inward. He felt the desperate intensity of Bailey's mind as he blazed away at the intruders. The reverberating sound of the gunshots kept him and Amber from hearing the back door open, but there was no need. Both of them could sense the presence of the three men and a woman by the boiling excitement of their emotions as they came prepared to kill anyone who got in the way of taking the two children prisoner.

Bailey had been hit in the first exchange of gunfire. Pat detected the mental pulse from the numbing pain of the bullet that broke his upper arm. She had been a few seconds behind Bailey in finding her gun in the dark and rushing out to defend her family. She ran into an immediate quandary of who to help first; should she head directly to Bailey or to Amber and Jimmy? It was solved for her by the mental despair she felt from Bailey as he stared at the second of the two men who had come in the front way. He had killed one of them, but he was helpless now. Only the fact that the impact of the shot that shattered his upper arm and knocked him to the floor saved him from immediate death. The intended murderer took a few seconds to locate his body in the darkened room; his partner was supposed to have turned on the lights, but he died too quickly. Bailey stared helplessly as the barrel of the pistol lowered and aimed at him.

Pat made it just in time to save Bailey's life. She fired as quickly as the gunman came into sight. Her first shot missed, but it startled him enough so that he also missed Bailey with his shot. He never got off another; Pat killed him with three rapid rounds directly into his chest. He crumpled. She started to run to Bailey when she sensed how badly he was wounded then stopped. *Amber!*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jeannie finally concealed herself in a large laundry hamper when she stumbled across the wash room. She pulled dirty clothes in on top of her and sent her thoughts in search of her parents. They were safe for the moment in another room somewhere hiding under a bed. After that, she explored with her mind until she found Sharko, the one who had killed Casey. Even though she had met him only briefly, his proximity allowed her to enter his mind. She learned the name he was called by and began to observe his surroundings through his eyes and thoughts.

It wasn't too bad. Sharko was a killer, a gun for hire, but the rest of his personality was no more deviant than the general population. She could stay in prolonged contact with him and not feel the sickening disgust Casey's mind caused her.

Sharko reported to his immediate boss, Brazos, by phone.

"Stay where you are and wait for orders," Brazos told Sharko. The news Bailey had released on his own was causing a media field day and now Brazos fully expected an assault on the mansion by any number of antagonists. *I should have taken care of Rudo already*, he thought. That bastard would be one of the first coming after his prize, but others of his ilk wouldn't be far behind. The military and the intelligence services were getting nosy, too. He knew the street gossip already had her location pinpointed. He needed to get her away from there and to a safer place as soon as possible.

"How long do I stay here, boss?"

"Until I tell you to leave. You protect that little girl once you locate her, goddamn it. I don't care what the news is saying; it's all hypothetical, and she's a fact! Round up everyone there and get them prepared for a war. Then find the little girl. She's still inside somewhere, otherwise the dogs would have made a fuss.

Sharko had no idea what Brazos was talking about other than "the little girl," but he didn't think was so little now.

"What about her parents? She turned them loose and they're hiding, too."

"Capture them. We can use them as hostages to control the girl. Now get moving. No more fuckups, or you'll wind up like Casey. *Comprende, amigo?*"

"Yes, sir," Sharko said quickly. He got busy.

\* \* \* \*

Amber wasn't in trouble. Pat had simply detected the furious mental energy she and Jimmy were using to locate their intended kidnappers and their irresistible rage at what they had intended to do to them all. Their mental powers made it easy for them to wait in ambush and begin shooting at the optimal time and location. The only thing that marred their actions was Jimmy's hesitance.

Amber didn't necessarily intend to kill the two men she and Jimmy had agreed she would target as they ran toward their bedroom, but neither did she try to only wound them. They must have had information on the floor plan of the house because they never hesitated, but now she would never know for sure. She stepped from the concealment of an alcove in the hallway holding a decorative table, her gun leveled in just the fashion she had been taught. She fired four times. Both the ones she shot at were dying as they crumpled to the floor.

Jimmy killed the other man just as easily, but the woman was a different story. He hesitated the barest

moment in shooting the woman as he caught a mental image of momentary fear and regret from her that disguised her determination for a second or two. It allowed her to get a shot off that sent wooden splinters from the side paneling flying when the bullet struck an inch from his head. One of the splinters hit his eye, nearly blinding him and causing an incredibly sharp needle of pain to arrow into the nerves around his eye. His pain distracted Amber. She felt it almost as much as he did and it caused her to miss when she got off a round.

