



# RESURRECTION

By Sara Reinke

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## FOREWORD

*Resurrection* was originally published in 2006 by a now-defunct electronic publisher as a serialized novella. It's a story I've had in mind for many years, and a concept that always felt too fresh and original to me to forget.

When I first started working with my agent in mid-2007, I decided to “flesh out” the novella-length version of *Resurrection* into a full novel-length work. What I thought would mean adding some extra scenes, or maybe expanding on some existing ones, instead turned out to be nearly a complete rewrite. If you've read the novella-length version, which is available as a free PDF download on my website, [www.sarareinke.com](http://www.sarareinke.com) under the “Free Reads” link, you'll find a lot has changed between that version and this one.

Ultimately, my agent and I decided not to try and market the manuscript to publishers. More than a paranormal romance, this story is a crime thriller at heart, and if you've read the novella-length *Resurrection* or its sequel, *Eye of the Storm*, you'll know that I'm not very savvy when it comes to writing authentic police-procedural dramas. But I had fun with the characters and with the challenges of taking the basic framework I'd introduced in the novella and building it from there into this novel-length version. I hope you'll enjoy.

It's also worth noting that *Eye of the Storm* works better as a sequel to the novella-length version of *Resurrection* than this one. Some of the changes I made in this manuscript revolved chiefly around the character of Emma, who is important in both stories, and some of the things I changed with her in this version don't fit the previous one, or fit well with events in *Eye of the Storm*.

— Sara Reinke (March, 2009)

## CHAPTER ONE

“Christmas present?” asked the girl behind the register at K-B Toys.

Jay Frances blinked at her, snapping out of a near reverie. He’d been wiggling his fingers, glancing at them in distraction because they were tingling, a strange, tickling sensation, the way they might had he lost circulation, only to have feeling and blood flow abruptly restored. “I beg your pardon?”

The girl nodded at the iDog on the counter in front of her. “These are really huge this year. I asked if it’s a Christmas present?”

“Oh.” Jay looked down at the toy, a robotic dog that would move its feet, bob its head and flash colorful lights in time to a music feed from an MP3 player. It was white plastic with hot pink butterflies adorning its glossy surface, the one Emma had been eying hopefully for months now. “No. It’s a birthday gift for my daughter.”

“Coming up soon, then?” the girl asked, tapping the tip of a ballpoint pen against a small machine beside her register, waiting for it to process his credit card.

“Too soon,” Jay replied, rubbing his hands against the front of his coat, trying to shake that peculiar prickling. It reminded him of how you could feel the vibrations of a revved car engine while gripping the steering wheel, or the throbbing beat of a song just by draping your hand against a speaker box. “She was born the day after Christmas.”

The cashier's expression grew mournful, like Jay had just told her Emma had stuck her hand down the garbage disposal and flipped the switch. "Wow," she remarked as the machine spit out a receipt. "That's rotten luck."

He'd heard sentiments to that effect a million and a half times, of course, as if he and Lucy had deliberately planned everything from the moment of conception just to have a kid born close to Christmas. Every year, he tried to make each occasion, Christmas and birthday, special and separate for Emma. Especially since Lucy had died.

His hand was still tingling as he signed the sales slip and slid it across the counter. "Don't tell my daughter that."

As he made his way out of the mall, returning to the garage where he had parked his car, he glanced at his watch and saw it was quarter 'til eight in the evening. Despite the late hour, the garage remained full of cars and relatively empty of people. It two weeks before Christmas, a time of the year when frantic shoppers clung to every last second in which the mall shops were open for business.

It had been four years since Lucy had been killed. They'd been out on a "date night," their first in too long. Most of the evening was completely lost to Jay, memories that were irretrievably gone, his neurologist had told him. He'd hit his head in the car crash that had killed Lucy; an SUV that had hit an icy patch on a two-lane highway had veered out of control and into their lane. Jay had tried to swerve and avoid a head-on collision, but the car had been broad-sided at nearly 60 miles an hour. Lucy had died instantly. At least that's what the doctors and police had told him. Jay had suffered what was diagnostically termed a *traumatic brain injury*. After languishing comatose for almost a full month, he'd then languished anew for many more long months to come, enduring physical and speech therapy, bouts of severe depression and chronic fatigue.

He was one of those rare and fortunate few to come out the other side from that kind of injury. He'd made almost a full and complete recovery. The fatigue remained on occasion, a persistent and unpleasant reminder of his ordeal, but for the

most part, he'd been able to pick his life up again, almost exactly as he'd left it.

He stepped off the elevator and crossed the fourth tier of the garage. The tingling sensation had started to spread now, radiating from his hands up into his arms. It felt as though his fingers were the taut lines of tuned guitar strings someone had just strummed, sending a resounding shudder arcing through his entire frame.

And he realized.

*Oh, shit.*

His eyes immediately cut around the shadow-draped garage. Dingy yellow fluorescents overhead cast more shadows than light in and among the closely parked cars.

*Nothing here. There's nothing here.*

From somewhere on another level, he could hear the overlapping, distant murmur of running motors, a squawk of tires on damp, slick pavement, the faint echo of a honking horn. He smelled the lingering, phantom stink of exhaust but saw nothing.

*It can't be that*, he told himself. He quickened his pace, willing himself to ignore the tremulous warmth now seeping through his entire body from his hands. *I'm imagining things. It can't be that. It can't be.*

He tried to think about something else, anything. Emma would be turning nine in two more weeks. He had offered to let her have a birthday slumber party with some of her friends from school, even though the idea of a half-dozen giggling, squealing third graders all hyped on cake and ice cream, up until all hours of the night watching DVDs and singing along to the *High School Musical 2* soundtrack wasn't even remotely appealing. That prospect alone should have been enough to distract him.

He walked past a small service closet jutting out from the dark cinderblock wall of the garage, no more than twenty paces from his car; he could see the square back end of the dark Volvo wagon. Suddenly the dim heat, the prickling in his hands turned to sharp spears of startling pain that lanced up

his arms and into his chest, seizing his breath in his lungs and drawing him to a stumbling, gasping halt. He dropped the bag from the toy store, his hand moving reflexively for his chest, his gloved fingers clutching the overlapping lapels of his wool overcoat. He couldn't breathe; it felt as if his ribcage had suddenly collapsed inward, crushing the air from him. Another shudder of pain shot up from his hands, deeper this time, knotting all of the way in his groin and he staggered, collapsing against the hood of a nearby car.

"God...!" he gasped. "G-God...no!"

At the impact, the car's alarm went off, a shrill, overlapping cacophony of honking horn and blaring siren, with all lights flashing in a sudden, dizzying display. Jay shied back, limping in a clumsy circle, panting for breath as the crushing spasm waned. The door to the service closet was directly behind him, a plane of steel painted a darker shade of grey than its surrounding walls, a numeral "4" painted in red, as tall as a man's fully grown height.

*No*, he pleaded in his mind. The car alarm continued to shriek, echoing in the confines of the garage, but all at once, the sound seemed muted to him, almost inconsequential. He felt powerless to prevent himself from reaching for the door, helpless to resist, as if all at once, he'd become some kind of life-sized marionette under the sway of an unseen master. *Oh, God, no, please, not now! Goddamn it, not now...!*

He touched the door knob, and as he did, another shock of pain stabbed through his midriff, stripping the wind from him. He doubled, his eyes smarting, his voice escaping him in a strangled, anguished cry.

*Let go of the door knob*, he told himself as the pain subsided. *For Christ's sake, let it go and get the hell away. Call Paul, call somebody—call anybody—but just get the hell out of here!*

But he couldn't. Again, as if under the command of an invisible puppeteer, Jay turned the door knob. *Let it be locked*, he thought desperately, and when it turned freely against his gloved palm, he groaned aloud in dismay. *No, God, no!*

He stepped back and opened the door, listening to the heavy steel scrape against its hinges, feeling the sudden, faint huff of air from beyond the threshold against his face. The light inside was broken; the fluorescent tubes flickered and danced, flashing between darkness and glaring white-blue light in an erratic beat. The strobe effect made what lay beyond the doorway seem even more surreal—a woman sprawled on the floor, her head toward him, her hair splayed about her face in a dark corona.

He stood against the threshold, staring at her. Her white pants had been pulled down to her knees, her panties along with them, and the flesh of her thighs, her belly and exposed groin was alabaster in the staccato glare. Her throat was ringed in dark contusions, her face flushed, her eyes and mouth all partially ajar.

*Oh, God*, Jay thought, but as soon as he took a hedging step back, the pain returned, wracking through his torso, searing in his palms. He stumbled forward into the tiny room, floundering sideways into the wall and sending brooms and mops that had been leaning in the corner tumbling, crashing into the large, fiberglass basin of an industrial sink. The door swung shut behind him, closing all of the way. He looked around, but saw nothing else except for a dingy toilet in one corner, and an oversized standing locker in the other. He was alone in the room with the dead woman.

*I can't do this*, he pleaded, even as he pulled off his gloves, exposing his throbbing, aching hands to the frigid air. *Not now, please, I have Emma to think about...I can't do this...oh, Christ, please...*

He stepped around and over the fallen broom handles and mops and knelt beside the woman. She had lost a shoe, and it rested on the floor beneath the sink, a white clog of some type with a heavy, rubber sole. He could see blood on her face, smeared around her mouth and nose, glistening in the flashing overhead light.

*It's not too late*, he thought as he reached for her, struggling vainly to pull his hands away, to defy the damnable



force that pushed them forward. *If I don't touch her...if I just don't touch her...*

He cradled her swollen face between his hands and found himself looking down into the sleepy half-crescent slits of her eyes. "Oh, God," he whispered. "Help me...!"

The pain crashed into him, crushing the breath from him, snapping his head back on his neck as he uttered a hoarse, anguished cry. A brilliant flash of light flooded the closet, a sudden wind as if a cyclone had touched down in the tiny confines. It roared in Jay's ears; the light blinded him, swallowing the girl, the closet, the world, everything.

**He blacked out.**

## CHAPTER TWO

A low, unfamiliar buzzing sound drew Jo Montgomery from the depths of some fathomless and dreamless sleep, stirring her slowly toward consciousness. Thinking at first it was her bedside alarm clock rousing her for an early shift, she reached out, pawing for it, meaning to slap the snooze button. Instead, she felt her hand strike skin—warm and firm with the contours of etched musculature apparent beneath. Since it wasn't her own, she opened her eyes a bleary half-mast, blinking in bewildered surprise.

And found herself lying face to face with a complete stranger.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped, jerking her hand away from the man's bicep, because that's what she had inadvertently been groping. She scuttled backwards in the bed, pushing with her heels and tangling her legs in the sheets until there was nothing beneath her but the open air. She yelped as she tumbled to the floor, smacking down hard against her hip and wrenching most of the covers along with her.

“Oh...oh, my God!” she gasped again, using both hands to push the disheveled mess of her auburn hair back from her face. She waited for the man to say something; surely she'd woken him up, and she cringed, shoulders hunched, body seized with fright as she struggled to gather her wits. *Okay*, she told herself. *Okay, okay, I'm okay. This is okay. Everything is okay. I have no idea who the fuck that is, but it's okay.*

The man didn't say anything. He didn't lean over to look at her. In fact, to judge by the tautness in the sheets still

tethering Jo's legs to the bed, he hadn't as much as moved. Hesitantly, Jo rolled onto her knees and risked a peek over the side of the mattress.

*What have I done?* she thought. He was still sleeping, the covers now pulled down enough from his body to reveal he was naked beneath. Jo allowed herself a momentary but admiring glance along the well-muscled plane of his chest and belly, the dark shadow of hair at his groin that disappeared beneath the sheet's edge. Then she looked down at herself and jerked in new shock to realize that she, too, was nude. *Oh, Christ, what have I done?*

The man was handsome, whoever he was, with high cheeks, a strong jaw line and a head-full of dark hair that lay swept about his face haphazardly in his sleep. There was something intimately familiar about him, a strong and insistent feeling that she *should* know him; she should be able to remember him, whatever had happened between them, and however she had come to be in his bedroom.

At least, Jo assumed it was his. *Because it sure as hell isn't mine*, she thought, looking around at the sun-filled room. The entire wall to her left was framed by large, floor-to-ceiling windows, an alcove that framed a TV set and a treadmill. The room was half-again as large as any of the ones in her small bungalow, the floors covered not in dingy, matted carpet, as hers were, but with blond-colored wood and a scattering of colorful throw rugs. Directly across from her were two large closets and on the opposite side of the room, she saw two doors, one closed and the other ajar, leading into what looked like a bathroom.

*I've never seen this place before in my life*, she thought as she looked up and found the source of the quiet buzz that had first disturbed her rest—a ceiling fan spinning lazily overhead. *What happened to me? Did I go out drinking last night? Pick this guy up in a bar?*

She pressed the heel of her hand against her brow and struggled to remember. The only recollection that came clearly to her was that she had signed up to pick up an extra third shift at the hospital, filling in for one of the regular Friday night

nurses who'd had a last minute emergency. *I couldn't have been out drinking*, she thought, shaking her head, her eyes closed. *I had to work. I meant to stop by the mall, to pick up a gift for Cheryl...that stupid Secret Santa thing...*

Her breath drew still as dim memories returned to her. She *had* gone to the mall; she remembered browsing through both the Hallmark and Things Remembered shops before settling on a decorative ceramic picture frame. *Cheryl has a new grandson. I thought she'd like it to put a picture in, keep at the floor station during her shifts...*

She remembered paying for the frame, because at first, her debit card hadn't gone through. It was well worn, the black strip on the back nearly scraped away from over-use, and the cashier had finally typed the numbers in by hand to ring up the sale.

*Then what?*

Everything after that seemed lost in a fog to Jo, submerged in shadows and lost to her. She opened her eyes and found herself gazing across the mattress again, looking at the mysterious man she didn't know, but still somehow felt that she *should*.

*I have to get out of here*, she thought. That more than anything seemed suddenly, immediately imperative. She kicked the sheets from her legs, shoving them in a heap onto the bed. She stood, clapping her hand to her head and groaning softly as her mind side-slipped, swimming with sudden vertigo.

"Oh..." she whispered, closing her eyes, waiting for the nauseating sensation to pass. When it only grew more insistent, knotting in her stomach and rising from there like some bitter, massive wave, she gulped and stumbled around the end of the bed, staggering for the bathroom. She shoved the door open and crashed to her knees beside the toilet just as her stomach heaved. She vomited, her gut twisting sharply, forcing a cry from her. Again and again, she spewed up thick, nasty mouthfuls of bitter, foamy bile, until at last, there was nothing left. She fumbled for the handle and flushed the commode, turning her face away from the sudden rush of water and pressing her cheek against the cool rim of the toilet

seat. She was trembling, her thin frame shuddering uncontrollably, her teeth clattering together.

*I have to find my clothes.* She limped to her feet, pressing her hand gingerly against her sore belly. She paused as she walked past the sink and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Frowning, she reached behind her, flipping the light switch, then sucked in a whistling breath through her teeth as bright glare flooded the room, bouncing starkly off of white countertops and polished tiles.

*What the hell?*

Jo leaned over the sink, peering closely at her reflection. The dark smears around her mouth and nose that had first attracted her attention turned out to be something dried and caked clear to her cheeks and crusting tendrils of hair to her skin. *That looks like blood,* she thought, picking at it with her fingertip and watching the smears flake away.

She had no memory of a nosebleed, and couldn't see any cuts or scrapes on her lips or gums. She prodded lightly against the tip of her nose, but felt no pain. And yet that blood remained, as if something violent had happened to her, something that should have undoubtedly hurt.

Unnerved, Jo turned on the hot water and scrubbed her face, rubbing until her skin felt chapped and sore from her efforts. She lifted a hand towel from the counter and dabbed the lower half of her face with it. She looked up at herself again in the mirror, her skin clean now, water droplets beading in her hair, dotted across her forehead. *What happened to me?*

Again, she struggled to remember, and again, nothing came to her. She felt confused and frightened, along with a sudden urge to burst into tears. She took a long, deep breath, locked gazes with her reflection and gave herself her most no-nonsense stare. "You're alright," she said, her voice hoarse and croaking. She cleared her throat reflexively, and when she spoke again, she sounded stronger. "You're alright. Whatever happened, it's over now. Just get your clothes on and get the hell out of here."

She nodded to herself and turned, going back into the bedroom. The man in the bed lay just as she'd left him, with his back to her now, the sheets draped about his hips. From this side, she could admire the lines and muscles of his back if she wanted to; his broad shoulders, the slim taper of his waist, the lean outline of his buttocks beneath the ivory-colored sheet.

*Who is he?*

She looked around and found her clothes in a tangled pile on the floor nearby, her uniform scrub pants and shirt both turned inside out, as if they'd been clumsily pulled from her body. Her panties lay beside them. Jo frowned as she lifted them in hand and realized the thin nylon was torn along the seams. *Like someone tried to rip them off me*, she thought, glancing at the man in the bed again.

She tried not to think about it as she stepped into the slacks, pulling them up over her hips. She pulled her shirt on, and looked around vainly for her clogs. There was no sign of her shoes, and she frowned, getting down onto her hands and knees and peering under the bed. Still no luck. "Looks like I'm going home barefooted," she muttered.

Her parka, an ugly, bulky, olive-drab thing, had been draped over the back of a chair in the corner. When Jo picked it up, the contents of the pockets spilled, loose change, car keys, lip balm and breath mints clattering noisily against the hardwood floor and rolling in all directions.

"Damn it!" Jo squatted, chasing runaway quarters and dimes, snatching peppermints and Chapstick before they disappeared beneath the bed. She grabbed her keys and paused, holding the heavy ring up in front of her face, watching the play of sunlight against them. At the end of the ring was her pepper spray, a small plastic bottle with a bright red trigger. Her father had bought it for her. *Because of Rich*, she thought.

Rich was Jo's ex-husband. The dissolution of their unhappy marriage had only been finalized the year before, three months after Rich had started a six-year prison sentence for felony drug charges. He had been a methamphetamine

addict, and a mean one, at that; a junkie who had no qualms about taking after his wife with his fists—and on one occasion, a kitchen knife—while strung out. He'd made a habit of stalking and terrorizing Jo during their all-too brief union, and her father had disliked the idea of her walking to her car alone at the end of her late hospital shifts.

*Dad thought the pepper spray would keep me safe. Hell, so did I.* Why she suddenly wouldn't think so made no sense to Jo, but for some reason, the sight of it left her momentarily stricken. She shivered slightly with the distinct and disquieting certainty that something had happened to her, something in which she hadn't been safe, and her spray hadn't been able to protect her. Her mind turned to the blood dried on her face, crusted against her skin and she shivered again. *Something bad happened.*

At this, her eyes clouded with tears, and no amount of blinking or hiccupping for breath would get rid of them.

*Oh, God, I think something bad happened to me.* Jo clapped her hand over her mouth as she burst into tears, and a loud, ragged sob escaped her.