The woman whirled and was gone from sight around the corner.

"Mom!" Amber screamed, frightened almost to panic as she realized where her mother was.

Pat had come running when she thought her daughter was in trouble. She was nearly deafened by the noise of all the gunfire, but she heard Amber's warning cry in her mind. She stopped, crouched, and shot several times as the woman came zooming around the corner. She careened forward head first and slid a few feet, coming to rest almost in front of Pat. Blood pumped from exit wounds on the woman's back for a second and finally stopped.

Amber and Jimmy knew that no one else was after them, but, in the same instant, realized Bailey was in trouble. The whole unbelievable episode had taken only moments, but it seemed to have gone on in slow motion. There appeared to be no end to the crisis. Amber stepped over the dead woman and said, "Come on, Mom! Bailey's bleeding, bad!"

Pat's mind was still whirling with adrenalin-laced reaction, but she caught the urgency in Amber's voice and felt the distress in Bailey's mind. It was like a nightmare that wouldn't end. She raced after Amber, with Jimmy right behind her.

Bailey was bleeding profusely and trying to hold his hand around his arm above where the bullet had hit. It was so high up his arm he hadn't been able to stop it. Already he was feeling weak from blood loss and was unable to make any further effort. He simply stared at the blood flowing from beneath his weakening fingers.

"Turn on the lights!" Pat commanded as she knelt down by Bailey and added the strength of her hand to his, making a living tourniquet. The room brightened. Her stomach rebelled at the sight of the carnage the large caliber bullet had done when it hit. The right humerus of Bailey's arm was broken and splintered, and a big chunk of flesh had been chewed out of his bicep muscle.

"Get me a belt, the bullet hit an artery," Pat said, her voice shaky, but remembering her teachers' emergency first aid training. "No, first make sure no one else is here."

"There isn't, not anyone trying to hurt us," Amber said while Jimmy removed the belt from his jeans. Between the three of them, they got it adjusted and the bleeding stopped, but, by then, Bailey was barely conscious.

"He needs to get to a hospital quickly," Pat said. "Bailey, sweetheart, hang on. Jimmy, call 911, we don't have a way to take him ourselves. Tarker hid our car."

Jimmy called, but while he was doing that, Ray drove up. He saw the shattered doorjamb and came in cautiously, gun drawn. He stopped, mouth agape when he saw Bailey still lying in a pool of blood.

"Good God, what happened here?"

"Never mind, it's over with," Pat said shortly. "I had to call an ambulance because we didn't have a car. It's on the way, but there are four bodies back by the bedrooms. If you have any influence, get moving

and keep us away from the police and the feds."

Ray acted quickly, not stopping to ask any more questions. He got busy on the phone, telling Tarker and his own contacts to start building a brick wall of denial even while Tarker was still heavily involved with planning the impending rescue attempt of Jeannie. He was still talking on his phone when they heard approaching sirens. Apparently, their nearest neighbors had heard the gun battle.

"Jeannie's still in trouble," Amber said, "But now we can help. She's loose and had a contact with one of the men there, so she can tell us what they're up to all the time."

"Great," he said. "Listen, you kids run to the street and huddle in the back of my car so you won't be seen. Take your guns and spare clips," he added grimly. "I'll pull some tricks here and get Pat and Bailey on their way to the hospital."

"What are you *doing*, Ray? They've been through enough already!" Pat exclaimed harshly, but she shut up as the determination of Amber and Jimmy to help rescue Jeannie suddenly got through to her.

"I'll keep them away from the action, but if they've got eyes inside that damn fortress, we need them, Pat. Tarker sent me back to get them so everything doesn't have to be relayed from Jeannie to Jimmy to a phone before he can try taking the place. We need on the spot advice, and if Jeannie has a contact inside now that Casey's dead, it will help tremendously." He didn't mention that Tarker had doubts about assaulting the guarded mansion with his thin crew.

"I ... I put it out about mind ... mind reading," Bailey said through teeth clamped tight against the pain of his arm.

"I heard, but it doesn't matter right now. Tarker's spotters have relayed word that Rudo's gang is going to try for her, and also that Brazos is heading in that direction. The FBI is interested, too."

Pat strained to touch Jeannie's mind but she was too new at the ability. It wouldn't have helped in any case. Amber or Jimmy could have told her that to find someone at a distance, you must first have had deep mental contact with them. Even close, if a person hadn't been known before, it took emotional turmoil on their part, such as the gunmen had just displayed, to be able to detect them.

"Hurry up, go hide in the car!" Ray ordered, more urgently this time as the siren sounds grew louder.

Amber and Jimmy still hesitated, not wanting to leave the wounded Bailey, but fearing for Jeannie's life if they didn't. For all her antagonism and misguided attempts to change their three-way relationship, she was still the only other mind reader they knew of, other than the sudden ability Bailey and Pat were unaccountably displaying, and Jeannie seemed to be truly remorseful now; they didn't intend to abandon her.

"Go!" Ray ordered again and they hurried outside, reluctantly but swiftly. They had no sooner scrunched down behind the front seats when the emergency vehicles began arriving, and down the street, a curious neighbor peeked from a door.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sharko had been put in charge of immediate defense of the big house until Brazos arrived. Jeannie and her parents were still hiding, but Sharko had men and women not on guard duty going through the place room by room looking for them.

The long wait in the car in uncomfortable positions was an excruciatingly tense interval for Amber and Jimmy. They couldn't even tell Ray when Jeannie reported new developments to them.

Both Amber and Jimmy got a sense of how uncomfortable Jeannie was, huddled in the laundry hamper beneath a bunch of smelly clothes, but didn't take time to commiserate. What she had learned was more important at the moment.

Jeannie's thoughts were clear. "Sharko's the man I got away from. Now he's expecting Brazos, the big boss, to be here before long, and he thinks Brazos has a way to sneak me and the folks out safely."

"Find out how he's going to do it," Jimmy urged her.

"I tried. I looked into him as deep as I could and he doesn't know; he just thinks Brazos can do it."

In order to keep her overwrought mind in a semblance of order while they waited, Amber attracted a part of Jimmy's attention that wasn't locked with Jeannie's and exchanged thoughts with him.

"Did you get all that about Pat and Bailey?" Jimmy asked silently.

Amber squeezed his hand and answered him the same way. "I think so. They must have both swallowed a big dose of the nerve agent then took a lot of Benadryl on top of it. They're learning to be mind readers, just like us! Did you hear what Bailey said?"

"What? Oh, something about releasing the stuff about mind reading? Uh huh, I heard it, but I didn't pay much attention at the moment. I wonder why he did it?"

"I guess he figured if it worked on him and Mom, it would work on most everyone—and if the whole world learns how to read minds, we'll be normal again. He did it to protect us I think."

"He would," Jimmy thought to her. He moved his head into a position where they could touch lips. After they kissed, he continued "I don't think we'll ever be normal again, lovie. Not after all this, and it's not over yet. Jeannie's still in trouble, and we're still wanted by God knows how many people."

"Oh bums, yes, I'm not ramping my B cells." Amber's mind stayed quiet a moment then she went on. "Jimmy, I hated that business. I'll have nightmares forever about the way those minds went dead when we shot them. It was even worse than last time." She could tell Jimmy felt almost the same way but had been trying not to think about it.

Amber sent her mind out to check on Bailey again. "Hey, the ambulance is leaving with Mom and Bailey. Maybe Mister Hetrick will be ready to go now," she whispered.

Ray was more than ready, but there was still fifteen more minutes of impatient waiting before he finally convinced the county sheriff and his deputies to let him go, which meant that a great number of ancillary phone calls had been required.

Amber breathed a sigh of relief when Ray finally opened the driver's side door and slid inside.

Ray started the car and drove away, keeping a careful watch behind and ahead. He didn't try to talk until he was well away from the area.

Jimmy finally spoke up. He didn't think they should wait any longer to tell him what was happening with Jeannie.

After that, Ray drove faster. He didn't speak of the circumstances that had the three of them traveling together, perhaps into another fight. It was still hard for him to imagine how children as young as they were had come through a gun battle where they had killed other persons and still be acting almost normal.

Even if he had asked, Amber and Jimmy wouldn't have been able to tell him much. They didn't have words in the language to describe how they *knew* they had to fight and kill in order to survive or how they had *known* how ruthless and immoral their opponents had been. Neither could they describe how they comforted each other in a way far more intense and profound than mere words ever could have conveyed.

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie heard footsteps in the washroom. She tried to find the mind the footsteps belonged to but it was a stranger, one who apparently wasn't riled up enough for her to detect his thoughts. All she could do was listen and wait. She heard the big washer lid being pulled open then dropped shut. What she thought was the dryer door banged against something then the noise echoed again as it was closed. The footsteps made a circuit of the room quickly then stopped by the hamper.