She sat down against the edge of the mattress and wept, the culmination of what had proven thus far to be a bewildering and terrifying morning. When she felt the man behind her move, his hand touching her arm lightly, she jerked away and danced to her feet, yelping in bright new fear.

She stumbled away from the bed as he rolled onto his back, his large, dark eyes, heavy lidded and dazed, finding hers. "You...you're awake..." he murmured, lifting his hand again, letting it hover weakly in the air as he reached for her.

"Don't touch me," Jo said, her voice fluttering with fright. She shoved the barrel of the pepper spray at him, keeping her finger poised on the trigger.

"Please..." the man whispered, his eyelids drooping closed, his hand falling limply back to the bed. "Wait...please..."

*Like hell!* Jo snatched up her fallen jacket and ran out the door into a corridor. She followed it to a living room with

more of hardwood floors and enormous windows. A large sectional couch divided the room into perpendicular planes and a broad but simple fireplace dominated the far wall.

She saw a small flight of steps that led down to an entry way, and a front door. She staggered down the steps, somehow not spilling ass over elbows in her mad rush, and threw open the door.

A woman stood on the front stoop with an armload of groceries, fumbling with her house keys. She was older, maybe in her late fifties, with a fading brown rinse in her carefully coiffed hair. A young girl stood beside her, her hair up in a ponytail, fastened with a cheery red ribbon. Jo froze in the entryway, her breath caught in a panicked tangle in her throat and the three of them stared at one another for what felt like an eternity.

“Look, Marie, she’s awake,” the girl said suddenly, brightly, and she smiled up at Jo.

“E-excuse me,” Jo stammered. “I just...I...I’m sorry...”

She brushed past them and dashed down the front steps of an old, brick-front brownstone, stumbling on the sidewalk and blinking stupidly in the bright, glaring sun.

“Well, I never—!” she heard the woman exclaim hotly. Jo looked over her shoulder and saw she was coming down the steps after her. “You, there! Stop!”

The little girl remained on the stoop, gazing after Jo with interest. She seemed completely unsurprised by Jo’s presence or appearance, as if she knew exactly what Jo had been doing in her home.

*That makes one of us, kid,* Jo thought, and then she turned and ran down the sidewalk.



## CHAPTER THREE

“Do you know what this is?” Charles Toomis asked Jo as she climbed into the passenger seat of his car. He held his cell phone out in his extended palm; with a quick flip of his wrist, the slim black case unfolded and he wagged it under her nose. “It’s an amazing little device, Jo. Came out a few years ago.”

“Ha, ha, very funny.” Jo slapped the phone away as she snapped her seat belt in place. She’d caught a cab home that morning, once she’d run long enough to reach an intersection of streets she had at least vaguely heard of, and for her feet to be frozen nearly solid. How she had survived the sprint without losing toes to frostbite remained a mystery to her. She had returned to her house, and after showering, dressing in fresh clothes and downing a cup of coffee heavily imbued with Bailey’s Irish Cream, she was feeling much better.

*I don’t know what happened to me, but I don’t care, she’d thought, after spending nearly a meticulous hour in front of her bathroom mirror, inspecting her naked body from every possible angle for any hint of injury. It’s over and done with and behind me now, and I’m just going to forget about it.*

Never mind that her thoughts kept turning again and again to the handsome stranger she’d awoken beside. Never mind the pervasive feeling that she knew him somehow, or that despite the still lingering sensation that she’d just survived something very bad, she felt nothing but fondness—inexplicable but insistent—when she thought of the man.

Charles continued waving the phone at her, not content to let the matter die. "It's called a cell phone, Jo. Maybe you've heard of one."

"I have, yes, thank you," she growled as he at last relented and tucked the phone back into his coat pocket. He put the car in gear and backed out of her driveway.

"You need to get one," he said.

"I know."

"If you had a cell phone, then not only could you call the hospital to let them know you won't be able to make your shift, but you'd also be able to call me before the hospital does, wondering where the hell you are, like I'm your keeper or something."

Jo hunched down in her seat. "I'm sorry, Charles."

"Never mind I was actually worried about you," he continued and spared her a glance. "I thought Rich might have found you or something."

Two weeks ago, she'd been stopped in the hospital parking lot on her way to her car one morning when her shift had ended. She and Charles had parted company in the lobby, heading in separate directions for their respective parking slots. She'd been tired and hungry, ready for an Egg McMuffin and her bed when a voice had called out, stopping her in her tracks.

"Jobeth Garland?"

*Garland* had been her married name, one she hadn't gone by in over a year. And nobody called her *Jobeth* unless it was her mother and she was in trouble, or one of the hospital administrators. Bewildered, she'd turned and found a tall, lanky man in a winter overcoat and scarf walking briskly behind her, his gloved hand raised in beckon.

"Jobeth Garland?" he asked again as he drew near.

"It's *Montgomery* now," she replied. "May I help you?"

The man's face was unfamiliar, long and narrow and somewhat youthful, crowned with a head full of tousled brown hair that was windswept and in need of combing. "My name is

Daniel Porter,” he said, extending his hand in greeting. “I’m one of the social workers over at the Saint Lawrence Resource Center for Men.”

This hadn’t enlightened matters in the least for Jo, and after she’d accepted the handshake hesitantly, she’d crossed her arms over her chest. “What can I do for you, Mr. Porter?”

“I’m here on behalf of your husband, Richard,” Porter said. “He asked me to get in contact with you. He was hoping that you would meet with him.”

Jo had blinked in undisguised start. “You...you mean my *ex*-husband,” she stammered at last, with pointed emphasis on *ex*. “Rich and I are divorced. And there’s a standing restraining order against him, in case he’s forgotten.” The more she spoke, the more old ghosts inside of her rose from their crypts, and the angrier she became. Soon her fists were balled, her brows furrowed, and her voice loud and sharp. “And even if there wasn’t, Mr. Porter, I have no intention of stepping foot anywhere near a goddamn prison to hear what he has to say. He’s out of my life, and I’m happy that way—you can tell him I said so.”

Porter’s expression had grown uncertain. Clearly, this wasn’t the response he’d been anticipating. “I don’t understand,” he said after a moment’s pause in which he licked his lips and shifted his weight, visibly uncomfortable. “Richard isn’t in prison anymore. He’s on parole, one of our residents at the halfway house our shelter runs. He’s been there for over two weeks.”

His words had echoed in Jo’s stunned mind, leaving her open-mouthed and gasping for breath. “What?” She shook her head. “No. No, that can’t be right. He can’t have been paroled. They would have called me. They were supposed to call me. I would have gone to the hearing. I would have testified so they couldn’t...” Her voice faded. “He can’t be out.”

“I’m sorry,” Porter said. “I thought you knew. Richard and I...we both thought you knew. There was a hearing. Richard thought because you didn’t come that you didn’t oppose his release. He thought it meant you’d forgiven him.”

*Forgiven him? a part of Jo's mind screeched. Forgiven him for what? For stealing from my bank accounts to buy drugs? For telling me he'd lost his wedding ring, when really he'd pawned it for dope money? For taking out credit cards—cards I'm stuck paying the bills on now—so he could get high? For breaking my front teeth so I had to get porcelain caps, or busting my nose, so I had to lie and tell everyone I'd been in a car accident rather than admit he was beating the shit out of me? For coming after me with a butcher knife and putting three big scars on my arm and shoulder? Or for smoking meth in my house so when the cops busted him, all of my neighbors had a front-row seat for the show? What could he possibly think I've forgiven him for?*

"He's clean now," Porter said. "He's been going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings every day, and one-on-one sessions with me and our staff psychiatrist in the afternoons. He just wanted to see you, talk to you, let you know that he's healing. I think having you as part of that healing would help keep him strong, keep him sober. He still loves you very much."

At this, Jo had laughed out loud and then shoved Daniel Porter out of her way. "Richard Garland can go fuck himself, as far as I'm concerned," she said. "And, frankly, mister, since you're here on his behalf, you can, too."

Jo had called her lawyer from a payphone in the hospital lobby, too shaken and upset to drive home. "They were supposed to call me!" she'd screamed. "They were supposed to let me know! He isn't supposed to be out of jail this soon!"

"I'll find out what happened," her lawyer had replied, but unfortunately, by that point, there had been no undoing it. Somebody somewhere had dropped the bureaucratic ball, and while Rich got a get-out-of-jail-free card, Jo hadn't received so much as a written note in apology.

"You'd tell me, wouldn't you?" Charles asked, drawing Jo from her thoughts. "If he was bothering you, I mean. If he tried to get a hold of you again?"

Jo had tried to stay on her guard ever since learning of Rich's release, and had never gone anywhere—not even to her own driveway to let her car warm up—without her pepper

spray. Her dad had given it to her when he'd found out about Rich. Again, thinking about it made her feel inexplicably vulnerable and frightened, like it had somehow proven a false sense of security, and she struggled to push it from her mind.

"Yes, I'd tell you," she said. "Really, Charles, it was nothing. I just forgot to call the hospital, that's all." She had already explained herself to the chief of nursing staff, even though she had to admit that her excuse—car trouble at the mall, and in the stressful aftermath, forgetting she'd promised to pick up the extra shift—sounded lame even to her own ears. Fortunately, she had worked at Metropolitan General Hospital for five years, and had an otherwise stellar record that had saved her ass in this instance.

"Well, you should have called me," Charles said, and it occurred to her that his feelings were hurt, that she'd offended his manly pride by not turning to him in her time of crisis. She had known him for nearly eight years; they had met originally in nursing school, and now worked together at the hospital on the graveyard shift.

"I'm sorry," she said again, reaching out to touch his sleeve and draw his gaze. She wanted to confide in him. Jo and Charles had dated in college and during that time had been lovers. The relationship had ended on friendly enough terms that had eventually evolved into the nearly brother-sister relationship the pair currently shared. He was her closest friend in the city and she had always been able to tell him anything. *But when I don't even know what to tell myself, how in the hell can I explain things to Charles?*

"Besides, you'd told me you had a hot date with Gina last night," she added, trying to be playful. "I didn't want to interrupt. How did it go, anyway?"

Gina was Charles' girlfriend, a paramedic he'd met while working in the emergency room at Metro General. Gina was as slight and petit as Charles was tall and brawny; as mousy and quiet as he was gregarious and outgoing. Jo had never quite understood the pairing.

He shrugged. "I spent the night in front of the TV eating take-out lo mein. She got called in on a shift."

“You’re kidding!” When he shook his head, she patted his arm again. “I’m sorry, Charles.”

“Hey.” He shrugged again. “That’s the nature of the beast.”

“She’s not mad about you giving me a lift today, is she?” Jo asked, and he turned to her, looking surprised.

“No,” he said, his expression growing puzzled. “Why would she be?”

Some women would have felt intimidated by their men keeping in such constant contact with their exes. Shortly after their split, Charles and Gina had hooked up, while Jo had started dating Rich.

*Maybe I should have stuck with Charles,* she thought.

He drove her to the mall, and as they pulled into the garage, a peculiar, unnerved feeling settled in Jo. It was Saturday afternoon, and the place was packed with cars as well as people moving to and from them, trundling armloads of plastic bags and oversized boxes.

“What floor?” Charles asked, and Jo realized she’d been clutching so fervently at the door handle, she’d left brief fingernail indentations in the molded plastic.

“Uh...fourth,” she said. Her voice sounded tremulous and hoarse, so she cleared her throat and tried again. “Fourth floor.”

“At least you didn’t pay some shyster to tow your car this close to Christmas,” Charles remarked. “What’d they want for that? A hundred bucks? Two hundred? Your whole damn car isn’t even worth that much.”

“Ha, ha,” Jo murmured, as they passed a service closet, its slate-grey door emblazoned with a large, red numeral “3.” For some reason, the downy hairs along the nape of her neck suddenly stirred beneath the collar of her parka and she shivered, despite the fact Charles had the heater in his Taurus cranked high.

“I bet you just need a new battery,” Charles said. “I’ve got some jumper cables in the trunk. We can get you going,

and I'll follow you over to Pep Boys so you can get another one."

They reached the fourth floor of the garage, and Charles slowed to a near creeping pace, panning his gaze from side to side. "Right or left?"

"Right," she said, but her gaze was fixed on another service closet, this one painted with a blood-red "4." She felt her stomach twist in a sudden knot, her breath drawing short, and again, she hooked her fingernails into the door handle as they drove past.

Even with the closet out of sight and behind them, she still felt disconcerted and vaguely nauseous with anxiety. *A goose walked on my grave*, her grandmother had been fond of saying, and Jo had never understood what she'd meant until that moment.

There was no missing Jo's car, a bright green 1978 Datsun 280 Z with faux gold wheel rims.

"No robbing banks for you," Charles had teased her once good-naturedly. "My God, the police could spot you a mile away in bumper-to-bumper traffic in that goddamn thing."

At one time, it might have passed for sporty—and Charles kept insisting to her with a little investment on her part, it could be a real collector's item—but to her, it looked like a woeful, rust-speckled green frog. She'd bought it from a friend of her brother-in-law for \$1,500. It was old and battered, pocked with dents, but at the moment, it was the best she could do. Thanks to her ex-husband, her credit was ruined, and it was either drive the shitty old beater she could afford, or a nicer, newer car with payments higher than her mortgage.

There were no available spaces on either side of Jo's car, so Charles pulled to a stop just before her slot. "Let's see if it will start on its own," he said, turning the ignition off, and startling Jo out of her reverie. "If it won't, we can pop it in neutral and push it back so my cables will reach."

He opened the door and started to step out, then paused, glancing over his shoulder because she hadn't so much

as reached for her seatbelt. “Ground control to Major Tom,” he said, and she blinked at him. “You going to help me here?”

“Sure,” she said, her hands trembling as she unfastened the shoulder harness. “Sorry.”

She unlocked the Datsun and popped the hood, watching as Charles propped it open and leaned over, tugging here and there on wires and cables. “Why don’t you try turning her over?” he said.

The car would start, of course. Jo knew it, and struggled to act surprised when it roared to life, no muss, no fuss. There wasn’t a damn thing wrong with the Datsun, but it had been the only excuse—however pathetic—she could come up with on the fly.

Charles stepped back from the front end of the car and folded his arms across his broad chest, his expression thoughtful. “Sounds like it’s running just fine,” he said, walking around to the open driver’s-side door and looking down at her. “Your battery looks okay, too. I didn’t see any corrosion around the terminals or anything. Turn it off and try again.”

Jo did. In the interest of putting on a good show, she restarted the Z another three or four times, until Charles seemed puzzled yet satisfied it wasn’t going to die on her. “I still think we should go over to Pep Boys and have it checked out,” he said.

Jo shook her head. There was only so far she was willing to let this ruse take her, and spending upwards of a hundred dollars or more on a brand new battery she didn’t need wasn’t in her plan. “No, that’s okay, Charles. It seems like it’s doing fine now. Maybe last night was just a fluke. And anyway, I’m really tired...”

And really ready to get the hell out of that garage, she realized. The longer she was in there, the more she felt like she was suffocating, and it had nothing to do with the fact her car had kicked out a large cloud of pungent exhaust with each engine turnover.



He raised his brow, clearly dubious, but he'd known her well and long enough to know when to choose their battles. "I want you to call me when you get home."

She nodded. "Yes, Dad."

"And I want you to think about what I said about the cell phone. I mean it, Jo. They're a necessity, not a luxury anymore these days."

She smiled. "Yes, Dad."

"I'll see you at work Monday night?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, Dad."

He shook his head, but laughed as he walked back to his car. She watched him start up the Taurus and pull away, driving toward the exit slowly enough to let her know he was keeping an eye on her for as long as possible. She put her own car in reverse and pulled out of the parking slot.

She backed up and found herself idling beside the service closet, that blood-like numeral "4" glaring at her. She glanced around; Charles had left, and no one else was around. The sight of that door—something about that closet—still left her decidedly uneasy. She turned off her car and got out.

*Did something happen to me here last night?* she wondered. *Something while I was on the way back to my car? Something I don't remember?*

She thought of the blood dried on her face, and the man again, asleep and nude in the bed beside her. *Did something bad happen here last night?*

She shut her car door and walked over to the closet. She stood for a long moment simply staring at, and then the distant bark of a car horn from another level in the garage startled her, making her jump in reflexive fright. *This is ridiculous*, she thought, and she managed a fluttering, nervous little laugh. *The door's going to be locked, anyway. It's not like they leave these things standing open so just anybody can walk right on inside.*

She reached for the doorknob, and it turned beneath her hand. She froze momentarily, her heart hammering, and then she steeled herself, pulling the door open.

Beyond the threshold was nothing but darkness. A dim patch of light spilled inward from the doorway, revealing a tangled pile of fallen brooms and mops, but nothing else. Jo reached out and fumbled along the wall until she found a light switch, but when she flipped it, nothing happened. She tried again, but still no luck.

She stepped back and returned to her car. She fished around in the glove compartment until she found a small, pocket-sized flashlight. The narrow beam wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. *And I've already come this far*, she thought. *No sense stopping now.*

She made herself go back to the closet and open the door again, even though she was shaking beneath her down-lined parka, and the flashlight's beam bobbed and nodded in her unsteady grasp. She panned it around slowly, feeling very much like a little girl playing Nancy Drew. When the light spilled across something stark and white, she shied in momentary surprise, then moved forward again in shocked realization.

*My shoe. That's one of my clogs...!*

She felt her face go ashen as she stepped into the closet toward the fallen shoe. The door swung shut quietly behind her. Jo knelt, lifting the clog in hand and saw something on the floor beside it, a credit card receipt. She aimed her flashlight at the slip of paper as she picked it up. It was from K-B Toys. A man named Jay Frances had bought something called an iDog on sale for \$25.99 plus tax the night before.

Something about that receipt—the name on it—sent shivers along her spine. *Like a goose walking on my grave*, she thought again as she folded the sales slip in half, tucking it into the hip pocket of her jeans. She picked up her shoe and looked around, panning the light into every corner. To her left were the brooms and mops on the floor. To the right, a toilet that would have been creepy in broad daylight, various and sundry janitorial buckets and supplies, and a large, upright locker with its door standing open wide. No sign of her other shoe.

The next thing to really grab her attention, however, was the sink. It was ahead of her in the left corner, a huge,

deep, industrial fiberglass basin with a fat, swan-necked faucet and cross-shaped handles. From the moment her gaze settled on the sink, it locked there, and she was frozen, unable to think, move or breathe.

*Oh, God. That sink...*

An image flashed through her mind, as powerful as a physical blow to her face, and she dropped the clog, her hand darting to her brow as she winced.

She remembered...

*He shoved me against that sink, and the lip of it punched into my belly like a fist. He held me there, one hand tangled in my hair, something around my neck...choking me. I couldn't breathe.*

She remembered being doubled over the side of the sink, forced there by someone else, a man, tremendous and heavy, strong enough to pin her. *He had something around my neck, and I could feel myself fading...blacking out...but I could see him...*

She glanced overhead, directing the flashlight toward the ceiling, and the darkened fluorescent tubing there. *The light was working*, she thought. *It was flashing off and on, but it was working, and I could see him...the silhouette of him reflected in the faucet...*

The memory-like images were too much, too soon. She turned, hurrying back to the door, keeping her eyes and the flashlight trained on the sliver of faint grey light she could see seeping from beneath its bottom edge. *I have to get out of here.*

She didn't look again at the sink, or let her thoughts stray back to the horrifying, confusing images that had flooded her brain uninvited.