Jeannie held her breath, not daring to breathe as the top layer of dirty clothes were removed and tossed away. She could feel hands fumbling with more of them and she thought she was lost until she heard a disgusted male curse. She still held her breath, but now she had to try to keep from laughing. The man must have encountered the layer of soiled undergarments, some of them very dirty indeed. They had almost kept her from choosing this hiding place, but now she was glad she had. The man cursed again and went away. When she heard the door close, Jeannie gasped for air and bit her lip painfully to keep from braying with hysterical laughter. Well, the clothes were smelly, but she decided to stay exactly where she was while she sent her mind exploring again. She recognized Sharko's mental aura immediately, but something was different about him. He was much more relaxed. A second later, she knew why. He had her parents.

There was nothing she could do for them at the moment. She could only follow their distressed thoughts as Sharko ordered them out from under the bed. She reached out for Jimmy and was surprised at the impression she got of he and Amber in a moving vehicle. They all merged minds. Jeannie bit her other lip to avoid crying out for happiness. They were coming on the rescue mission, too! It raised her spirits high enough that she didn't even mind the continuing pain from the battering Casey had given her.

\* \* \* \*

Tarker still held him crew back. He hadn't anticipated as many defenders as Jeannie reported and didn't think a direct assault on the mansion would work without generating a lot of noise and killing that would draw a huge amount of attention. He had already used up just about all the pull he and his superiors could manage to keep previous shootouts from the public eye. He didn't think he could do it again, not tonight. He was still trying to decide whether to intercept Brazos and capture or simply kill him. His death would certainly be no loss to society, but the man held a lot of useful information the authorities would like to have access to. He had almost decided to detain him when he received word from Ray, relayed from Jeannie to Jimmy and then to him. Brazos thought he would have no problem getting away with Jeannie and her parents, but he hadn't revealed how he would do it to Sharko. Tarker already had Brazos spotted and had an operative following behind him as he neared their area. That made the decision for

him. Brazos had no way of knowing Jeannie would be able to follow his every move so long as he stayed relatively close to Sharko. If Brazos thought he could get them out safely, best to let him do it and then attempt the rescue. He allowed Brazos to pass and go on through the gate with his three bodyguards.

\* \* \* \*

Brazos hurried past his inner guards who held back the dogs to let him pass. He kept his phone to his ear the whole time, listening to reports from his outside confederates. The situation was changing almost by the minute. He heard that Rudo was on the way to the mansion with a big gang, intending to either capture the mind reading girl or render her useless to anyone else. He was told the FBI would probably arrive as quickly as lines of authority were sorted out. An action team from military intelligence had reportedly landed at the airport in preparation for a possible assault, and aside from all those, another shadowy agency was apparently on the loose, giving succor to the perceptives and especially the mind readers. He didn't know who they were, only that the retired FBI agent Ray Hetrick was somehow associated with them.

"Take me to the girl's parents," Brazos told Sharko as soon as his assistant reported to him.

Sharko led the way to an inner room on the first floor where they were imprisoned. He stepped inside with Brazos and confronted the Burgers. He wasted no time.

"I know your daughter can read your minds. Tell her she has five minutes to surrender. If she doesn't, one of you dies. Five more minutes and the other will follow. Sharko, get ready."

"I don't know how to contact her!" Mrs. Burger wailed. "Please, I swear! Don't kill us!"

"Just think it; she'll get the message."

"Those kids aren't mind readers, you fool," Mister Burger said. "You're making a big mistake."

"Sharko, chastise him."

Sharko didn't hesitate. He slammed his gun barrel across Burger's cheek, splitting the skin open. He hit him a second time on his forehead, and he dropped to his knees, moaning.

Mrs. Burger shrank away, expecting the same treatment any moment.

Jeannie wanted to cry, to wail for forgiveness and share her father's pain. Her mother's fear and anxiety were making her mind feel funny, like it was about to break into pieces. When Jeannie saw Sharko checking the time she could stand it no longer. She heaved the dirty clothes off her and climbed out of the hamper. She ran down the hallway toward the area where she thought her parents were being held. She thought she had their location pinned down from Sharko's thoughts. She burst into another hallway, screaming "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Several guards came hurrying, but they weren't needed. All she wanted to do was save her father or mother from being shot. Brazos heard her cries and smiled thinly.

"Sounds like your daughter can read minds after all, hmm?"

Jeannie was taken into custody without a fight.

Brazos immediately began herding them along, using Sharko and one other trusted assistant. They went back down a hallway, turned a corner, and Sharko opened a door. Steps led downward into a basement.

There was a concealed doorway in a storage closet in a corner of the big basement game room. Sharko and Brazos looked around to make sure no one had followed then opened the door. It led to a dimly

lighted underground tunnel, barely wide enough for one person.

Sharko led the way, with the Burgers next and Brazos and his other assistant following.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Ray, Jimmy, and Amber had joined forces with Tarker by phone, who was in his car by himself some distance away from the action around the mansion. While waiting for Ray to give him more information about Jeannie, he was trying to coordinate two other small crews trying to rescue perceptive kids from Brazos' gangsters as well as from those of Rudo, Brazos' main competitor.

"Where are they now?" he asked immediately when Ray called again.

"Still underground, but neither of us can tell which direction the tunnel goes," Jimmy said. "How can we find them unless they come out somewhere near a street sign?"

"I think I know," Tarker said. He visualized the city map and satellite download of the immediate area he had been using to plan the aborted assault. "The ground behind the place slopes down toward Sierra Street. Any other direction except in front, there's no good way to exit from their tunnel without attracting attention. Just by thinking like the sneaky bastard he is, I doubt he would have an escape hatch in front anyway; that's where most of the feds would be if they planned a raid."

Ray immediately headed by a circuitous route toward Sierra Street, the only way to get there. Then his phone rang before he even had a chance to call his crew waiting near the mansion to join him. He gave a silent curse and thumbed it on, dreading what he was going to be told. He could hear gunshots behind them, even through the closed windows.

It was Tarker's second in command, Roark Johannsen.

"Tarker, we're pinned down and can't move your way."

"Who is it?"

"One of the drug cartel gangs, I think. I lost Marin and Beverly is wounded. We're going to have to try to back out of here if we can."

"Yonny, do what you can to get away. I'll be back in touch. Rescuing that girl without a lot of casualties was going to be kind of dicey, anyway." He hung up and was silent until he turned onto Sierra Street. Now it was just him and Ray—when he got here—and the kids. Damn, damn. He dialed Ray's phone.

"They're coming out of the tunnel now," Jimmy said.

Ray relayed the information to Tarker. "Okay, from now on tell me every step they take," Tarker ordered for Jimmy. "Ray, tell me exactly where you are, and we'll meet. I'm on Sierra Street, down the hill from the mansion. The rescue gang I had standing by tangled with a bunch of cartel thugs, and they're out of play."

Ray gave him their location then told the children the news.

"I hope your men kill them all," Amber said, surprising herself with the venom she felt toward the people causing so much agony and despair.

Jimmy remained silent a moment before adding some extra information from Jeannie. "They're in a house now. Jeannie's scared. She says Brazos' mind is like a block of ice. He's cold blooded and doesn't have emotions like normal people."

"A psychopathic personality," Ray explained. "That would scare me too, but it's all the more reason to try to get Jeannie and her folks away from him. Are you still with her?"

"Yes, sir. They're in the garage of the house now. There's a car there. Now they're arguing. Brazos wants to leave. Sharko is telling him it's safer to stay hidden for a while longer. Now they're going back inside. They're sitting down. Jeannie says it's the living room."

"Keep tuned." He dialed Tarker and gave him their location and asked, "Tarker, how much farther now?"

"You're almost there. Next street should be Winding Way. Turn right and go two blocks; you'll be on Sierra."

A few minutes later, Ray was parked along the curb on Sierra Street. As soon as he spotted them, Tarker jumped out of his car, ran over, and slid into the front seat beside Ray.

Jimmy shrugged helplessly when asked if he knew which house the captives were in. "I can't tell unless Jeannie tells me. I guess they aren't thinking about an address."

"Would it help is she asked some leading questions?"

"I'll see—no, wait, they just got back up. Sharko is taking Jeannie to a bedroom. The other man is taking her parents to another one. Brazos is going to ... he's in a sort of office."

"Tell Jeannie to see if she can get the number if he uses the phone there, quick, or if she can't, get any number he dials and tell me immediately." Tarker dialed a number on his phone and was quickly switched to a contact with the phone company servicing that area.

"Take this down," Jimmy said suddenly. He voiced a telephone number slowly to be sure someone recorded it.

The first time Brazos wasn't on the phone long enough to produce results. The second time he dialed, they got lucky and got a trace back from the number he dialed to his phone to the exact address.

"Three blocks down, Ray," Tarker said and hung up on his contact. "Park a few houses away; they're separated pretty good in this area. We'll walk from there."