*Out of sight, out of mind*, she told herself, repeating this over and over. As she stepped back out into the chilly garage, she whispered the mantra aloud: "Out of sight, out of mind."

She got into her car and started the engine. As she drove away, she realized she clutched the steering wheel so tightly, her knuckles had blanched alabaster, and struggled to

ease her grip. “Just my imagination,” she whispered. “Nothing happened. Nothing at all.”

But that firm admonition didn’t stop the tears from welling in her eyes or streaming down her cheeks, and Jo hiccupped on silent, strained sobs all of the way home.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“I didn’t see his face,” said a woman named Abigail Nelson. She looked up from her hospital bed, keeping her gaze directed toward a nearby policewoman as she spoke. This didn’t bother Detective Paul Frances in the least; had, in fact, been his intention all along in bringing the officer, Lisa Riggs, into the room with him. He kept a courteous but attentive distance near the threshold of the room, his mouth closed as he stood beside another of his fellow officers, Detective Dan Pierson. Abigail Nelson had just narrowly escaped being raped and murdered only hours earlier. He knew the last person she felt like confiding in was an unfamiliar man.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail said to Officer Riggs, her brown eyes mournful and oversized, magnified behind the lenses of her glasses. She’d explained that she ordinarily wore contact lenses, but the right side of her face was a mess of bruises, and her eye was nearly swollen shut. Around her throat, just beneath the shelf of her chin, was a deep violet stripe of bruising where something had been drawn with enough force against her skin to leave a mark. Paul had to give her credit. She probably had enough Valium in her system to sedate an NFL linebacker, but even so, he hadn’t known too many witnesses to go through the kind of trauma she had and be so willing or able to talk to the police so soon. He’d offered several times to let her rest at least until later in the day, but Abigail had been insistent. Small and slight of build, she was tough nonetheless; he didn’t know many men with those kinds of balls.

She took a sip of 7-Up from a Styrofoam cup she held between trembling hands and then continued. “It was dark and everything happened so fast. I didn’t see his face.”

Dan Pierson groaned audibly at this, and Paul shot him a glower. A loud-mouthed, lazy son of a bitch, Pierson had been Paul’s partner when he’d first transferred to the homicide division from the sex crimes unit a year earlier. Pierson had taken it upon himself to walk Paul through every crime scene they encountered with an “I’ve got seniority over you” attitude, as if Paul had never seen one before and was fresh out of diapers, weaned from his mother’s tit. Paul had finally—and to his credit, politely—pointed out to Pierson that he wasn’t a fucking moron and knew how to work a crime scene. From then on out—along with a reassignment to another partner—he and Pierson had gotten along like rival pimps hustling the same street corner. Pierson had pretty much shouldered his way uninvited into the hospital room for the interview, but Paul hadn’t wanted to upset the victim further by demanding he get the hell out.

“That’s okay,” Officer Riggs reassured Abigail. “Why don’t you tell us what you remember, Mrs. Nelson?”

Paul had switched his cell phone to vibrate, and when it began to shiver violently against him through the inner pocket of his blazer, buzzing like a muffled cicada, he jumped in start. He reached for it with a frown, pivoting toward the door. His frown deepened when he saw the number on his caller ID.

*Goddamn it, Vicki*, he thought irritably. It was the third time in the last forty-five minutes that his wife had tried to call. She knew he was working. He’d left the house late last night when he’d received the call about Abigail Nelson’s assault. He hadn’t been home since, and had been surviving thus far solely on at least twenty cups of coffee and an egg-salad sandwich he’d grabbed out of one of the hospital vending machines an hour earlier.

He felt worn thin, exhausted and more than vaguely nauseous, his nerves and temper nearly shot. After nearly twenty years of marriage, Vicki knew better than to bother

him—weekend or not—with some piddly shit like did he want meatloaf for dinner. And while he wouldn't put it past either of his teenaged daughters—fifteen-year-old Mary Kate, or "M.K." as she preferred to be called, and thirteen-year-old Bethany—to call him over some silly dispute like who was hogging the computer or who had borrowed whose jeans without asking, it remained Vicki's responsibility in such circumstances to play the mediator. Especially while he was working.

He ignored the call just as he had the other two, letting it roll over to voice mail as he tucked the phone back into his jacket.

"...and I guess it was around a quarter 'til seven," Abigail was saying. "I came home from school and pulled into the garage. I take a night class over at the community college every Friday. Conversational Italian. I came home and used the opener to raise the garage door. I didn't see anything unusual or out-of-place when I pulled in. I didn't even think about it."

Judging by footprints left in the mud and snow around the outer perimeter of the Nelson house, Abigail's assailant had been waiting in some shrubs near the garage when Abigail had returned home. He'd ducked into the garage behind her car, as the door was lowering automatically behind her. The crime scene technicians had been able to give Paul this information earlier in a preliminary report.

"I got out of the car," Abigail said. "I had my books with me, a back pack I was carrying in my arm..." She held up her arm, crooked somewhat demonstratively. "Robbie was at his poker game, and he's usually out until ten or eleven at least, so I was going to go inside, have a glass of wine and do some reading."

Her voice faltered, growing timid, and the tremors that shook the cup in her hands grew more insistent. "I heard something behind me," she said quietly. "A scuffling sound, like a shoe sole on the concrete, you know? So I started to turn..." She shuddered. "That's when I felt something go around my neck. It snapped tight, someone pulling it, and I stumbled around on my tiptoes. I could feel him behind

me...tall, strong...a man. I tried to scream, but I couldn't breathe. He was strangling me."

Her eyes swam with tears and she fell momentarily silent. Her husband caught her hand, pressing a tissue into her palm, and she nodded once, dabbing beneath the rim of her glasses.

"What happened next?" Officer Riggs asked.

"He pushed me down on the hood of the car," Abigail replied. She motioned once, a brief flip of her hand at the side of her face. "That's how this happened, I guess. He pushed me down hard. I was already starting to black out. I couldn't scream. I couldn't fight him. I couldn't breathe. I...I felt him pulling at my pants and I knew what he meant to do. God, it was horrible. Then I heard a car pull up the drive and saw lights underneath the bottom of the garage door. I heard a loud noise, and then the door started to rise." She glanced at her husband the way actresses in old, silent movies would stare at Rudolph Valentino, with a mixture of love and adulation. "Robbie was home early."

"I ate something that didn't agree with me," Robbie Nelson interjected with a sheepish shrug as he patted the swell of his belly. "Double sausage pizza with green peppers and onions...always hits me wrong. So I figured I go home and pollute my own toilet, rather than my pal's."

"Hey, we've all been there," Pierson said with an amiable chuckle.

"The man ran away," Abigail said. "Just like that, whatever was around my neck was gone, and so was he. I didn't see where he went. I fell onto the floor, choking."

"I saw someone duck out of the garage, just a dark figure running," Robbie said. "I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I saw Abby on the ground, holding her neck with her hands. By the time I jumped out of the car, the son of a bitch was gone, high-tailing it across our back yard and into the woods."

They had found footprints consistent with those at the crime scene all along a ragged path through a thin tangle of



underbrush and trees dividing the Nelson's subdivision from another adjacent one. The trail had gone cold; the woods abutted a cul-de-sac drive, and Paul had sent officers out on foot door-to-door, canvassing the neighborhood, looking for any witnesses who might have seen an unfamiliar car, or a stranger running around in the night.

"I didn't see his face," Abigail said again, rather helplessly, and this time, she looked directly at Paul as she spoke.

"Me, either," Robbie said. "Like she said, it all happened so fast."

"That's alright," Paul said, putting on a smile he hoped looked vaguely sincere. "We've been able to collect some good physical evidence from the crime scene."

It wasn't a complete lie. They'd found the footprints, which was about as close to physical evidence as they had ever come. So far, crime scene technicians hadn't been able to find any discernable hairs, fiber or fingerprints, much less semen, saliva or blood.

"What does this guy do, wrap himself from head to fucking toe in latex?" Pierson had recently complained, and despite Paul's customary urge to drive his knuckles squarely into Pierson's face if only to shut him up, he had been inclined to agree with the sentiment. Their guy had always been meticulous to the point of anal-retentiveness. Gloves every time without fail. According to autopsy results, whatever he used as a garrote was smooth enough not to leave any trace fibers embedded in his victims' skin, as would happen with a rope or nylon stocking. The medical examiner had speculated that he shaved or waxed, because they never found pubic samples, or any other hairs for that matter, that might have brushed loose from his arms, chest or legs during a struggle with his victims. Traces of spermicidal lubricant indicated that he always used condoms during his sexual assaults, even though he killed the victims in the aftermath.

"So you'll find him, right?" Robbie Nelson asked, holding his wife's hand as he looked up at Paul. "I've watched

*C.S.I.* on TV. That's all you need, right? Good physical evidence. You can catch this guy now, right?"

As if it wasn't bad enough that the fucking *C.S.I.* craze had flooded every Tom-Dick-and-Marcy community college criminal justice program in the country with police-officer-wannabes, Paul had grown to discover that now the general population typically had the mistaken notion that every crime could now be solved in a time span of sixty minutes, and all thanks to one loose hair, or a stray splatter of bodily fluid.

His phone rang again and he struggled not to grimace. "We'll do our best, Mr. Nelson," he said, ignoring the vibrations against his chest. "You have my word on that."

"I mean, is it even safe for me to take Abby home?" Robbie said. "You said this guy has been watching us—watching her. You think if I hadn't come home early like I did, he would have killed her?"

"Not right away," Pierson said before Paul could open his mouth. "He figured you were going to be gone at least a couple more hours. He probably would've kept her around in the meanwhile, taking his time."

At this, Abigail Nelson looked decidedly ashen, Valium or not. Paul closed his hand firmly against Pierson's elbow, drawing the other man's gaze. "Out in the hall," Paul said in a near-undertone, his brows furrowed deeply. "You. Me. Right now."

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Paul stepped outside the hospital, ducking through the automatic doors off the emergency ward, meaning to call his wife back. He walked past a group of women clustered around an ash can and faltered briefly, caught by the smell of cigarette smoke in the breeze as surely as if he'd just been nabbed by the scruff of his jacket.

"I want you back at the office manning the tip line," he'd told Dan Pierson in the corridor outside of Abigail Nelson's hospital room.

Pierson had blinked at this, seeming genuinely surprised. "What? Why?"

“Because you have a big fucking mouth, Pierson,” Paul had replied. “And I think it would be best served on the receiving end of a telephone.”

“Are you kidding me?” Pierson had said, and when Paul tried to walk away, he’d grabbed him by the jacket sleeve. “Are you pulling my dick, Frances? I’ve got five years’ seniority on any one of these jokers you’ve got here and you’re sending me back to play Miss Susie-Goddamn Secretary?”

“Tell it to the lieutenant,” Paul had growled, jerking his arm loose and marching away. “I call that line and your ass isn’t on the other end in thirty minutes, Pierson, I’ll have you written up.”

That was when the urge for a cigarette had really starting scratching around inside his brain. He’d quit three months earlier, just two weeks shy of being handed the largest assignment he’d ever received, the biggest responsibility he’d known to date on the force—one with *promotion* written all over it if he could pull it off and *unemployment line* all over it if he blew it.

The Watcher case. It had once been a simple investigation into a string of murders that had occurred over a two-year period, all bearing a striking resemblance to one another. Then the media had caught wind of it and come up with the killer’s nickname and from there, the case had swelled to three-ring circus proportions. It had also become a veritable thorn in the side of the police department, a public relations nightmare as city officials and the public both simultaneously demanded the killer be caught, and all the while lambasted the police for trying to keep the matter under the radar for so long.

Paul wound up being in the right place at the right time—or the wrong one, depending on your point of view. Shortly after his transfer to homicide, he’d caught the attention of his senior-most commanding officer with a methodical but lengthy investigation that had resulted in the arrest and ultimate conviction of a pedophile who had murdered a young boy. As a result, he’d been appointed to lead a task force investigating the Watcher, destined to either be the department’s Golden Boy or its sacrificial lamb. He hadn’t

quite decided which yet. And he'd regretted that he'd quit smoking ever since.

Sometimes—like right now, he discovered—he yearned for a smoke so badly, his fingertips itched for it, reaching subconsciously for his right blazer pocket, where he'd once kept his rumpled pack and Bic lighter stashed. He considered asking one of the ladies if he could bum a cigarette, but forced himself to reach instead for his inner coat pocket, the packet of tough, flavorless nicotine gum he kept stowed for emergencies.

It was cold, and he'd put on his overcoat and gloves. He fumbled with the foil-lined gum package and popped a square into his mouth. He bit down into it until he felt the tingling sensation of nicotine against his tongue, scratching the back of his throat, and then held the gum unchewed against his cheek. It was a poor goddamn substitute, that was for sure, and as he reached for his cell phone, he deliberately turned his head again so he could snort some more secondhand smoke from the air.

“Detective Frances?”

Paul glanced over his shoulder, surprised by the beckon, and bewildered to see it was not one of his officers who had called to him. Instead, a woman with a short, smartly styled brunette bob and a sheepskin-trimmed winter coat marched toward him, trailed by a young man trundling an armload of supplies. Most noticeable among these was a large video camera he held balanced against one shoulder.

The ubiquitous local news crew. *Terrific*, Paul thought.

“Detective Frances? I'm Shelley Fields with Channel Six News,” the woman said, offering her gloved hand in greeting. She needn't have bothered, however; Paul knew who she was, and she knew that he did. She'd cornered him before, usually at least once a week, and was certainly no stranger to him.

“I remember you, Shelley,” he said, accepting her hand out of courtesy. Shelley Fields was a cougar; a veteran beat reporter who had never found her way into an anchor seat, and now had to contend with rivals half her age, fresh-faced and

just out of college. Pretty, petite and slender, she could shake hands with the formidable grip of a man three times again her size. He wouldn't have been at all surprised to peek beneath the hem of her skirt and find a set of balls cupped in the crotch of her panties. "What brings you out and about today?"

"I had an interesting tip that the Watcher struck again," she said, looking up at him, her expression unamused, as if to say, *You know exactly why I'm here, so cut the bullshit.* "And that the victim got away. Did you just finish interviewing her?"

"You know I can't comment on any ongoing investigations, Shelley."

"I was hoping I could get a couple of official statements for our six o'clock broadcast," she said. Dealing with the local news could sometimes be like a well-orchestrated dance. He had opened with a maneuver, and she'd countered. *Tête-à-tête.*

"I'm just here visiting a sick aunt," he said, holding his hands up in mock surrender.

"Is it true the victim's husband came home and scared the Watcher off?"

He chuckled, shaking his head as he turned to go back into the hospital. "You're going to have to go downtown and talk to the public affairs officer on duty. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go and call my wife."

"Oh, come on, Detective." He heard the rapid-fire *clip-clap-clop* of her high-heeled shoes against the salted pavement as she scurried after him. Her small-but-manly hand fell against his sleeve, closing hard enough to give him pause. "You're in charge of this investigation, the lead detective on the Watcher task force. Some public affairs officer isn't going to be able to tell me jack shit, and you know it."

She put on her best poor-pitiful-me look. "I'm not asking for a scoop," she said. "You think the Willowgate subdivision where the victim lives isn't crawling with news vans and camera crews even as we speak? Have you looked out the front door of this hospital? You've got a shanty-town out there in the parking lot—every station in the tri-state area has

set up shop. I'm just asking for a couple of comments. Something so my boss will get off my ass and let me go inside out of this godforsaken cold. Cut me a break, will you?"

She knew him well enough to know he was married, so she never tried the sex ploys others might have, like purposefully brushing her breasts against him, wearing her blouse unbuttoned just so or her skirt hiked high enough to tantalize. Shelley Fields went for the jugular by going for the heartstrings. No cop could resist a damsel in distress.

"Alright," he said with a sigh, and she broke out in a broad, delighted grin. His phone call to Vicki would have to wait.

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"I can neither confirm nor deny the victim's identity at this time," Paul said, the light from the nearby camera a blinding glare in the corner of his left eye against which he struggled not to squint.

"But it was the Watcher who attacked her last night?" Shelley pressed. He wasn't giving her what she'd wanted—a scoop, despite her protests to the contrary—but he'd give her enough to make a sound bite or two for the evening news, and some bragging rights in front of her rival reporters.

"I can neither confirm nor deny that, either, at this time," he said. "I can tell you that she was attacked in her home in a manner that was consistent with what we have come to expect from the Watcher, but that her assailant fled the scene while the victim was still alive."

"He was chased away by the victim's husband, wasn't he?" Shelley asked.

"The assailant fled the scene while the victim was still alive," Paul said again, keeping his voice calm and level, his smile warm, despite the mounting aggravation he saw flashing in Shelley's eyes. She wanted a T-bone; he was giving her scraps to go on. "The circumstances are still under active investigation. Of course, we're still actively investigating the hundreds of leads that have come into our anonymous tip line."

I encourage those who might have seen anything suspicious, who might have information that can help us, to call.”

Every time he mentioned the tip line on the air, they’d see a spike in calls; everything from folks speculating about the creepy, reclusive neighbor at the end of their block to their second cousin-in-law who had once driven through a victim’s subdivision. Anything even remotely viable had to be documented and investigated. *That ought to keep Pierson hopping for awhile*, he thought with a smirk.

He wasn’t about to tell Miss Nosy Newshound, but the fact that Abigail Nelson had survived—that the Watcher had been scared off by her husband’s unexpected early return worried him. *Because he wouldn’t have gone home to lick his wounds and forget about it*, Paul thought. *Not my guy*.

As part of the task force investigation, the city had funded the services of a nationally noted criminal profiler, psychiatrist Dr. Nathan Long, who had prepared a lengthy dossier of the killer early on in the case. Long had theorized that the Watcher reveled in the power he had over his victims both before and during his assaults. Like a lion on an African meadow stalking a herd of wildebeests, the Watcher took his time, analyzing each of his victims, learning their routines, exploiting their weaknesses. Pierson might have been an asshole, but he had been right—the Watcher had attacked Abigail anticipating hours alone with her, leaving her murder for the very last possible moment. In other cases, the Watcher had kept his victims alive in excess of five hours by their best estimations, assaulting them repeatedly before finally strangling them to death.

“He keeps a stable of women—all potential victims—under close eye whenever possible,” Dr. Long had reported. “He probably has at least two, if not more, within a five block radius of each other, to make watching them all easier.”

Abigail Nelson’s survival had insured someone else’s misfortune, of that Paul was fairly certain.