As Ray put the car in motion, he said. "We need to do something quickly. Jimmy says Jeannie will try distracting her guard."

"We will," Tarker said. He opened a panel under the dash and pulled out another handgun to add to the one he was already carrying. "Jimmy, are you sure there's only three of them?"

"Jeannie's sure."

\* \* \* \*

Jeannie had been allowed to bring a change of clothing with her. She washed and dressed while Sharko drug Casey's body to another room. He was already back inside when she came out of the bedroom.

Jeannie felt much better now. She was on the bed, sitting and leaning against the headboard, ignoring Sharko. Now that she had met Brazos, she could concentrate on his mind and find out what he was doing. A few minutes later, she felt the sudden alertness of his mind. He was listening to various tiny microphones in turn, each connected to the wires that led from the huge house where they had been held. They led through the tunnel and back to the room he was in. Apparently, he had just heard something he

didn't like. Jeannie couldn't tell for certain what it was. Before she could try further, Jimmy's thoughts intruded. She paid rapt attention and relayed her increasing concern over Brazos' state of mind and his half-formed intentions. She urged them to hurry with whatever they intended to do.

Jeannie waited impatiently until Jimmy let her know the rescue party was ready and went into her act. Her part of the plan was to keep Sharko distracted. From looking into his mind, she knew exactly how to do that. Jimmy hadn't mentioned that the rescue party was only two men and he and Amber.

If it wasn't for the seriousness of their situation, Jeannie would have laughed at the dumbstruck expression on Sharko's face as she slid off the bed and began disrobing, taking her time about it.

"What the hell're you doing?" Sharko asked, staring at her as she unbuttoned her blouse and took it off. She looked at it a moment then dropped it to the floor.

"I'm sleepy and getting ready to go back to bed. Want to join me?" Jeannie yawned theatrically and sat on the edge of the bed, making a production of sliding her tight fitting jeans down past her hips. She slowly removed each of her legs in turn from the jeans. She stood up and kicked them away, clad now only in a skimpy bra and panties.

"Get your clothes back on, girl," Sharko said. His breathing and pulse had speeded up noticeably. He got up from his chair.

"I told you, I'm going to bed. I always sleep naked. Of course, I sleep a lot better after sex. How about it?" She reached behind her and unhooked her bra, again taking her own sweet time. She smiled at Sharko as it slowly slipped free of her breasts. She dangled it by one of the straps for a moment before dropping it to the floor. She alternated her thoughts, reaching out to Jimmy, then Brazos and last to Sharko, trying to time everything right. Jimmy was at the front door with Tarker while Amber was at the back with Ray. Jeannie was astonished that there was no one else. She held back the fright at the uneven odds by sheer determination. In the office, she was tuned to Brazos' thoughts as he put down the phone, having reached a decision.

*Hurry!* Jeannie screamed silently to her friends. *He's made up his mind!* As if in a dream, she snaked her panties down to her knees and let them fall. They puddled around her feet. She concentrated on Sharko. He was wavering, wondering if he could get away with going to bed with his captive. She had a great figure for one so young. The bikini tan lines only enhanced it, making her more alluring. He stood mesmerized as she slowly walked toward him. He had a vagrant thought that something was wrong, but, by then, his lust had the upper hand. He ignored it and let the naked young girl lead him to the bed.

\* \* \* \*

Brazos pulled out his handgun. It was time to get away from this place. He was aggravated with himself for allowing Sharko to talk him into staying this long. They should have left immediately. From what he had heard though his hidden microphones and what his outside contacts were telling him, a virtual army had descended on his long-standing refuge. Even now, feds and cartels and God alone knew how many others were mixing it up there. He knew some of his people would surrender rather than die defending his interests. They would talk. In other areas of the city, his perceptive children were being taken into custody, mostly by feds but some by his enemies. The only safe place for him now was across the border. He would take the girl, one way or another, but not her parents. It would be too dangerous. Best to dispose of them in case the little mind reading bitch had managed to pass his thoughts to them. He stepped out of the office and was heading toward the bedroom where they were being held when a disconcerting noise stopped him. He turned and saw the back door opening. He ran.

\* \* \* \*

It felt strange to Tarker to have a girl still a few months short of fourteen years old coming along on a crash-and-shoot mission, but there was no help for it. The increasingly urgent messages being relayed by Jeannie brooked no delay. It took him a couple of minutes to bypass the alarm system and get the back door unlocked. Ordinarily, he would have had a specialist for that kind of thing with him, but again, there had been no time to get a proper crew together. He pulled his weapon and motioned for Amber to stand to one side, even as she whispered urgently to hurry.