*Because he wouldn’t have stopped. He would have found another one. It might have been a bigger risk, but he would have done it. He would*

*have been desperate, frantic even. And God help whoever he got his hands on in the meantime. He probably tore her to pieces.*

That, more than anything, concerned him. *Because it means I've got another body out there somewhere, waiting to be found.*

His cell phone started thrumming again as Shelley drew her index finger under her throat in a cutting gesture, and the cameraman turned off the glaring spotlight. "Excuse me, please," Paul said to them, just as Shelley opened her mouth and drew breath to press him again, this time off camera, still hungry for her steak.

He turned around and walked away, leaving her breath frosted in the air as he flipped open the phone. "Somebody'd better have cut off a finger or set the goddamn house on fire."

"Paul, I've been trying to call you for—" his wife Vicki began.

"Yeah, I've noticed," he cut in. "I'm sorry I couldn't get to you right away. I've sort of had my hands full with a victim interview and a crime scene—like I told you I would when I left the house last night."

He felt like shit the moment the words were out of his mouth, and closed his eyes, wishing like hell he had a cigarette. He wasn't as aggravated about the phone calls as he simply was exhausted, running on the last little metabolic fumes that had been keeping his internal combustion running. He'd been right earlier; Vicki *did* know not to call him while he was working unless it was something important. She was neither a stupid woman, nor his emotional punching bag, but there he was, treating her like both. *Par for the course these days*, he thought.

"I'm sorry," he said with a heavy sigh, as he forked his fingers through his thinning hair. "I didn't mean that. It's just...it's been a long night, and even longer morning and I—"

"Are you finished?" Vicki asked at length, her voice clipped.

He sighed wearily. Yeah, a Camel Light would have hit the fucking spot right about then. "No. I'll probably be at Metro General, the scene or the office until late tonight. When I wrap up here, I've got to—"



“Because if you are,” she interjected coolly, “you might like to know that Marie has been calling. She’s very upset and is frantic for you to call her.”

Paul opened his eyes. Marie Frasier was his younger brother’s housekeeper, a matronly sort whom he had never seen anything less than cool, calm and collected. “Frantic?”

“Yes, Paul. She wants you to call right away. She said something’s wrong with Jay.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“That’s the bitch about growing old,” Bill Frances had complained to his youngest son, Jay, less than three months before he had died. His wife, Jay’s mother Dolores, hadn’t preceded him to the grave by more than a year, and Jay had always suspected that it had been a broken heart, not cancer, to which his father had finally succumbed.

“You don’t feel it here,” Bill had told Jay with a conspiratorial wink, tapping his forefinger against his brow. He then swept his hand downward, fingers spread, indicating the length of his tall, sinewy frame. “You feel it here. And all over. And every goddamn day.”

At this, his voice had dissolved into a heavy series of sodden coughs, trademarks of the lung cancer from which he suffered. Bill had always been a heavy smoker; a pack of Marlboro kings in the front pocket of his chambray work shirt was as familiar a sight to Jay growing up as his father perched on the seat of his tractor, rumbling along through the cornfields surrounding their house.

When Jay roused groggily from some deep crevice of dreamless sleep, his father’s words came inexplicably but appropriately to mind. At thirty-four, he was not an old man, but as his mind slowly emerged from unconsciousness, as he became more and more aware of his body, he realized he *felt* like an old man, like his father must have at seventy-four, arthritic and cancer-ridden, aching and stiff from head to toe.

His eyelids fluttered open and he found himself looking up at the shadow-draped ceiling of his bedroom. The

room was dark, blackness broken only by the pale, blue-white glow of nearby streetlights filtering through the windows and splaying against the walls. He could see the ceiling fan turning overhead; more than this, he could feel it, the soft press of its steady, gentle breeze against his face.

He hurt all over. His throat felt parched, his mouth tacky, his tongue leaden, as if he'd fallen asleep with a wool sock stuffed between his cheeks. His eyes felt dry and sticky and he closed them with a groan, feeling the pounding rhythm of his pulse throbbing behind his temples. His entire body—every muscle and joint—felt taut and sore, as stiff as if he'd been lying on a bed made of nothing but two-by-fours for at least a week.

He lifted his hand slowly, the motion coming clumsily to him. He pawed at his face, pushing his hair back from his brow and pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. *What happened?* he thought. *Feels like one of the all-time great hangovers here. What the hell have I done to myself?*

He didn't remember drinking. He wasn't much of a drinker by nature, maybe a beer or two here and there, but never anything to cause such misery. *Not since college anyway.*

He sat up slightly, propping himself on his elbows, and groaned as a disturbing wave of vertigo swept over him. When it passed, he saw his older brother camped at his bedside, sitting in a chair from the dining room with his head leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed.

*What's Paul doing here?* Jay thought, bewildered. For a moment, he had a weird sense of *déjà vu* taking him eerily back to when he had first roused in the hospital from his coma years earlier. He'd come to feeling similarly disoriented and sore, with Paul beside him, asleep in a chair.

Then he remembered vaguely, something dim and distant, like out of a dream. *I was at the mall, the toy store...on my way out to my car when my hands started to tingle...*

*Oh, Christ.*

He remembered the girl sprawled on the floor of the service closet, her throat ringed in bruises, her eyes half-

opened. He remembered the sight of her, the smell of her, the inescapable pull of her and he realized.

*It happened again. Oh, Christ, it happened again.*

He sat up, swinging his legs around until his feet hit the floor. His motions were slow and pained, like an old man's would have been, and he grimaced as he sat up at last, perched on the side of the mattress. He closed his eyes as another wave of vertigo swept over him, this time accompanied by a definite roiling in his gut.

"Paul," he said, but his voice was little more than a hoarse, strained groan, barely above a whisper. "Paul, I...I don't think I can..."

The nausea suddenly became immediate and alarming, and he clapped his hand to his mouth, forcing himself to stagger to his feet. He stumbled to the bathroom, his clumsy legs barely able to support his weight, and he crumpled in front of the toilet, clutching the rim of the bowl just as his stomach heaved and he retched up a mouthful of bile.

Again and again, he vomited, until his poor, wretched gut was twisted in an unyielding knot, and all he could do was huddle against the bathroom floor, naked and shivering, gasping for breath. When the light came on, flooding the stark white tiles and porcelain fixtures with brilliant, unbearable glare, he shrank even further into a cowering ball, drawing his hands helplessly toward his face.

"Turn it off," he croaked.

He heard the click of the switch and then darkness, blessed and cool, folded down around him again. He heard his brother's footsteps on the floor, the snapping creak of his knees as he squatted beside Jay, and the immediately reassuring strength of Paul's arm draped around his shoulders.

"Hey, kid," Paul said. "How are you doing?"

"Been better," Jay whispered. When Paul pulled gently, Jay didn't protest. He slumped against the shelter of Paul's chest and shuddered there, still struggling to catch his breath. "It...it happened...again."

"I know," Paul said, stroking Jay's hair. He pressed his cheek to the crown of Jay's head and held him.

"I couldn't stop it." Jay's eyes swam with sudden, unbidden tears, and though he struggled to contain them, he couldn't. He began to weep, choking himself for breath all over again. "I...I tried, Paul, but I...I just couldn't...!"

"It's alright," Paul said, holding him fiercely. "I'm here, kid. Everything's alright now."

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Jay stood beneath the shower head, his eyes closed as he felt water droplets pound a stinging rhythm against the cap of his skull. He kept one hand against the wall of the stall to steady himself; he still felt vaguely dizzy, his legs leaden and weak, and the last thing he wanted—much less needed—was to take a header in the tub.

Steam circled around him, enveloping the narrow confines of the bathroom in a thick, murky fog. He opened his eyes and watched water streaming from his face, down the contours of his brow and nose, spattering from his lips, the disheveled, sopping mess of his hair, pooling at his feet.

Marie had taken Emma to Paul's house shortly after Paul's arrival. Jay had been dismayed to learn he had slept the better part of twenty-four hours. *I've never slept that long before*, he thought, watching water swirl and burble down the holes of the chrome drain.

"Marie thinks you're having some kind of relapse with your head injury," Paul had told him. "Some kind of delayed brain damage to your impulse control or something, that you went out last night and picked up a prostitute."

"What?" Jay had groaned aloud at this. *Christ. Terrific.* "What did you tell her?"

"I told her not to worry. You'd probably just gotten drunk, found the girl in a bar," Paul had replied, making him groan again. "What the hell was I supposed to say? She wanted to call your doctor. I had to think of something."

Jay had clapped his hands to his face, forking his fingers through his hair. “Christ.”

The girl was long gone and Jay had no idea who she was, much less how to ever track her down. “She was all of the way back,” he’d told his brother as they’d sat together on the side of the bed. Paul had brought him a mug of coffee, and while the dark, steaming brew had smelled wonderful, Jay had done little more than let it warm his palms.

Paul had blinked at him in surprise at this. “What?”

Jay had nodded. “She sat here, on the side of the bed, just like this, crying. And when I reached for her, she jumped up and ran away. She told me not to touch her.”

“She *spoke* to you?” Paul had asked, incredulous. He’d pressed Jay to remember more, what had happened, how he had found the girl, but for the moment, it remained locked away inside of Jay’s skull, forgotten to him.

And yet, he did remember some things clearly; not who she was or how he’d brought her home, but of the woman lying in bed beside him, a bed that was not his own, her mane of curls tumbled about her head against glossy dark sheets, her mouth spread in a broad, beautiful smile.

He remembered chocolate-colored sheets—which he didn’t own—and the milky contrast of her pale skin, her narrow shoulders bare against them. He remembered the drape of the silk against her lean, long form, outlining her breasts, the slender indentation of her waist, the twin lengths of her thighs. He’d been able to see the imprints of her nipples, hard points outlined clearly against the sheets, and realized she was naked beneath the folds.

In that moment, he had wanted to shove aside the sheets and draw her slim, nude form against him; to meld himself against her, belly to belly, cradle her breasts in his hands, taste the buds of her nipples against his tongue. He had wanted to feel those long thighs coil about his middle and take her, fill her in one deep stroke, making love to her for hours—for eternity, even. He’d wanted her powerfully and poignantly, like nothing else he had ever known.

*Like it was something right. Like it was meant to be.*

Jay blinked down at the bathtub drain, a slight shudder snapping him from the reverie. He realized the hazy recollection—memories of her deathscape, her own personal and unique perception of the afterlife—had affected something more than his mind. Though neither full nor large enough yet to be uncomfortable, he was still officially sporting wood, and he switched the shower faucets promptly over to cold. He sucked in a hissing breath at the sudden spray of frigid, sobering water, forcing himself to stand there and endure it as his burgeoning erection withered away. He hadn't been with anyone since Lucy had died; had never even found himself remotely attracted, and yet there he stood, growing hard at the thought of a woman he didn't even know.

Lucy had worked as a legal assistant for a prominent firm in the city up until Emma's birth, and then they had been able to afford for her to stay home with the baby. He hadn't realized what a sacrifice this had truly been to her; the job had been something she loved, and had surrendered only begrudgingly, because she'd loved Emma more.

Lucy had been lonely and unhappy, but he'd never seen it. He realized now—too late in retrospect—that she'd tried countless times to tell him. She'd even broached the subject of taking over his office, using it to start her own home-based consulting business.

"Why?" he'd asked her, at a genuine loss. He made good money in his work for the city. It sometimes meant long days, but his father had been a farmer; there had been many times in his childhood that hadn't seen Bill Frances for days, because he'd be out before dawn and home again well after dark, when Jay had been put to bed. Hard work and long hours were the price a man paid to provide for his family. That had been Bill Frances' philosophy, one he'd instilled in both Jay and Paul, his sons. Jay and Lucy had agreed from the start it would be worth it in the end, for Emma and for them, if she stayed home and he'd be the primary bread-winner. At least he thought they had agreed.

After Lucy's death, he'd faced a long and grueling road to recovery. He'd hit his head in the crash; not enough to cause permanent brain damage, but he'd still struggled through years of physical, occupational and speech therapy before he'd begun to assume any semblance of his life before the accident. It was during this time that he'd found her personal laptop. He'd also found emails; lengthy correspondences that had been exchanged for more than a year before her death that had cut him to the core.

*Jay doesn't understand me anymore,* Lucy had lamented in one. *And sometimes, I don't think I understand him, either.*

But she had found someone with whom she had shared a mutual understanding—Michael Dabney, a junior partner at the law firm where she'd once been employed. She'd written these words in an email to him, one of hundreds she had saved.

*I can't wait to make love to you again,* Lucy had written to Michael. *To feel your hands and mouth against my skin, to feel you inside of me.*

She had gone into detail, her private thoughts and recollections of the encounter, of how Michael Dabney had brought her to multiple orgasms; how he had touched her, explored her, tasted her. How she had liked it.

There had been a strain on Jay's relationship with Lucy that he'd realized by that point, although he'd no earthly idea just how badly things had deteriorated between them. The "date night" on which she'd died had been her idea and he'd thought that she'd meant to try and reconnect with him.

Lucy, however, apparently had other ideas. *I'm going to leave him,* she'd written to Michael. *Tonight's the night. I'm going to ask Jay for a divorce.*

He'd never met Michael Dabney, not formally anyway. Six months after the accident and only several weeks after finding Lucy's emails, Jay had gone back to the scene of the accident. He'd been absorbed in a deep depression that was rooted in shame and rage, both of which had come from the discovery of his wife's infidelity. No one had known this,



though. Not even Paul, who had driven Jay to the crash site that day.

He'd waited for Jay in the car while Jay had made his way toward a makeshift memorial, a white wooden cross overlaid with a circlet of brightly colored silk flowers that her parents had erected shortly after the funeral. *In Loving Memory*, they'd painted on the crossbeam in big, bright red letters, above a laminated photograph, a headshot of Lucy wide-eyed and smiling.

Jay had leaned heavily against the walker he'd needed at the time to aid his stilted gait and moved slowly, clumsily along, feeling all the while like a feeble and decrepit old man. Comatose for the funeral, he'd never been to Lucy's grave. Because of his ability, he'd been unable to risk a visit to the cemetery, so he had hoped to find some kind of peace at the memorial site, something like closure, anything to lessen his anger toward her. He'd noticed another car parked along the shoulder of the highway and a man standing nearby upon his arrival, but hadn't realized what he was doing, who he surely must have been, until he drew closer.

He'd turned toward Jay, a tall, handsome African American in a crisply pressed camel trench coat with dark slacks beneath and glossy black shoes. In that moment, Jay had known, even as the man had turned away, walking briskly back toward his car.

"Michael Dabney!" Jay had shouted after him, so seized with fury, he'd been shaking, his fingers coiled tightly about the handles of his walker. His wretched goddamn infirmity had been the only thing that had prevented him from taking off after Dabney and pummeling him. "I know who you are! Turn around and face me, you son of a bitch! Turn around and look at me!"

His voice had scraped up raw, anguished octaves. He'd stumbled, his uncertain footing failing him, and he'd crumpled to his knees, his walker toppling over. Even as Paul had come loping up the hill from the car to help him, he'd continued screaming. "I know who you are, Michael Dabney! Look at me! Look at me, you son of a bitch—*look at what you've done to me!*"

Because he wouldn't have been out that night, wouldn't have been in the wreck, wouldn't have lost his strength, his health, his wife—hell, his *life* if it hadn't been for Michael Dabney. It had taken him years to get over that fury, that deep-seeded and festering hatred. And in many ways, he never had.

*You thought it was meant to be with Lucy, too, and look what happened, he told himself in the shower. Look what happened to you. You're only just now getting your life back together, back to anything resembling normal. Get your head out of the clouds, Jay...and out of your ass while you're at it.*

## CHAPTER SIX

Jay and Paul had discovered his ability to resurrect the dead many long years earlier. Jay had been six, and Paul had been twelve, and Jay remembered like it was yesterday the day that school had been canceled after more than a foot of snow had dropped on Barnham, Kansas overnight.

Paul's friend, a boy from a neighboring farm with the rather unfortunate name of Danny Thomas, had trekked over to play. Jay remembered clearly that the delight at this prospect had abruptly died in Paul's face when their mother had told him to take his younger brother along, too.

"But...but Mom..." Paul had sputtered in protest, standing in the middle of the kitchen and staring in abject aghast.

Dolores Frances had been elbow-deep in a soap-sud-filled sink, while their dog, an aging German Shepherd named Bowzer, had sat nearby, thumping its heavy tail against the floor, waiting for her to give it the last of the breakfast scraps. "You heard me, Paul," Dolores had said, sparing a no-nonsense glance over her shoulder. "No 'but-Mom.' Bundle Jay up good and take him with you."

"Why can't Jay go out and help Dad in the barns?" Paul had whined, hands on hips.

Dolores had turned around fully, mimicking her son's posture to much more stern effect. "Because he's either going to be outside playing with you and Danny, or he's going to be down here with me, coloring while you spend the day in your

room and Danny goes home.” She turned around again, the matter closed.

“Well, now what are we supposed to do?” Danny had complained, as he and Paul had tromped abreast of one another—both keeping deliberately ahead of Jay—across the side yard.

“I want you to tell me if they don’t let you play with them, okay?” Dolores had told Jay before he’d walked out the door. She’d squatted in front of him, tugging against the edge of his stocking cap to secure it around his ears. “And if they start getting rough, you come and get me. Paul knows better. You’re smaller than he is.”

“I don’t know,” Paul had replied, sparing a backwards glower as Jay had plodded along behind, carefully hopping in broad strides to keep within his older brother’s footprints in the snow.

“We could play zoo keeper,” Jay suggested. In his mind—then, as now—Paul could do no wrong.

*I bet you’d say your brother shits Chanel No. 5 if someone asked you,* Lucy had teased him once.

*That would be you, Lu,* he’d replied with a straight face that had made her burst out laughing. *Paul shits gold, remember?*

“You can’t play zoo keeper in the snow,” Danny had said.

“Sure you can,” Jay replied.

“No, you can’t. It’s too cold. Zoo animals don’t go out in the snow, stupid.”

Paul had slapped Danny across the arm, pretty much hanging the moon in Jay’s estimation. “Shut up, Danny. Don’t call him stupid.”

“Let’s play Indian scout,” Danny said.

“No,” Paul said.

“Why not? Come on. We can be Indians and Jay can be the cowboy.”

“No, Danny.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Danny said, and Paul had socked him again.

“What’s a pussy?” Jay asked Paul as his brother slowed down to wait for him. Danny ran on ahead, ducking between slats in the fence and heading for the nearby woods to set up for the Indian scout game.

“Nothing,” Paul replied, tugging on Jay’s scarf to keep it close to his mouth and nose. “And don’t go repeating that around Mom, either, or you’ll see both of us whipped.” He knelt so that he and Jay were eye-to-eye. “Look, why don’t you just go on home, okay? You don’t want to play Indian scout.”

“Sure I do.”

“It’s a stupid game. You won’t like it.”

“Sure I will. What do I do?”

Paul sighed heavily, glancing over his shoulder once. Danny was gone, having disappeared among the spindly oaks and evergreens of the woods. “You stand here and count to twenty after I follow Danny into the trees. Then you come and try to find us. That’s all. You’re a cowboy and me and Danny are Indian scouts. We’re supposed to be hiding from you.”

“What happens when I find you?” Jay asked, all adulating eyes on Paul.

“If/you find us,” Paul replied, rising to his feet, “you get to throw snowballs at us. You ready, then? Okay. Start counting then, all the way to twenty.”

Jay did as he’d been told, and once he reached twenty, he started out, wading through the snow, following his brother’s footsteps. It wasn’t a very good game, he’d thought at the time, considering he could see from the snow exactly in which direction Paul had headed. But he was happy to be included, that Paul had agreed to let him play, so he went along with it.

He’d followed Paul’s footprints in and among the trees until at last he reached a small clearing. To his utter puzzlement, the footprints disappeared abruptly in the middle. He could see snow swept all about, like someone had brushed

at it with their hands to cover the tracks, but no more than this.

“Paul?” he called out, turning in a hesitant semi-circle. He didn’t like the woods. He didn’t mind playing in them as long as his daddy or Paul was with him, but the idea of being alone among the trees was immediately alarming to him. His father had told him there were coyotes in the woods, and maybe worse than this—mountain lions. Daddy and Paul would go hunting together sometimes in the woods, and Paul had told him once they’d seen a mountain lion there, way deep in the trees, near the outermost edge of the farm.

“Paul?” he called again, his voice unsteady. “Danny? Are you there?”

He thought he heard a faint sound, like a snicker, and spun about. Nothing. It began to occur to him that the “game” of Indian scout wasn’t a game at all, but a mean trick Danny and Paul had played to see him lost in the woods so they could go off together and do something else, unencumbered. His eyes flooded with tears. “Paul?” he called again. “Paul, I’m telling. Mommy said to tell if you didn’t let me play with you!”

He turned around to follow the footprints back to the fence line. “I’m telling!” he cried again, and that’s when the first snowball smacked him squarely in the center of his back. The impact sent him teetering forward, his hands pinwheeling in the open air for balance. He felt another heavy hit between his shoulders, and then another against his buttocks, each accompanied by a loud, sodden *whap!*

He started to spin about, but a barrage of sudden, rapid-fire snowballs struck his belly and legs, and he floundered, crying out in frightened surprise. Snow spattered up, stinging his face, and he lost his footing, pitching backwards onto his ass. More snowballs rained down, this time hitting him in the head, and he yowled, drawing his hands up to protect his face. Too late. A hard-packed wad about the size of a baseball whipped against his cheek with enough force to snap his head toward his opposite shoulder and leave a bright red, stinging spot. Another caught him in the ear, spraying

snow down the back of his parka collar, and he heard Paul shouting from somewhere nearby.

“That’s enough, damn it! I told you not to hit him in the head! Danny, stop it!”

The bombardment of snowballs ceased, and Jay huddled against the ground, his breath hitching, his nose clogged with snot and snow, his eyes swimming with tears. A humiliated, wounded mewl escaped him and then he began to cry, loud and open-mouthed in outrage and pain.

*“I’m telling!”*

“Jay!” he heard Paul exclaim, his boots scrabbling in the snow. Paul knelt in front of him, grasping him by the shoulders. “Jay, are you alright?” He looked over his shoulder at the trees. “Danny, you asshole!” he yelled. “I told you not in the head!”

“I...I’m telling...!” Jay said, blinking against his tears as Paul cupped his cheeks between his hands.

“Let me see,” he murmured, tilting Jay’s head slightly so he could see the fading red weal where the snowball had struck his cheek. He dusted his mitten against the side of Jay’s hat, sending more snow that had been clinging to the wool down the collar of Jay’s coat.

“Muh-Mommy said I get to play with you,” Jay whimpered. “She...she said...”

“I told you how to play the game,” Paul said. “I told you to throw snowballs at us.”

“You...you cheated!” Jay insisted, fresh, fat tears welling. “You cheated, and I...I’m telling...!”

“Come on, stop it now,” Paul said, pulling Jay against his shoulder and giving him a fierce hug. “I’m sorry, Jay. I’m sorry.” He leaned back, cradling Jay’s face again, his blue eyes round and remorseful. “Look, if you tell Mom, we’ll both have to spend the rest of the day in our rooms.”

“I don’t care! You cheated!”

Paul's shoulders hunched. "Okay, fine. I cheated," he said. "I'll make it up to you, okay? If you promise not to tell."

Jay sniffled. "How?"

Paul looked momentarily thoughtful. "I don't know."

"How about I get to read your *Spiderman* comics?" Jay asked, and Paul's expression darkened. "Please, Paul? I'd be really, really careful with them. Extra especially careful."

The *Spiderman* comic books—two years' worth—were Paul's most prized possessions. He saved up his allowance to buy them each month, and kept each stowed neatly away, arranged chronologically in a large cardboard box in his closet when he was finished with them.

"Please?" Jay said and Paul glanced over his shoulder, as if wondering what the hell was keeping Danny, and wishing his friend would hurry up and rescue him from the dilemma he'd just found for himself.

"Aww, come on, Jay..." he began.

"Please?" Jay asked, with prolonged and particular emphasis on the *eee* sound. "Please, Paul? I won't spill anything on them. I won't wrinkle or fold them. And I won't say anything to Mommy. I promise."

His hands were itching, but in his excitement because of the prospect of reading Paul's *Spiderman* books, he had only just now noticed. He rubbed his mittens together, and realized more than just itching, the flesh of his palms, his fingertips had begun to crawl, a steady, mounting, tingling sensation that suddenly slid up into his wrists, creeping like dim, uncomfortable heat toward his elbows.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

"My hands hurt," Jay replied, bewildered, staring at his damp mittens.

"Nothing hit your hands," Paul said, sounding irritable now. He looked over his shoulder again. "The game's over!" he called out. "Come on, Danny. Come out of there. Let's go home!"



Jay followed his gaze across the clearing as Paul rose to his feet. He uttered an aggravated sigh and tromped through the snow toward the trees. Jay stumbled upright and followed him, not as much out of any curiosity to see what was keeping Danny, but because all at once, that felt like what he was *supposed* to do, as if he was being called silently but insistently.

It was a strange, unfamiliar and altogether spooky sensation, one that left Jay feeling somewhat dazed and distracted—so much so, that when Paul drew to an abrupt halt in front of him, his breath cutting off sharply in a hiss, Jay plowed headlong and face-first into the back of his brother's coat.

"Danny...!" Paul gasped, his arm shooting out to stay Jay, even though Jay had made no move to go around him. "Danny, are...are you okay?"

Danny Thomas lay on his back in the snow. There were no footprints around him, and the indentation was deep enough, even Jay realized what had happened. The boy had fallen out of a tree. He might have been playing, just pulling some elaborate but harmless trick, except for the fact that his eyes were open, fixed and unblinking at the tree crowns overhead, and twin trickles of blood, each no wider across than Jay's little finger, snaked out of Danny's left nostril and ear, staining the snow beneath his head.

"Oh, Jesus," Paul whispered, his body gone as rigid as a piece of statuary. He stumbled forward and dropped clumsily to his knees in the snow beside his friend. "Danny? Danny, can you hear me?"

But Danny couldn't hear him. Jay knew it, just as he knew Paul understood, too. They both realized what had happened. They both knew.

"I think he's dead," Paul hiccupped. He bit the tip of his mitten between his teeth and jerked his hand loose, fumbling beneath the edge of Danny's scarf at his throat. "I think...I think he's dead...oh, fuck me, Jay, I think he's dead."

The burning, throbbing sensation had migrated up from Jay's hands to his shoulders, and now spread through his

chest, tightening between his ribs, constricting the air from him. He wanted to run, to wheel about and flee back to the farmhouse, but couldn't move. He was helpless to move, and remained there, rooted in spot, his eyes enormous and glued to Danny Thomas' dead body.

"Go get Dad," Paul said, his hands fluttering helplessly over Danny, flapping in the air. He looked over at his brother, his pale cheeks stained with twin patches of bright, frightened color. "Don't just stand there gawking, Jay! For Christ's sake, go get Dad!"

But Jay hadn't gone back to the farm. He'd stumbled forward, still feeling somehow strangely detached not only from the situation but from himself, and that he moved of someone or something else's volition, not his own. He knelt beside Paul in the snow, and for a long moment, both of them simply stared down at the dead boy.

"Dad will know what to do," Paul whispered, nodding over and over again, as Jay reached involuntarily for his mittens, slipping them off of his hands. He felt oblivious to the cold; his fingers and palms, in fact, felt infused with incredible, impossible heat.

"Dad will know what to do," Paul said again. "Dad will know." He drove his elbow mightily into Jay's side, but Jay didn't look at him. "I told you to go get Dad. You have to go, Jay. We can't leave him here like this. You...you have to..."

"It's alright," Jay said, his voice coming from miles away to his own perception, and sounding alien to him, deeper and calmer and more grown up somehow than any six-year-old kid's had a right to seem. He said this as he reached out, his bare, burning hands outstretched, and draped his fingers lightly to frame Danny's face.

"It's alright," he said again, and then the light swallowed him whole.

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He didn't remember much of what happened next, but years later, Paul had told him it had felt like a nuclear bomb had detonated in the clearing among the trees. The force had

thrown Paul backwards, kicking up a maelstrom of snow, leaves, sticks and pine cones, hurtling them in every which direction. The light had been bright enough to leave both brothers seeing spots against a backdrop of dazzled darkness for nearly five minutes after its passage.

The next thing that Jay even vaguely recalled was the sound of Danny Thomas' voice, a peculiar, hoarse cawing sound that whistled through a slight part in his lips. Paul scrambled on his hands and knees over to Jay's side and the two of them stared down at Danny in matching, disheveled states of stupefied shock.

"Danny?" Paul had whispered, his voice tremulous. "Danny, can you hear me?"

But Danny hadn't answered. He'd blinked up at them with absolutely no hint of recognition apparent in his face, or any other emotion for that matter. He'd been like an oversized doll, turning his head slightly back and forth, opening and closing his mouth just enough to allow for that strange, scraping sound to escape.

Jay turned the water off in the shower and stood for a long moment as it dripped from the contours of his body, splattering loudly against the floor of the tub. Danny Thomas had never uttered another word to another living soul. He had been alive in the technical sense of the word—his body had been functioning normally, in prime and perfect health, in fact, but his mind had been another matter.

*In his mind, he'd still been dead,* Jay thought, shivering.

He pulled aside the curtain and stepped out of the tub, using a towel to swat at his sopping hair. Danny's family had believed the boy suffered some kind of irreparable brain damage when he'd fallen out of the tree. To Jay's knowledge, he had been sent away to some kind of convalescent hospital where he had spent the next few years, fed through one tube in his navel, peeing through another in his dick. His family had finally ordered the tubes, bags and machines all disconnected, and eventually, Danny had been allowed to die.

Again.

*At least that was something like mercy*, Jay thought, as he wrapped the towel around his waist and padded back into his bedroom. *Not like poor Eileen, whose family won't let her go. Not even now, after all of these years...*

But he didn't want to think about Eileen.

He sat down on the bed and pulled on a pair of jeans. When he reached for a T-shirt in a crumpled pile on the floor beside the bed, he caught sight of something just beneath the bottom edge of his nightstand. With a curious frown, he pulled it out—some kind of laminated identification card with a metal clip at the top. He turned it over against his hand and jerked in surprise to find the young woman's face—the dead woman from the parking garage—looking back at him.

Her face was as beautiful as he remembered, her delicate, elfin features highlighted by that broad, infectious grin and framed by an unruly tumble of dark russet curls that had been drawn back into a bun or ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her hazel eyes pierced out from the small, closely cropped photograph, pinning him, leaving him breathless.

*Jobeth Montgomery, R.N.*, the nametag read, the words printed in large, boldface type beneath the bright blue logo for Metropolitan General Hospital.

*Jobeth Montgomery*. He remembered that when he'd roused dimly to find her weeping beside him in the bed, she had dressed, and was holding her heavy winter coat in her arms. *This must have fallen out of her pocket*, he thought.

He touched the woman in the photograph for a quiet, lingering moment, then he pulled on his T-shirt and walked down the hall toward the kitchen, tucking the card into his pocket. Something that smelled marvelous wafted from that general direction to greet him, the bold scent of strong coffee mixed with something mouthwatering that involved melted butter. He could hear it popping and sizzling as he approached. He could also hear his brother's voice; Paul speaking quietly but sharply to someone on his cell phone.

“...I don’t know what to tell you, Vic. It’s either going to be late tonight or early tomorrow, and since it’s already after ten, I’m going to go with the morning as the safest bet.”

Jay drew to an uncertain halt steps away from the kitchen doorway. He could see his brother’s shadow moving back and forth, pacing briskly, restlessly against the linoleum floor.

“I know what I promised you about weekends,” Paul said at length with a heavy sigh. “Yes, Vic, I know, but this is hardly... Look, I’m sorry about that. Yes, I know.”

Another prolonged, tense silence, and another sigh from Paul. “Alright, then. Yeah, fine. I said yeah, Vicki, I hear you, for Christ’s sake. Yeah.”

Jay heard the audible snap as Paul closed his phone, and jumped in surprise at the unexpected clatter as it smacked to the floor and skittered out into the hallway in front of him. Paul came out to retrieve it less than a full breath later, and blinked in surprise at Jay.

“Hey,” he said, the severity unknitting immediately from his brows, the stress dissolving in his face. “I didn’t hear you coming this way.”

“Vicki’s pissed because of me,” Jay said, hunching his shoulders unhappily.

Paul glanced at the phone in his hand. “What? No. No, that...? That had nothing to do with you. Trust me, kid, I piss her off just fine all on my own.”

He dropped Jay a wink and draped his arm across his shoulders. “Come on, sit down. I’ve got coffee going, and some eggs almost done. Bacon’s in the microwave.” Another quick wink. “Cholesterol be damned.”

“I didn’t know you could cook,” Jay said as he sat down at the breakfast bar, a cut-away window between the kitchen and living room, and watched with raised brows, dutifully impressed, as Paul scraped fluffy yellow eggs from a skillet onto a nearby plate.

“Don’t be too impressed,” Paul replied. “This is as good as I get unless it comes in a can.”

He presented Jay with a plate of toast, scrambled eggs and bacon, and returned to the counter to pour them each a cup of coffee. “Plus, I didn’t want to go rooting around too much in your kitchen,” he added. “Thought Marie would kick my ass and all if I went messing up her system.”

Jay laughed, accepting the coffee. Paul had offered him a mug earlier, but it remained untouched at his bedside. His appetite had restored along with some of his strength, however, and he was unable to resist. He took a sip, wincing as he scalded his lip.

“It’s hot,” Paul pointed out helpfully.

“Yeah, thank you for that.” Jay flipped him off affectionately. “I’m sorry about Vicki getting pissed. You didn’t have to come.”

Paul flapped his hand dismissively. “I wasn’t about to have Marie call the paramedics on you or anything.” He laughed. “Besides, I told you—Vicki’s mad at me all on my own. Nothing to do with you. I fucked up her weekend plans. First a crime scene, now this. She’s been home with the girls and M.K.’s throwing some kind of fit. Somehow, it’s all my fault.”

Jay popped a forkful of egg into his mouth and closed his eyes, momentarily savoring. Sometimes when he awoke after a resurrection, it felt as if he hadn’t eaten in years, as if every bite of food was his first ever.

“Anything else come back to you yet?” Paul asked. “Anything you remember?”

Jay opened his eyes, the wondrous, buttery flavor of the eggs suddenly curdling against his tongue as images of the girl—Jobeth Montgomery, R.N.—lying dead on the floor of the garage service closet flashed through his mind. He forced himself to swallow, to wash it down with another blistering sip of coffee. “I don’t know.”

Paul didn’t say anything, but he kept his gaze fixed patiently, almost gently on his younger brother. It was a rather

effective interrogation technique, Jay realized, after a few moments of this unbroken, not-unkind scrutiny. "I was at the mall," he said at length. "Getting something...a present for Emma..."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes, struggling to remember.

"Christmas present?" Paul asked, his words echoing the store clerk's in K-B Toys. Jay opened his eyes, his breath caught in a startled gasp as a sudden flood of memories fell into place in his mind.

"No," he murmured. "Birthday. A birthday present. I bought her an iDog."

*What happened to it?* he wondered, because he had no idea, no recollection of anything past the point of the bright light, when he had touched Jobeth Montgomery and raised her from the dead.

"A what?" Paul frowned.

"An iDog. It's this little robot you hook up to an MP3 player. It dances as you play music and...never mind." He could see that he'd lost Paul at the word *robot*. "I was on my way out to my car inside the garage when I felt it in my hands," he said. "This sensation...almost like heat..."

He told Paul the rest, his voice quiet, his gaze distant as within his mind, he lived through all of it again, the horrifying moment of realization, of what the tingling in his hands meant, and the even more horrifying moment in which he had discovered the young woman's strangled body.

"She'd been raped, I think," he said. "Her pants were pulled down, anyway. I don't...I can't remember how I got here...why I brought her with me."

He shuddered to think about carrying her from the closet back to his car, and then somehow driving home in the zombie-like state that always possessed him following a resurrection. He had no memory of any of that, not even fragmented moments. *Jesus Christ.*

“Did you see anyone else?” Paul asked, the odd tone of his voice drawing Jay’s gaze. A strange expression had come over Paul’s face; his brows had narrowed slightly, the corners of his mouth turning down somewhat, as if he’d tasted something bitter, and for some reason, had kept it with him, rolling it around against his tongue. “Was there anyone else in the service closet when you went inside?”

“No.” Jay shook his head. “Not that I remember, anyway. Why?”

He must have looked worried, alarmed enough by Paul’s expression for it to reflect in his voice, his face, because Paul smiled, softening visibly. “Nothing,” he said. “No reason. I mean, besides the obvious. Someone killed this girl. Just wanted to make sure he wasn’t still hanging around when you showed up.”

Jay nodded, not wholly convinced. *He’s not telling me something*, he thought, watching as Paul took a drink of coffee.

“Any idea who this girl is?” Paul asked, leaning forward and snagging a strip of bacon from Jay’s plate. He popped it in his mouth. “She leave anything behind? A purse or wallet or something?”

Jay thought of the laminated identification card on his bedside nightstand. *Jobeth Montgomery, R.N.* “No.” He shook his head again. “Not that I know of.”

Paul nodded, chewing thoughtfully. “Probably just as well, then,” he said, his voice somewhat mumbling around the bacon. He smiled broadly, but again, Jay wasn’t convinced.

*What’s going on, Paul?* he wondered. *What is it you’re not telling me?*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

“It’s just not like him. You know Jay, he hardly ever even drinks a beer ...”

Emma Frances sat at the threshold of her older cousin, Bethany’s room, her nose to a slight crack between the door and frame as she listened to Marie and Aunt Vicki talking together in the nearby kitchen. Emma was supposed to have been in bed asleep hours earlier, and wore a nightgown with Hannah Montana emblazoned on the front, her legs crossed beneath, Indian-style.