Tarker pushed the door open with his foot and immediately heard footsteps. A second later, he heard the shout. Amber screamed.

"Kill them quick and get out of there!" Brazos yelled to the guard as he threw open the door to the room where the Burgers were being held. He ran on, trusting the distraction would give him time to get to the garage. He stopped at the bedroom where Jeannie Burger was being guarded by Sharko, turned the knob, kicked the door open, and stopped dead in his tracks.

Sharko was entangled with the girl on the bed. Both of them were naked, with Sharko on top. His mind raged at the betrayal. His gun was already out. There was no time now to untangle them and grab the girl. All he could do was try to save himself, but he was so angry that he couldn't resist. He already had his gun pointed in their direction. He fired three quick shots at the bodies and ran toward the garage again. Behind him, he heard the girl scream in agony. Good. If he couldn't use her, no one else would, either.

Jeannie had been hit in the leg by one of Brazos' bullets, but that wasn't why she screamed. Her parents had just been shot to death.

\* \* \* \*

The guard who had killed the Burgers ran out into the hallway and immediately died in a blaze of gunfire from Tarker and Amber. Tarker had no time for prisoners, and Amber wouldn't have taken the man captive under any conditions, not after she mentally witnessed the two minds dying at the gunman's hand. "Sharko's dead, but Jeannie's hurt," Jeannie said, her voice fast and shrill with excitement. One of Brazos' shots had blasted away the back of Sharko's skull.

Tarker hardly hesitated. Amber's word was good enough for him. He had caught a fleeting glimpse of someone else running toward the front of the house and followed quickly. It could only be Brazos. Behind him, Amber heard Jeannie's cry and ran to help her, trusting Tarker or someone else to take care of Brazos.

Brazos got to the garage exit then suddenly realized that not only had Sharko had been carrying the keys to the car, but also that the garage door was closed. The only escape now was out the front. He whirled and ran toward that door. He was just in time to be sandwiched between Jimmy and Ray, who were already through the door, and Tarker coming up from behind. His cold, reptilian mind decided to kill or die, but he had to stop to take aim.

Jeannie was following Brazos with her thoughts even through the pain of her wound and relaying them to Jimmy instantaneously.

It wouldn't have mattered because Brazos was in such a rage that Jimmy could follow his mental presence easily. He knew the agony the man had caused Jeannie, both physically and mentally, in the last few moments. "Down, Tarker," Jimmy yelled and began firing at Brazos at the same time.

Tarker was very fortunate that one of Jimmy's shots didn't hit him. His first two impacted the gangster squarely in the chest, but the final one passed over Brazos' head as he fell. Tarker was already lying prone. His alert mind had followed Jimmy's orders without hesitation. Neither Ray nor Brazos fired a shot. Jimmy had been too quick.



"Jeannie's hurt. We've got to help her," Jimmy exclaimed as he shoved his gun back into his belt, feeling the warmth of the barrel against his body like a comforting hand. He didn't know what room Jeannie was in, but Tarker did. He followed him then shoved him aside as Amber touched minds with him again, urging him on. He ran, both to help Jeannie, but even more importantly to be in Amber's physical presence. He had been mortally afraid something would happen to her during the fight. He ran into the room where Jeannie lay on the bed beside Sharko's body. Amber was trying to stop the bleeding from Jeannie's thigh with a bunched up portion of the sheets. He grabbed some more of the sheet and leaned over beside Amber so that their bodies could touch like their minds were already doing.

Tarker and Ray, both much better versed in emergency wound treatment, took over from the youngsters. A minute later, Tarker said, "The bullet didn't hit the bone or puncture an artery. Help me, Ray."

Between the two men they quickly got torn pieces of the sheet wrapped around Jeannie's leg.

"We have to get out of here. The neighbors aren't that close, but they're bound to have heard the gunfire. Let's go."

They all hurried to the street and toward Ray's car, Tarker carrying Jeannie in his arms, her body draped with a sheet. A couple of people at the other end of the street stood outside doorways or peeked from windows as they piled in the car and sped away, but none of them were near enough to read the license plates. They made a clean getaway, but that didn't stop Ray from disposing of the car just to be safe.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*We've sure lived in a lot of different houses lately*, Amber said. She and Jimmy were sitting together in an easy chair at the latest place, Amber in Jimmy's lap.