“...not like him at all,” Marie was saying. “Going out to bars until all hours, getting so drunk he sleeps the next day through, picking up trash like that. I wish you could have seen her. Vicki.”

Emma frowned, puzzled. She had seen the woman who had been in their home; she and Marie had been standing together on the front stoop when she had thrown open the door and burst outside. The woman had seemed as startled to see them as they had her, and somewhat frightened besides, but Emma didn’t know why Marie would call her “trash.” Emma had thought she was pretty.

“I’m telling you,” Marie continued. “No matter what Paul says, I think it’s from where Jay was hurt before—from the car wreck.”

*You’re wrong*, Emma thought. She’d wanted to tell Marie this all day, even though this was the first time she’d heard the older woman voice her suspicions aloud. She’d known Marie was thinking it anyway and she’d wanted to tell

her it wasn't true. *Dad wasn't out at a bar drinking. And it has nothing to do with the car crash.*

She didn't know how she knew this; she just did, just like she knew what Marie had been thinking all day without her saying a word. Just like she knew what had really happened to her father the night before. Sometimes Emma just knew things.

Usually it was only small stuff, like if Marie would lose her car keys, Emma would know where to find them or if there was going to be a fire drill at school, she'd put her coat on ahead of time. But sometimes it would be bigger things, too, that Emma wouldn't necessarily understand but would still know somehow, almost as if she could see inside people's minds.

Like she knew that Miss Taylor, her third-grade teacher, had talked to her dad last week about having her tested for attention deficit disorder during parent-teacher conferences. Emma had been across the room at the time, showing Marie the class' pet guinea pig, Clarence. Listening in on Miss Taylor and her father's conversation, as she had that night with Marie and Aunt Vicki, had been impossible, and yet somehow she'd known.

"Emma is an exceptionally bright girl," Miss Taylor had said. "Her work is always terrific, and her reading comprehension level is way above the other students. But she seems distracted a lot, and I'll catch her daydreaming. Getting her to participate in things is like pulling teeth most times. I think medication might help her to focus more, draw her out of her shell."

Miss Taylor also thought that Emma's dad was very handsome, even though she hadn't said anything aloud to this effect. She especially liked his eyes, how they were large and dark, and wondered if he kept them open or closed when he came during lovemaking. Not that Emma had any idea what *that* meant, but it had been in the back of Miss Taylor's mind during the parent-teacher conference, and Emma had known it.

She also knew what her father could do, what had happened with the red-headed woman they'd seen at the front door. She'd wanted to explain things to Marie, too, but knew there was no way she could. Not that would make any sense.

"I told Paul I thought we should call Dr. Thompson," Emma heard Marie say. Even though Marie's voice sounded sharp and irritable, Emma knew she wasn't mad. She was worried about Emma's father.

Marie had come to work for them shortly after the car crash in which Emma's mother had died. Her father had been hurt in the accident; for almost a year afterwards, he'd been unable to work. He'd had trouble talking, sometimes forgetting simple words like *telephone* or *car*, and he'd needed to use a walker to get around. He'd sold their house and a lot of their furniture, buying the brownstone in which they now lived. Then he'd hired Marie.

Before Marie's husband had died, he'd suffered several strokes. Emma wasn't exactly sure what that meant; Marie had explained once that it was like a part of his brain had come unplugged, sort of like what had happened to her father when he'd hit his head in the car accident. Only unlike Dad, Marie's husband had never gotten better. Marie had needed to help him get out of bed, brush his teeth, take his baths, eat his supper, put his clothes on, even go to the bathroom. That's why Emma's dad had hired her. Not because he'd needed that much help around the house, but he'd needed help nonetheless, and he'd appreciated the fact that Marie wouldn't look at him like he was an *invalid*. That was the word that Emma had sensed a lot from her father during that time. It was something she hadn't necessarily understood, and still didn't really, but her father had thought about it a lot and it had made him angry and sad all at the same time. *Invalid*.

"Emma?" Bethany's voice, sleepy and croaking from the bed, made Emma jump in start. "Em, what are you doing?"

"Nothing," Emma replied, looking over her shoulder, watching the older girl sit up, tucking her long, honey-colored hair back behind her ears.

“You’re supposed to be in bed,” Bethany said, pushing the covers back and rising to her feet. She shuffled toward the doorway, her hand outstretched expectantly. “Not eavesdropping on Mom and Marie. Come on.”

“I’m not eavesdropping,” Emma said. “It’s not my fault they’re talking loud enough for me to hear.” She let Bethany pull her up and lead her back to the bed. It was only a twin-sized mattress, but she was eight, and Bethany was a waifish teen, so it accommodated both of them comfortably...aside from the fact Emma wouldn’t stay put.

Bethany crawled into bed beside her, squirming to get comfortable. “You’re worried about your dad,” she said after a long moment, rolling over to face her cousin.

Emma was, but not for the reasons that Bethany thought.

*It takes a lot out of Dad, what he can do, she thought. That’s why he has to sleep for so long. He’s weak now and his body has to heal.*

“He’ll be okay, Em,” Bethany said. “My dad’s over there with him. Sometimes grown ups just do stupid stuff like drink too much. That’s all. It makes them sick. Like my mom last year for Fourth of July. She spent almost the whole weekend hanging over the toilet. But she was fine after that.” She rolled over, presenting her back to Emma. “You’ll see.”

Emma lay in the darkness as her cousin drifted off, her body relaxing beneath the covers, her breaths growing long and deep in rhythm. When she felt certain that Bethany had lapsed back to sleep, she slipped out from beneath the blankets and stole back to her spot by the door. She sat on the floor at the threshold peeked through the narrow opening into the hallway. The light was still on in the kitchen, and she could once again hear Aunt Vicki and Marie talking.

“...like that all of the time,” Aunt Vicki was saying, her voice weary and unhappy. “Like everything is a battle and no matter what I say or do, it isn’t right or good enough. And she’s only fifteen! If I have to put up with this until she’s off to college, I might as well give up now.”

They had changed subjects, then, and were now talking about M.K. She'd made a scene at the dinner table earlier that night. Aunt Vicki had made pot roast for supper, and M.K. had refused to touch any of the meal.

"I keep telling you and Dad—I'm a *vegetarian* now," she'd said. Bethany had explained later to Emma that this meant M.K. had decided not to eat meat anymore, a concept Emma had found foreign and altogether weird.

"Then just eat the vegetables, M.K.," Aunt Vicki had replied, sounding tired and irritable.

"You cooked them in with the meat," M.K. had protested. "They've been swimming in beef fat for hours, Mother! Please! You may as well have injected them with all of the saturated fat and growth hormones that they give the cows! I'd rather starve!"

"She's a teenager," Emma heard Marie say, her tone soothing. "There isn't a parent of one alive who hasn't gone through the exact same things, or felt the same way as you."

Vicki uttered a quiet snort of laughter. "That doesn't help," she said. Then, with all kidding in her tone aside: "And neither does Paul working all the time. He's never home anymore, and when he is, it's usually just to shower and shave, maybe catch a nap before running out the door again. I feel like I see him more on the television than I do in this house. I'm all alone here and everything's on me."

Uncle Paul had been on the TV news that very evening. Emma had been excited to see him, even though Marie had made her watch from across the room, where she couldn't really hear what he was saying. "It's police stuff, and I don't want you to get scared listening to it," she'd told Emma. Marie had a habit of treating Emma like a baby. Sometimes Emma didn't mind, like when she'd come home from school and find that Marie had baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies just for her snack, or that Marie had folded all of her clothes and put them away so that she wouldn't have to. But other times, it aggravated her, like when she was around M.K. and Bethany and the last thing she wanted to be thought of as was a stupid little kid.

Bethany had told her later that Uncle Paul had been talking about a big case he was working on with the police department, something Bethany had called a *cereal killer*. Though she'd explained that this meant someone who had killed a bunch of people, Emma had still been left to wonder what that had to do with breakfast food.

Bethany and M.K. hadn't been scared or upset by whatever Uncle Paul had been saying about killers on the TV. In fact, they'd both come running when Marie had called it out in announcement. Everyone had been excited except for Aunt Vicki, and to Emma, she'd seemed nearly mad about the whole thing.

Emma heard a strange hiccupping sound, followed by a loud snuffle, and the scraping of chair legs against the kitchen floor. "Oh, honey..." Marie murmured. "Come here."

Aunt Vicki was crying, Emma realized with a start. It always disturbed her when grown ups cried because it seemed like something they weren't supposed to do. That just like sleeping with a nightlight on, at some point, you were supposed to outgrow crying, that things just quit hurting when you got older.

Emma sat up until Aunt Vicki left the kitchen to go to bed some time later. She shied back from the doorway as Vicki went down the hall, and listened to the quiet *click* of her bedroom door closing. Marie would sleep in the den on a pull-out sofa bed. Vicki had insisted on trading places with her, but Marie had been equally insistent that Vicki remain in her own room, her own bed. Ordinarily, Marie didn't spend the night at all. She had her own house across town that had belonged to her and her husband, and even though he'd been dead for more than ten years, Marie remained.

Emma's dad had offered to fix up the spare room for her at the brownstone, the one where he kept his drafting table and computer. His "office away from the office," as he called it. But Marie wouldn't accept the guestroom and live with them anymore than she'd accepted Vicki's bed over the hide-away couch, so when Emma tiptoed out of Bethany's room,

creeping on kitten's feet and wincing as the door creaked quietly, that's where she found her.

"What are you doing awake so late?" Marie asked, sitting propped up by pillows in the sofa bed. She'd put on her nightgown and some kind of lotion on her face that gave her skin a peculiar, glossy sheen in the lamplight. Her reading glasses were perched on the bridge of her nose and she was holding a paperback book in her hand, one of the cowboy romances she loved.

Emma shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

Marie scooted over, patting the bed beside her. "I was just getting ready to watch Jay Leno. Want to join me?"

Sometimes Marie treated her like a baby, but other times—like right now—she'd make Emma feel really grown up and special. Emma grinned, climbing up onto the thin, lumpy mattress. When the older woman wrapped her arm about her shoulders, she snuggled closely.

"Thanks, Marie."

Marie held up the remote control, turning on the TV. "You're welcome, Em." She leaned over and Emma smelled the cloyingly sweet fragrance of her facial cream as she pressed her lips to Emma's brow. "Your daddy is going to be just fine."

"I know," Emma whispered with a nod.

"Your Uncle Paul is there tonight, and then when we go home tomorrow, he'll be right as rain," Marie said. *And then I'm going to have a little talk with him so he never pulls this kind of stunt again.* She didn't say that last part out loud, and Emma didn't necessarily hear it, but it was what Marie was thinking beneath the surface. Emma knew it.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Hi, Mom,” Jo said. It was late on Saturday night, close to eleven o’clock, and she knew that her mother would be getting ready for bed, if not already there. She swirled the last mouthful of pinot grigio around in the basin of a wine glass, watching the play of light from the muted TV against its light-golden surface, and hoped she hadn’t roused her parents.

“Hi, Jo.” Rachel Montgomery sounded surprised, but not groggy like she’d been sleeping or anything. “Is everything alright?”

Rachel was historically the one who kept in touch between the two of them. It wasn’t that Jo deliberately avoided her family, but they lived five hours away, and ever since her divorce, she had drowned herself in work. When she wasn’t pulling back-to-back, dusk-to-dawn shifts at the hospital, she was crisscrossing the state, working as an independently contracted phlebotomist for a local laboratory. This left little time for social niceties, or chatting on a regular basis with her mother.

“Yeah, Mom,” Jo said, tilting her head back and draining the wine glass dry. “Everything’s fine.”

Everything wasn’t fine, however. Everything was about as far from *fine* as they could be, Jo had decided. She’s spent the better portion of her evening on her sofa, wearing a T-shirt and panties, downing a large bottle of cheap, tangy wine and getting progressively more and more drunk. It was



Jo's sincere hope that if she simply swallowed enough liquor, her mind would go numb and she would stop remembering.

"I just...I wanted to see if that invitation for Christmas dinner was still open," Jo said.

Her mother was quiet for a moment, clearly surprised. "Well, I...of course, it is, Jo," she said at length. "You're welcome here anytime. You know that. I thought you were working Christmas day."

"I am," Jo replied. "But only until seven that morning. I was thinking I could just leave from there and drive straight through...be at your house in time for Christmas dinner, at least."

She'd come home from retrieving her car and tried to take a nap. But her dreams had been dark and disturbing and she'd woken herself up sucking in a sharp breath to scream. All afternoon, her mind had played tricks on her, flashes of things so horrible darting through her head, she couldn't believe they were memories.

She'd dreamed of being choked into unconsciousness while shoved belly-first against the industrial sink in the mall's garage closet. She'd dreamed of a rough hand, a man's hand, jerking her pants down, and heard the sound of her panties tearing open at the force of his efforts. In her mind, she had recalled coming to dimly as whatever had been drawn taut about her throat, strangling her, had loosened, and in that foggy, bewildered moment, she'd been able to see the man behind her, silhouetted against the flashing staccato of the broken overhead light, reflected directly in her face in the hooked chrome faucet of the sink.

To her horror, she'd realized what he meant to do and somehow despite the garrote and her own waning consciousness, she had summoned the strength and will to fight him. She'd shoved herself back from the sink, forcing him into startled retreat. The moment he was away from her, Jo whirled, arms outstretched, fists flailing. She ran for the door, moving in what felt to her like slow-motion, every step jerky and clumsy in the pulsing fluorescent light. She tried to

shriek, but nothing came out but a scraping, shrill wheeze; her throat had been damaged, her voice all but crippled.

When the man's hands fell against her from behind, she crashed to the ground, pinned beneath his sudden, heavy weight. She remembered fighting, kicking her legs, trying desperately to drive her feet into his gut, his crotch. He'd leaned over her, still more silhouette and shadow than discernable form to her dazed, frightened mind, and had clamped his hands around her throat. Her breath immediately snuffed and she gagged for air, slapping and pawing at his fingers, struggling vainly to dislodge them.

She'd dreamed of shadows overtaking her then, the darkness sweeping down on her, swallowing her whole. That's when she'd woken up, sitting in her bed, her covers a tangled mess around her legs from where she'd thrashed about in her sleep. She'd tried to scream, but as she'd hitched in her breath, she'd realized where she was—*when* she was. She tried to tell herself it had all been in her imagination, but even now, almost a full bottle of wine later, she remained unconvinced.

"Jo?" Rachel said, interrupting her thoughts. "Are you sure everything is alright?"

*No, Mom, Jo thought against the sudden sting of tears. Everything is not alright. Something happened to me. Something horrible, Mom, and everything is not alright.*

She still didn't understand how the dark-haired man came into play, the man in whose bedroom she'd awoke. If what she'd dreamed about had really happened, then it seemed a logical assumption that this had been her assailant; that he'd simply choked her into unconsciousness again and then carried her home to continue his assault.

*And put me in his bed? Laid down beside me and went to sleep? No, there's something else. Something I haven't remembered. It wasn't him. I think he must have saved me somehow. I just don't know how yet.*

"Rich didn't try to contact you again, did he?"

"No, Mom," she said quietly, as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I...I just want to come home." She sniffled mightily,

moving the phone so her mother wouldn't hear, and rubbed the damp streak fervently away. "For the holidays, I mean. I didn't get to come last year, and I...I miss you. You and Dad, Melissa, Bill, the kids."

She sat on the couch for a long time after hanging up with her mother. Tears streamed down her face, awarding her a blurry view of the TV. She thumbed the mute button on her remote control to restore sound, swatting her hands against her cheeks and struggling to reclaim her composure.

"...neither confirm nor deny the victim's identity at this time," a police officer on the late news was saying during an interview.

"But it was the Watcher who attacked her last night?" the unseen reporter said.

The police officer just smiled. "I can neither confirm nor deny that, either, at this time," he said. "I can tell you that she was attacked in her home in a manner that was consistent with what we have come to expect from the Watcher, but that her assailant fled the scene while the victim was still alive."

The Watcher. Not a day went by when a story about the city's notorious serial killer wasn't plastered all over the front page of the newspaper, or screamed about on the evening news. Despite this, the police had remained very carefully tight-lipped about the entire matter, leaving the media to speculate sometimes rather wildly about how the investigation was progressing.

Jo touched her throat gingerly. *The Watcher*. She knew that victims of the Watcher were strangled to death and sexually assaulted. That much—though in no further detail—the police had conceded. But even though Jo had dreamed of a similar attack, she had no physical evidence to prove it had ever happened. There were no marks on her neck, no bruises or weals. There was no pain in her groin, as she would have expected had she been raped, no signs she could see like bruises or blood. And God knew she'd tried, balancing first on one foot and then the other in the narrow confines of her bathroom, trying to angle a hand-mirror between her legs to

examine herself. There simply wasn't a mark on her anywhere, no matter what her dreams suggested to the contrary.

*Like nothing ever happened, she thought. Except in my mind, I feel like it happened...like those weren't dreams at all, but memories of something real...something horrible. Something that really happened to me.*

She turned off the TV and sat alone in the living room, strangely, acutely aware of every sound in her little bungalow; creaks and rustling she'd never paid a moment's attention to before. She had checked and rechecked all of the windows and deadbolts at least a hundred times, making sure each was securely locked. Even before sunset, she'd turned on every light or lamp she owned, and now sat bathed in warm yellow glow from all sides.

*If something did happen to me, it was Rich, she thought. Not some spook on TV, some nameless, faceless psycho. It was Rich.*

Her assailant, if real, had been incredibly strong. And though Jo was a slight woman, she was also tall and relatively in shape. It would have been no easy task to overpower her. *But Rich could do it, she thought. Especially if he's using again, strung out on meth. He used to knock me to the floor with one punch when he was high.*

This realization—that her ex-husband could have done this to her somehow, despite his parole, and his so-called social worker friend, Daniel Porter's assertions that he'd gotten clean—left her eyes swimming with tears again. All of the restraining orders in the world hadn't been able to keep Rich away from her before he'd been busted. They obviously weren't a deterrent to him even now; her little visit from Daniel Porter had proven that. Rich still felt like he had some right to be part of her life. *And if I won't let him in, he'll force his way, she thought, clapping her hands over her face and uttering a low, miserable cry. One way or the other, he'll get me.*

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She woke on the couch the next morning, lying somewhat on her side and mostly on her face, her hair disheveled and tangled around her head. She groaned at the

crick in her neck, the stiffness in her back and the numbness in her left arm, which had been trapped beneath her belly, as she sat up, blinking stupidly at the darkened TV set across the room. Muted sunlight seeped through the blinds behind her.

*Anyone catch the license plate off that truck that bit me?* she thought blearily, pressing the heel of her hand against her throbbing, aching brow. She smacked her lips together and grimaced. *Not to mention the squirrel that apparently crapped in my mouth?*

Her dreams had been strange. If she'd revisited the terrifying closet at the mall garage in her sleep, she didn't remember. But again, the images that had filled her mind overnight felt more like memories now upon waking than anything she'd imagined. And again, none of it seemed possible.