Pat and Bailey also sat together on the couch across from them. Ray had just arrived, and he was still standing and trying to get used to the idea of how he could now communicate so easily with the family mentally.

"This ought to be about the last one," Ray said vocally. "So many people have tried the nerve agent and Benadryl combination that even the government realizes there's no danger." He shook his head ruefully. "Just add Benadryl. It sounds too damn simple, but the proof is in the pudding, pardon the pun. Of course, governments will try to exert control, but it won't work. There's already so many mind readers in the world now that you original ones are no longer unique, other than that the media still wants the story of how you were the first ones. That will probably die down though. By the way, Bailey, now that the research is being done in the open, I'm getting reports that the reason your three kids didn't develop their mind reading ability right at first was the lack of a sufficient number of synapses. They probably had the latent ability, but it took some aging and experience before manifesting. That's what I was told, but as I said some time ago, most of the technical stuff passes me by. Does that sound right to you?"

"I had about concluded the same thing myself," Bailey told him with a smile. He squeezed Pat's hand. The kids had been right; there was nothing a normal person could compare telepathic bonding with.

Ray looked around the room, counting heads. "Where's Jeannie, by the way?"

"She's coming," Amber said. "She had a doctor's appointment."

Jeannie walked into the room, looking very much better than she had a couple of months ago. She had been working with Bailey in counseling sessions at first, but as soon as he found another psychologist who could read minds, he turned her over to him. Her attitude had improved tremendously, helped by the prospect of now having a chance to find a partner to pair with like Amber and Jimmy. She still envied them their closeness and utter happiness, but she no longer resented them.

"Doctor Menlow has gone back over all our records, Bailey. He says I won't have any more problems, but he still wants Doctor Simpson to see me once a month for a while." Menlow and Simpson were married and practiced together, but they used separate names to avoid confusion.

"Great," Bailey said. He smiled at his soon to be foster daughter. He and Pat had decided to take her into their home as well as Jimmy.

"I'm glad to hear you're getting along well, Jeannie. Tarker sends his regards also," Ray said. He realized he was still standing and took a seat.

"Where is Mister Blackmon?"

Ray scanned the room, his expression bland. "Don't ask. In fact, don't even think about him if you can help it. And all of you, keep what you know of Project Omega to yourself. I doubt we can maintain complete secrecy for too much longer, but the less said about us the better. We still have lots of work to do."

"You look like the cat that ate the canary, Ray. What other tidings do you bring?" Pat asked.

Ray nodded affirmatively. He opened the briefcase he had brought in and removed a sheaf of papers. "These papers are the deed to your new home, your bank accounts, drivers' licenses, and so forth. I'm sorry the FBI confiscated them, but it's all right now. The government finally had to admit all that fighting at Brazos' mansion was connected to the perceptive kids and the mind reading stories. You'll also be glad to know that the last of the perceptive kids was finally rescued from the gangsters. They were way down in Columbia."

"Wonderful!" Pat exclaimed. She smiled at first, but it faded as she remembered that two of the children had also died in rescue attempts.

Bailey went over and took the papers. When he sat back down, he and Pat exchanged glances. Then he turned to Ray. "Thanks. You've been a good friend. However, we've about decided to move back to Arkansas. Not to Mountain Grove, but another small city in the area. I think we'll all be more comfortable there."

"Is there anything in particular that brought on that decision?"

Bailey removed his glasses and polished them, promising himself to get that eye surgery, first thing. "This has all been very traumatic, for us as well as the kids. But putting that aside, Pat and I think there's going to be some giant upheavals in the world. We'd prefer to be back in familiar territory while it happens."

"I can see your point, Bailey and you really don't know the half of it. It will get worse before it gets better. You can't have a great paradigm shift like most of the race becoming telepaths without a lot of change."

"Telepaths. That sounds so science fictionish," Pat said.

Ray laughed along with everyone else. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You know, I think I'll buy a home somewhere in that area, too. It would be good to come back to when I'm not off on a mission."

"Come visit when you can. Just don't stumble over the kids when you do. We decided to take you up on that idea of home schooling," Pat warned him.

"I'm going to study just like this," Amber said from Jimmy's lap. She leaned down to meet his lips with hers. In a moment, she looked back up. "School will be lots more fun now. Especially recess!"

Ray laughed. "See what I mean? Lots and lots of changes."

Amber and Jimmy shared his mirth, but their minds were merged and there was no disagreement. They both knew that for them, the major changes had already occurred.

THE END

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