*The light,* she thought, as she limped into the bathroom and stood in front of the sink. She looked at her reflection in the mirror, her haggard face, her mess of curls, the shadows beneath her eyes. *I dreamed about a light.*

She had escaped from the horrific attack into some wondrous dream in which she rested in an enormous bed. The mattress, dressed in chocolate-colored silk sheets, stretched out for endless miles in any direction, with no visible borders. Warmth seemed to radiate up through the bedclothes and mattress, seeping into her form, soothing her. Golden light spilled, aglow against the silk, from no apparent source she could see.

If Jo could have imagined heaven, this would have been it. She had been naked, but unafraid and unashamed, stretching languidly beneath the sheets, luxuriating in the soft, tickling smoothness of silk against her bare skin.

Her attack could not have been further from her mind. It had seemed to her some horrifying but distant distraction, and all she had to do to forget it completely was lie still and quietly in this magnificent bed, free from any cares or troubles.

A soft rustling had drawn her attention, and she opened her eyes to discover a man lying in the bed—the same man she would later wake up beside. The sheet lay swathed around his waist, and Jo could plainly see that he was naked, too. She admired the play of the mysterious golden light against the muscles stacked neatly at his stomach, the lean lines of his arms, the bridge between his shoulder and neck.

If she could have imagined a heaven, *this* would have been it.

“Well, hi,” she said, smiling at him. She felt warm and happy and sleepy in this place, so completely relaxed, she was nearly dazed.

He smiled, and the warm sensation within her only grew. “Hi, yourself.”

She rolled onto her side to face him and reached out, brushing his hair back from his face. She felt strangely, intensely attracted to the man; drawn to him, nearly bound somehow. She had never seen him before, and yet in that moment, as their eyes met, she felt as if she had known him her entire life, as if he knew every secret—every thought or wish or hope or desire—she’d ever held dear, even without her saying a word. It was a sensation so powerful and poignant, it left her dumbstruck and breathless.

“Come back with me,” he said, words that made no sense to her. She shook her head, pressed her hand against his cheek and sat up from the mattress. She felt no shame here, no inhibitions, nothing that might have prevented her from acting wholly on impulse, giving entirely into what she wanted or needed. She leaned toward the man, canting her head to kiss him.

“Not yet,” she whispered, and her lips settled against his, drawing his breath to a startled halt. He stiffened, as tense as a fence post beside her, his entire body going rigid with surprise, and when Jo’s lips parted slightly and the tip of her tongue prodded gently, curiously against his, he drew back, his dark eyes wide.

She kissed him again, deeply this time, and after a moment's uncertain hesitation, she felt him relax. His hands tangling in her hair, drawing her firmly against him. He eased her back, settling atop her, shoving aside the blankets between them to caress her body, running his hands from her breasts to her waist and down from there, cradling her hips. Jo opened her legs, parting her thighs to envelop him. She could feel his arousal, the hot, hardening length of him pressing against her inner thigh. She could feel his need in the mounting urgency of his mouth against hers.

He began to kiss her throat, his lips drawing hungrily across her skin. Jo closed her eyes, turning her head to allow him full access, and closed her fingers in his hair to guide him. His hand fell again to her breast, his fingers pressing in firm circles, tracing against her nipples, sending shivers of delight racing through her.

He let his mouth take the place of his hand, his lips working their way from her throat to each of her nipples. The tip of his tongue danced against the sensitive buds, causing Jo to gasp for breath and clutch at his shoulders. His hand slipped further down, sliding between her legs and he began to move his fingertips, exploring her and Jo's voice escaped in a soft moan.

He moved slowly at first, caressing and teasing, but then quickened his pace, sliding between her slick folds, driving her to the brink of explosive pleasure with his hand. When his fingers abruptly drew away, it left Jo shuddering with need, whimpering for him.

"I...I can't do this," he said, his voice a shaky whisper. She felt his body stiffen with uncertainty against her as he started to pull away and she caught him, holding him still. "I just...I can't..."

"Please," she said, looking into his eyes, cutting off his stammered protest. There it was again, that intense, nearly overwhelming sense of familiarity, the feeling that she knew him, that what they were about to do was more than right—it was meant to be. "Please don't stop."

The apprehension in his eyes softened. He could feel it, too. She knew he could and she raised her head to kiss him again. "Please," she breathed against his mouth and he shifted his weight, entering her, sliding easily into her warmth.

He marked a strident rhythm inside of her, clasping her hips in his hands and lifting her from the mattress to meet each deep, pounding thrust. Within moments, her body easily succumbed and she hooked her fingernails into the tangled sheets as she climaxed. Again and again, she came; it felt as though they made love for hours, frenzied, passionate, sweat-soaked and exhausting.

When at last, he finished, he crumpled against her, gasping for breath. They lay together for a long moment, trembling and silent. *This is heaven*, Jo thought in the dream. *This has to be heaven. Nothing else could be like this.*

When at last he raised his head, propping himself on his arms, Jo looked up at him. He smiled at her, weary and breathless, and brushed wayward strands of hair back from her face.

"I love you," she said as she touched his face, tracing the curve of his mouth tenderly with her fingertips. Where in the hell *that* had come from, she had no idea, but it had felt so right to her—even now, it felt logical and real and utterly, poignantly honest. Somehow, she had known him, and he had known her, and it had been more than just sex. *I love you.*

He leaned toward her, letting his lips brush her mouth. "Please," he whispered. "Come back with me."

At that point, she'd come to, lying on her couch, her body an aching mess of knotted tendons and stiff muscles. She turned on the cold faucet in the bathroom sink and cupped her hands beneath the flow, splashing her face to startle the last vestiges of grogginess from her mind. *Just a dream*, she told herself, staring at her reflection again, watching water stream in rivulets down from her forehead and brow, beading in her eyelashes. *That's all it was—all of it. Just a dream. I'm not losing my mind.*



The phone rang, and she jumped, crying out softly in start. She grabbed a hand towel and blotted at her face with it as she crossed from the bathroom to the living room. She leaned over the arm of her couch and caught the corded phone just before the answering machine kicked in.

“Hello?” she said, clearing her throat once at the scraping, hoarse sound of her voice.

“Jo? Hey, it’s Shannon over at Syntac. I wanted to see if you were available for a couple of draws this afternoon.”

She was still somewhat distracted with thoughts of her dream, and it took a moment for the words to sink in. Syntac was the lab for which she did intermittent phlebotomy work. “Afternoon?” she asked with a glance at the digital time display on the telephone. *10:45 a.m.* She’d slept the night through and then some. *God.* “Uh, I don’t know, Shannon. I just...this isn’t really a good time.”

*There was the understatement of the year. But what am I supposed to say? I think someone might have tried to kill me last night, Shannon. I also think I fucked the guy who saved me, only I don’t know for sure because I can’t really remember and everything keeps coming back to me in dreams.’*

“I really need you, Jo,” Shannon said. “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t an emergency. I’ve had some call-ins, so we’re short staffed and...”

The work would be good for her, Jo told herself, as she copied down the assignments onto a small pad of notepaper. A necessary and welcome distraction from what had proven to be a bizarre weekend. “Alright,” she said wearily. “I’ll take them.”

She’d always thrown herself into her work whenever faced with stress; during the bad years with Rich, she’d pulled as many twelve-hour shifts at the hospital as she could find, and following the divorce and later, his arrest, she’d taken on even more, adding the phlebotomy gigs on the side, as well.

She hung up the phone and went straight for the shower. She had several patients slated, and the last two—scheduled for lunch time—were about an hour’s drive

away, at a convalescent facility called Respite House in the city's outermost suburbs. While it wouldn't take her long to get ready, she needed to go by the lab office first to collect her kit and the necessary paperwork, plus it would take her car a good fifteen minutes to heat up. The battery might have been working fine, but the heating core was on a slow but steady downward decline. Jo only hoped the Datsun made it through to the spring. A huge repair bill was the last thing she needed or could afford.

She stood under the steaming spray and closed her eyes, feeling water pounding against her head and shoulders. *It will be good to get out of this house for awhile*, she told herself as she reached for the soap. *To escape for awhile...forget about things.*

She tried not to notice as she rubbed lather against her breasts and belly that there was still not a mark on her, no sign whatsoever of anything ever having happened at all.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jo stopped by the Syntac Lab headquarters to check out a field kit and grab the paperwork for her day's assignments. She also paused long enough to swing by the staff room and grab a cup of coffee, carefully measuring out a generous allotment of powdered creamer into a tall Styrofoam cup before adding the dark, steaming brew. The smell was heavenly and when she'd finished stirring it all to a murky, café-au-lait color, she couldn't resist taking a quick sip before slapping a plastic lid on it.

And burned the hell out of her mouth.

"Shit!" She sucked in a hissing breath through her teeth, the tip of her tongue darting reflexively against the scalded middle of her upper lip.

"Are you alright, Jo?"

She'd been in the process of setting the cup down on the counter top when the quiet voice startled her. She turned, eyes wide, coffee slopping over the edge and spattering against the floor. "Oh!"

"I'm sorry," said the young man standing behind her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"That...that's alright, Nathan," she said, even as her heart still shuddered in a wild cadence and her voice hiccupped. She grabbed some napkins off the nearest counter and squatted, mopping up the mess she'd made. "I didn't hear you come in, that's all."

Nathan Gambit worked at the hospital with her, as well as at Syntac. He was a certified nurse's aide, and to Jo's knowledge, she was about the only person he'd ever speak to in more than hesitant mumbles. He was a tall boy in his early twenties, with a doughy but not quite overweight build, stringy dark hair that seemed perpetually oily and speckled with dandruff, and the sort of face only a mother could love. He had small, dark eyes deeply set, like raisins pushed down into bread dough. His nose was large and bulbous, an oddly misshapen landmark on an otherwise unremarkable and homely face, unless one took into account the acne that marred his pasty cheeks and chin with bright red, bumpy splotches.

*Lurch.* That's what Charles and some of the other nurses called Nathan at the hospital, as in the gangly, monotone butler on *The Addams Family*. Even though Jo had always scolded them for it—because she felt an irrepressible sympathy for the poor kid—she had to admit, the nickname wasn't entirely inaccurate. Nathan tended to skulk about, tending quietly to his duties and keeping to himself. He lived at home with his widowed mother, and seemed to have no discernable hobbies or outside interests in his life besides work. Patients didn't seem to mind him, but that was primarily because he worked the graveyard shift and most of them slept through any interactions. Nathan Gambit didn't speak much to anyone.

Except for Jo. Nathan would follow her like a puppy, telling her about this, that or the other, hanging around her cart at the hospital, purposely trading with other aides on duty so he could be assigned to the same corridors as Jo. He'd take his meal breaks when she did, or volunteer to come in on days when he wasn't scheduled and she was, just to help her out. He'd been the one to tell her about Syntac, and despite her better judgment, she'd applied for a phlebotomy post. She'd needed the extra money.

She didn't know what she'd done to merit such esteem in Nathan's regard, but she'd always found his obvious adulation somewhat cute. "He just has a crush, that's all," she'd told Charles once, making him frown.

“He’s a fucking weirdo,” he’d said. When she’d protested, his frown had only deepened. “He’s a creep, Jo. Would you trust me on this? He’s everywhere you go these days. Haven’t you noticed? You can’t take a piss around here without him nosing at the bathroom door. You keep on and the next thing you know, he’s going to be following you home, sitting outside your house in the dark and jerking off while he peeps through your blinds.”

Jo had laughed off Charles’ concerns at the time. But now, in the staff lounge at Syntac Lab, as she knelt on the floor, sopping napkins in hand, and looked up at Nathan Gambit, Charles’ words rang inside her mind.

“You just got rid of one stalker with Rich,” he’d told her. “Jesus, do you really want another one?”

“Here,” Nathan said, taking some napkins from a lunch table. “I can help...”

“No, that’s alright,” Jo said, her voice high and anxious. She managed a shaky laugh and flapped her hand. “I...I’ve got it, Nathan. Thanks anyway.”

She rose and went to the trash can, standing with her back to him as she threw away the napkins.

*He’s everywhere you go these days. Haven’t you noticed?*

“So they called you in, too?” Nathan asked. He’d come to stand by the coffee machine, and mopped up what she’d spilled on the counter. “I told them to try you. Shannon said they had three people out today with the flu.”

“Yeah,” Jo said. “Thanks, I guess...for the recommendation.”

He was standing directly in front of her cup of coffee, and didn’t seem to be going anywhere anytime soon, which meant she couldn’t grab it and run.

*The next thing you know, he’s going to be following you home, sitting outside your house in the dark and jerking off while he peeps through your blinds...*

Nathan turned, smiling, and she noticed a crusted spot on his bottom lip, the early stages of a healing wound. *Like*

*someone busted him in the mouth*, she thought, remembering in the dream that hadn't felt like a dream how she had struggled against her assailant in the service closet of the garage; how she'd run for the door, swinging her fists wildly, striking at him, trying to keep him away.

*You just got rid of one stalker with Rich. Jesus, do you really want another one?*

Nathan noticed her attention and his smile faltered. He reached up, brushing his fingertips against his mouth. "Oh, I...I slipped on the ice last night," he said, as if she'd asked. "On the steps in front of my mom's house. Got this and some banged up ribs, but nothing broken, I don't think."

Jo found herself edging back away from him, toward the table where she'd set aside her lab kit and clipboard. "Well, that's lucky," she said, her mouth feeling shot full of Novocain all at once. Her tongue felt tacky, like she'd been sucking on a gym sock, and suddenly, she was acutely aware of the frightened banging of her heart deep behind her eardrums. All she could think about was being forced belly-down against the sink in the garage closet, the hands jerking her scrub pants down, tearing at her panties. She found herself staring at Nathan's hands, his thick, clumsy fingers, his nails bitten back to painfully short length.

"I have to go," she said, her voice coming from miles away as she reached out blindly for the handle of her kit.

"Where are they sending you today?"

"Oh..." She tucked her clipboard hurriedly under her arm and hefted the lab supplies. "You know. Around. Here and there."

"Me, too," he said. "You working tomorrow night on the floor?" When she nodded, he smiled. "So am I. We can pull the same corridor again."

"Great," Jo said, managing what felt to her like an enormous, plastic smile. She turned and walked quickly from the room, not even glancing over her shoulder as the door shut behind her.

She rushed out to her car and sat behind the wheel, the engine idling, her ailing heater taking its own damn sweet time in warming up. She clutched the steering wheel with gloved hands and shivered as she struggled to compose herself. Her mind was flooded with horrific images—the silhouette of her attacker reflected in the rust-pocked chrome of the sink fixtures; her struggle for breath against whatever had been drawn about her neck.

*Oh, God, she thought. Just a dream. It was just a dream. Please God, it was just a—*

When someone rapped loudly against her window, almost directly in her ear, she shrieked out loud in surprise, jerking back as if the steering wheel had burned her. To her absolute horror, she found Nathan Gambit outside her window, his fist raised to the glass, and it took her a long, shuddering moment before she was able to roll the window down a margin.

“I’m sorry,” he said, tilting his face up as if he meant to press his mouth against the narrow space. “I didn’t mean to frighten you again.”

*He’s everywhere you go these days. Haven’t you noticed?*

“What is it, Nathan? What do you want?”

He held up a Styrofoam cup. “Your coffee. You left it in the lounge.”

“Oh,” Jo said, making no move to open the window farther.

“You want it?”

She thought about turning it down, but then imagined him sitting in his own car and thinking of her while he slurped it down. She pictured him reaching between his legs as he sat in the parking lot, of masturbating to thoughts of her while he drank her coffee and felt bile rise in a sour knot in her throat.

“Yeah,” she croaked, rolling the window down. She took the cup from him and hurriedly cranked the glass back up. “Thanks.”

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked, catching her window by hooking his fingers against the edge to stay it. “You don’t look so good, Jo. Maybe you’re coming down with the flu, too. They say it’s going around.”

“Yeah.” She put the car in gear and backed up, forcing him to jerk his hand away and dance back from the car. “Maybe so.”

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When she arrived at Respite House, the first thing she did was use the phone at the main nurse’s station to call Charles on his cell phone. It took him forever to pick up the line; she was about to hang up when at last, he answered.

“Hello?” he said, winded and somewhat hoarse. Jo closed her eyes, wincing. It was his weekend off, and Gina’s, too. She’d forgotten all about it. *And butted in while they were going at it, from the sounds of things. Terrific.*

“Hey, sorry,” she said. “I’m interrupting, aren’t I?”

“Not anymore, no,” he replied. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s just...I’m out doing lab draws today...”

“Did your car die again?”

“No, nothing like that. You’re charge nurse on the floor tomorrow night, right?”

“Your boss for a grand total of twelve sparkling hours? Yup. That would be me. Why? You calling in?”

“No,” she said. “I...I need you to do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Keep Nathan Gambit away from me. Assign him to another corridor.”

“Lurch? Why?” Now the good cheer had dissolved in Charles’ voice, and she didn’t miss the dark, angry edge. “What did the little fuck do?”



“Nothing. He didn’t do anything, Charles, it’s just...”  
She paused, licking her lips, sparing a careful glance over the nurse’s desk. “I’m taking your advice, that’s all.”

“For once.”

She laughed. “Yeah, for once. I think you’re right and I need to avoid him. But I can’t do that if he pulls assignments with me. That’s where you come in.”

“No problem,” Charles said. “I’ll put the jerk-off right at the nurse’s station with me, how about that? He won’t breathe unless I give him the go-ahead.”

Jo smiled, feeling as if he had just removed a leaden yoke from her shoulders. “Thanks, Charles. You’re my hero.”

“As always,” he reminded her pointedly as he hung up the phone.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Are you going to see your friend again soon, Dad?”

Jay and his daughter, Emma, sat at the living room side of the breakfast bar eating pancakes while Marie tended the skillet in the kitchen. The housekeeper hadn’t said more than a few polite words to Jay since returning to the brownstone from Paul’s house, but Jay knew that was a courtesy for Emma’s benefit only. Marie was pissed off, thinking he’d gone off on some kind of drunk binge with a hooker—or worse, that he was suffering from some kind of latent brain damage—and he winced to consider that as soon as she could get him alone, the older woman would likely lay into him but good.

He looked at Emma in surprise. “My friend?” he asked, although he knew exactly to whom she was referring. Jobeth Montgomery’s beautiful face, those elfin features and the broad expanse of her smile, perfectly captured on her hospital identification card, danced through his mind.

Emma nodded, washing down a mouthful of pancakes with a gulp of milk. Bethany or M.K. had painted her fingernails during her overnight stay, and they stood out in hot pink, glitter-speckled contrast against her cup. “I thought she was pretty.”

He didn’t miss the withering glance Marie shot over her shoulder from across the kitchen. Clearly, this was not something she agreed with. She made a soft, *harrumph*-ing sound in her throat, but returned her attention to the skillet and said nothing.

“I think so, too, Em,” Jay admitted.

“What’s her name?” Emma asked and when he told her, she smiled. “Jobeth. I like that.”

“So do I.” He had, in fact, been unable to stop thinking about Jobeth Montgomery. His dreams the night before had been haunted by her; startling, vivid images of making love to her, exploring her body with his mouth and hands, driving himself into her, feeling her long legs wrap about his midriff, her lithe, lean body writhing and undulating beneath him. He felt inexplicably as if he knew this woman somehow, every curve and line of her body, with the kind of comfortable familiarity that came with years spent together, maybe even a lifetime. He’d dreamed of looking down at her, winded and spent. Her face had been flushed, her skin dewy with perspiration, her russet hair clinging damply to her brow and cheeks. He’d brushed it back with his fingertips even as hers had lifted from the bed to trace the line of his mouth. Her smile had widened and he’d been helpless against her; he had smiled, too.

“I love you,” she’d whispered, and again, that deep and secret place within him—that part of his heart that had been frozen and buried since Lucy had died—stirred with new warmth and sudden life.

Jay had woken from these dreams, each time sweat-soaked and gasping, his hands outstretched as if reaching for her. Finally, he’d simply stopped sleeping altogether, forcing himself to get up and remain awake the rest of the night. Paul had been sleeping in the living room, stretched out on the sofa, and Jay had confined himself quietly to his bedroom, the TV turned on to a seemingly endless montage of infomercials. *What’s the matter with me?* he’d thought.

“So you’ll see her again?” Emma asked brightly, her eyes wide as she popped another forkful of pancake, dripping with syrup, into her mouth. “Jobeth, I mean. You want to see her.”

She stated this last as if it was a given rather than an inquiry. She was a very perceptive child, sometimes uncannily

so, as if she could see past his smiles or jokes and read his mind, clearly see his thoughts and feelings underneath.

“I don’t know, Em,” he said and again, there was no mistaking that dark, disapproving scowl Marie shot off the starboard bow of her shoulder. *Oh, yeah. I’m going to hear about it.*

He pointedly avoided Marie’s gaze as he scraped his mostly untouched pancakes into the trash can beneath the sink and tucked his plate and fork into the dishwasher.

“You didn’t eat,” she said.

“Yes, I did.”

“Barely.” She’d never had any children of her own; a widow, she’d taken Jay and Emma under her wing as her adopted family of sorts ever since he’d hired her. But sometimes—like right now—when she spoke to Jay, the tone of her voice would grow admonishing and dour with the sort of practiced ease he would have otherwise assumed reserved only for fully tenured mothers.

“I don’t have much of an appetite,” he told her with a sheepish glance, an apologetic shrug. He would have liked some coffee, but she hadn’t made any; undoubtedly her way of making him suffer through what she believed to be a hangover, because on any other given Sunday, a pot would have been brewed before dawn. He could have made one himself, but didn’t want to linger in the kitchen for any longer than necessary, bearing the weight of her stern gaze. “Are you going to be here today?” he asked.

“I’d planned on it, yes,” she replied. “There are some things I didn’t get finished with yesterday, laundry and what-not. Unless you don’t need me, that is...?”

“No.” Jay shook his head, risking another sideways peek at her. “No, I just...I do, in fact. I need to run out, and I just wanted to see if I should drop Emma back at Paul’s along the way.”

Marie turned to face him, leveling that humorless glare at him. “You’re going out?” she asked, and the unspoken inferences here were: *Again? Today? After all that you’ve done already?*

He looked at his daughter, who watched them both from over the breakfast counter, her dark eyes curious and somewhat concerned. “Not for long,” he said. “Just a few hours.” He smiled at Emma, but her expression didn’t lighten; again, it was as if she could read his mind, and didn’t buy the cheerful façade for a moment. *I’m sorry, Em, he thought. But there’s someone I need to see today.*

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Jay left the brownstone before Marie was even finished with the breakfast dishes, much less had enjoyed her chance to rip him a new ass. He’d kissed Emma as she’d sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the TV watching *Zoey 101* on Nickelodeon, and offered to bring her home a cheeseburger from McDonald’s for lunch.

“How about a salad instead?” she’d replied. “M.K. was telling me about stuff they put into beef, all of the grease and fat. That kind of stuff can give you heart attacks, you know.”

*Thank you for that, M.K.,* he’d thought. To judge by Marie’s unamused expression from the kitchen, he figured a Happy Meal wasn’t going to buy any brownie points with her either that morning.

He drove an hour outside of the city before reaching the sprawling, walled grounds of the Respite House convalescent hospital. It was a privately run facility, one of the most reputable—and therefore, expensive—in the region, and one he visited at least once a month, if not more. He parked his car and crossed the scraped and salted lot for the main entrance, a flight of broad, granite steps stretching upward to a grand portico.

The hospital was actually a cluster of nearly a dozen buildings, all over 100 years old. It had once been the campus for a large chapter of Masons; the property had been sold in the late 1950s and had eventually been renovated to accommodate Respite House. More than five hundred patients called the center home; half again that number came and went throughout the year on an outpatient or temporary basis. Most suffered from various neurological disorders, brain injuries or were classified as comatose or in persistent vegetative states for

a variety of reasons. That he was lucky not to have wound up spending the rest of his life there himself following the car accident was an irony not lost upon Jay.

He recognized the nurse at the main information counter, and smiled at her. "Hey, Bonita," he said, as he signed himself into the visitors' log.

"Hey, Jay," the nurse, Bonita, replied. She rose to her feet and leaned across the counter to give him a warm hug, crushing her large, soft breasts squarely into his chest. "Merry Christmas, honey. How are you doing?"

"Good, thank you," he replied as she drew away. "Merry Christmas to you."

The heavily treaded rubber soles of his shoes, still damp with snow, squeaked quietly as he made his way along the corridor. The hospital floors were all dark, mottled marble, the walls white-washed and lined with enormous, nearly floor-to-ceiling windows that left even the furthestmost edges of the facility drenched with light. He made his way to a set of elevators, and once beyond the brass doors, rode up to the fourth floor.

The ward here was quiet, a heavy sort of silence usually reserved for public libraries, broken only by the occasional murmured conversation from nurses as they passed one another in the corridors. The staff desk had been cheerily adorned for the holidays with a small Christmas tree complete with lights and tiny glass ornaments. Red and green paper streamers and fuzz-trimmed red stockings hung along the edge, one for each duty nurse. Like Bonita downstairs, the staff here knew Jay, and they smiled at him in greeting as they looked up from patient charts, or stood together by the small lounge doorway, sipping from cups of coffee.

Jay followed a corridor immediately to the right off the elevator and went to room 484. He hadn't been to visit since just prior to Thanksgiving, but clearly someone had before him. A Christmas wreath, a broad ring of fresh pine boughs crowned with a red velvet ribbon, hung from the door. He knocked, although there was no need. The door was open, and he could see beyond that no one else was there.

No one except Eileen.

The lights were off, her room draped in shades of grey as muted sunlight filtered in through the clouds outside. One of the nurses had turned on her bedside radio to a station playing a soft, steady stream of holiday songs. There were no other sounds at all except for the soft *squish* of his shoes against the floor, the occasional whisper or click from her computerized bed as it made minute adjustments to her position and the machine that dripped a vanilla-colored liquid down a tube into an incision in her navel.

Jay scooted a chair from a corner to the bedside and sat down. He'd tucked his gloves in his coat pockets, and reached out, stroking his thumb against the bridge of her knuckles. "Hi, Spider," he said, his voice stark and nearly startling against that heavy backdrop of silence. "It's me, Jay."

He stood long enough to lean over the bedrail and brush his lips lightly against her brow. She didn't respond. Her brown eyes stared, half-lidded, at some anonymous place across the room, seldom blinking, much less acknowledging. She had been propped at an angle to face him; the bed was state-of-the-art, one of the best money could buy, a sand-filled mattress that kept Eileen warm and used high-pressure air jets to inflate and deflate from one side to another, supporting her all the while, to help prevent bedsores. It was all operated by a computer that needed little if any human intervention in order to adjust her position.

As he stepped back from the bed, the air jets engaged, loud enough to startle him. Eileen didn't even blink while her left shoulder dropped and her body rolled slightly, shifting to the opposite direction. He moved his chair around so he could continue to face her. "I don't know if I'll see you again before Christmas," he said, reaching into his pocket. "But I wanted to give you this. See?"

He unwrapped tissue paper back from a small bundle he'd carried in with him from the car. It was a Christmas tree ornament, a small glass ballerina with her leg extended in an *arabesque*. "It's a dancer," he said as he hung the little loop of gold thread from the ballerina's head around a hook on

Eileen's gastro-feeding machine. Here, it was within her line of sight, if she'd had any conscious brain activity by which to be aware of it.

Eileen Dancer had been Jay's best friend in elementary school. Like Paul's childhood friend, Danny Thomas, Eileen and her family had lived on a farm near Jay. They were the same age, and Eileen and Jay had waited nearly every day each school year at the bus stop together, come rain, snow, sleet or hail. They had sat with each other on the bus, and because their last names were close enough alphabetically, they'd usually wound up together in homeroom classes, too.

He never remembered really thinking about Eileen as a girl, even though their classmates had teased them aplenty about being boyfriend and girlfriend from first grade clear through high school. He never remembered really noticing how somewhere along those years, Eileen had blossomed from the freckle-faced, pig-tailed girl he'd first met to a young woman with breasts and hips and a different sort of look in her eyes whenever she'd regard him, a sort of adulation he had come to realize entirely too late.

*Par for the course with me*, he thought, because he'd never realized Lucy's true feelings in the end, either.

During his senior year in high school, he'd dated a girl named Susan who wasn't particularly good to him, or for him for that matter, but she'd given him hand-jobs by the dozens over the course of their two-month relationship, and he was a virgin otherwise and thus had fancied himself in love. Meanwhile, Eileen had found herself a boyfriend named Eirik who also wasn't particularly good to or for her, and with whom she'd had little discernable in common, except that they'd both started their names with "Ei."

On the night of their senior prom, it had only seemed logical given their years of friendship that Jay and Eileen double-dated to the dance. They'd all piled into Eileen's father's hulking Suburban and rode together. They'd all pooled their money and bought booze and a double-occupancy room at the hotel where the prom was held. They'd even posed for pictures together, all four of them, arm-in-arm and laughing for



the camera. Jay often wondered why it hadn't occurred to him all night that Eileen had seemed to watch him; that her attention had been fixed on him, rather than Eirik.

He supposed he'd been too busy trying to get laid. He and Susan hadn't remained at the dance for more than two songs before he'd managed to convince her to come up to the hotel room with him. By that time, they'd both already downed quite a few elicited shots of vodka, and were feeling bold, reckless and giddy. He'd lost his virginity that night, while Susan had crooned drunkenly along with the bedside radio to some cheesy Bryan Adams song. She'd seemed distracted and bored, more into the song than any of Jay's clumsy attempts to turn her on, but he'd managed nonetheless, a whole, startling, wondrous five minutes of warmth, wetness and explosive, mind-numbing release.

"So did you?" Eileen had asked him upon his return to the ballroom. "Did you do it, I mean? Did you fuck her?" *Sex is stupid unless you're in love*, she'd told him once. *I'm not saving myself for marriage or anything, but I'm definitely not letting just anybody in my pants, whenever. It's got to be for love.*

His stupid grin must have been all the reply she'd needed, because she'd rolled her eyes and walked away.

"What?" He had hurried after her, catching her by the puffed sleeve of her satin dress. She shrugged him loose and continued marching out the door and into the corridor beyond, her hands balled into fists. It wasn't until he'd caught up to her in the hotel lobby that he'd been able to turn her around and realize she was nearly in tears.

"What is it?" he asked, worried, but she shook her head. "Spider, what's the matter?"

That was his nickname for her, something she tolerated from nobody else, not even her parents. He'd picked it because she had always been gangly, all long legs and spindly arms. Like a spider, he'd been fond to tell her.

"Nothing," she said, even as her lips quivered and tears spilled down her cheeks. "It...it's just...you're an asshole, do you know that, Jay?"

She turned and hurried away again, leaving him startled and bewildered. “What?” He ran after her, grabbing her by the arm. “Will you wait a minute? What are you talking about? Did Eirik do something while I was upstairs?”

She laughed, a scraping, humorless sound. “You don’t get it, do you? This has nothing to do with Eirik. It never has!” When this failed to enlighten him further, her expression had grown sorrowful, nearly heartbroken. “You...you never even thought to ask me, did you?” she asked, as more tears spilled. “Not to the dance...not upstairs...nothing. Never in all of these years. Not even once.”

*How could I have known?* he thought in the hospital room fifteen years later. *I was just a stupid kid. I didn’t understand. I never realized...*

Not until that moment, anyway, and then, in the hotel lobby, it had hit him like a fist in the gut. He’d blinked at Eileen, realizing what she was trying to tell him, and it had felt as if his heart had just broken along with hers. “Eileen...” he’d whispered, reaching for her.

“Forget it.” She’d swatted his hand away.

“Eileen, please. Let me—”

“What?” Her voice had grown sharp and loud, angry now. “Let you what, Jay? Take me upstairs and pity-fuck me now that you’ve finally figured out I’m in love with you? Or better yet—tell me you love me, too, only like a sister, and you’d never, ever, ever want to hurt me?” She had planted her hands against his chest and shoved him, sending him stumbling backwards. “Go fuck yourself, Jay. I...I hate you! I wish we’d never met!”

She had run away, dashing for the elevators, her hiccupping sobs driving into him like angry fists. He remembered people laughing and snickering, kids from their class who had been lingering in the lobby and overheard the exchange.

Three hours later, Susan had dragged him to another hotel room where a party was in progress, and had proceeded to get so drunk, she’d passed out in a corner by the balcony

doors. Tired and unhappy—and pretty drunk himself—Jay had stumbled back to their own room

When he saw the empty prescription bottle on the floor, it hadn't registered at first. He'd picked it up, puzzled, and saw it was made out to Eileen's mother, a prescription for Valium. It still hadn't made sense until he glanced over and saw the bathroom door was closed, a sliver of light visible beneath. And then, he'd noticed his hands, the peculiar, burning, tremulous sensation had spread from one to both now and seemed to be working its way up his wrists and forearms, creeping slowly into his shoulders.

It had been years since he'd last felt anything like it, since Danny Thomas, and the realization of what it was—what it meant—hadn't occurred to him. Not at first. Not until he'd opened the bathroom door and found Eileen on the stark white linoleum floor with her head against the base of the toilet seat, her eyes partially opened, her face framed by a puddle of thin, frothy vomit. The stink of it had been rich and thick in the narrow confines of the room.

Jay had stumbled back in horror, his voice and breath escaping him in a solitary, anguished cry. But then he had staggered forward once more, even though he'd wanted desperately to run away. He'd stepped into the bathroom as if pulled there on invisible tethers, willed there by a force other than his own choosing. He'd gone inside and closed the door.

*And the rest, as they say, is history*, he thought, watching light wink off the glass contours of the Christmas ornament he'd brought to the hospital. He sat down in his chair and held her hand, watching her watch nothing in particular. Like Danny Thomas, he had touched Eileen and brought her back from death, but not all of the way. He'd brought her body back somehow, restored to pristine health, but her mind had been gone, her heart and soul. Anything and everything that had defined and differentiated Eileen Dancer in the world had been stripped away, gone forever. She'd been in a persistent vegetative state ever since, a life-sized doll. She might have died again had her parents not been adamant about the matter of her survival. They had kept her plugged into tubes, wires and what-not all of those years, never losing that last, lingering

shred of hope that one day, she'd come back to them. They didn't understand what had happened. No one did. The resurrection had eradicated any evidence of the drug overdose that had killed her, and doctors had been left to think she had fallen in the hotel bathroom, suffering some kind of closed head injury, even though there had been no evidence to support this. There had simply been no other explanation for what had happened to her.

None that didn't sound insane.

"It happened again," Jay whispered to Eileen, running his thumb against her knuckles over and over. He stared at the tiles between his feet on the floor as if he could lose himself the way Eileen had; as if by simply staring at nothing, he could, in turn, become nothing. "Two nights ago, at the mall, I...I found a woman."

He looked up into her face, into those eyes that saw nothing, that reflected neither thought nor emotion. "I brought her back somehow. All of the way back, Eileen. At least I...I think I did but I..." His vision blurred with sudden tears. "I don't know how. I still don't know how, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I did, because I...I couldn't do that for you."

Eileen's family was relatively poor, her parents elderly. Jay paid for her care at Respite House: the private room, the state-of-the-art bed, all of it—anything she needed, for as long as she'd needed it. He'd always helped her parents pay for her care in the past, even when Lucy had been alive, whatever he'd been able to contribute, but when Lucy had died and he'd received the insurance settlements, he'd paid off the brownstone, car, Emma's education, socked some in savings and investments, and then put a large chunk in a trust for Eileen's healthcare.

He'd always visited Eileen at least once a month in all of the years since her resurrection. Even when she'd been almost a half-day's drive away in a Medicare-paid home outside of their hometown in Barnham, he'd been faithful in his visits. Lucy had known about them, but not why he went. She hadn't known about him, what he could do. What he had done. She'd

only known that Eileen had been his high school friend, and one to whom he had always remained loyal.

Eileen's mother had hugged him and cried when he'd told her about the trust fund. A frail and aging woman whose decline had started nearly from the moment she'd learned of her daughter's condition, and had progressed slowly but steadily in the years since, Alice Dancer had thrown her whip-thin arms around his neck and burst into tears of gratitude. She never suspected that he was the reason for her daughter's state or all of the years of sorrow and heartache it had caused.

"I'm sorry, Eileen," Jay whispered, as a single tear rolled slowly down his cheek. He stood, turning loose of her hand, and wiped the damp streak away, struggling to compose himself. He told her this every time; with each visit to her bedside, he begged for an absolution he knew would never come. He leaned over the railing and kissed her cheek, just as the bed hissed to life again, tilting her away from him and toward the doorway once more.

"I'll see you next month," he promised as he walked away. He paused at the threshold of her room and glanced over his shoulder into those dark, vacant eyes. "I love you, Spider."

She didn't as much as bat an eyelash.

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Jay stepped out into the hallway, his eyes more on his shoes than in front of him, and plowed nearly head-first into a nurse who'd been walking briskly down the corridor in his direction. She staggered back as he stumbled the opposite direction, and he heard her utter a sharp, startled yelp. She carried a handheld tray of test tubes and phlebotomy supplies in one hand; the glass vials clattered noisily together at the impact, and several toppled to the floor.

"I'm sorry," Jay said as the nurse squatted down, snatching up the tubes before they rolled away. All he could see was the top of her head, a heavy mass of dark, reddish-brown hair caught back in a loose bundle at the nape of her neck, and the shoulders of her bright, multicolored scrub top.

"It's alright," she said, sounding aggravated.

"Here." He folded his legs beneath him, reaching for one of the fallen vials. "Let me help."

"That's alright. I've got..." The nurse looked up at him and their eyes met. Jay felt his heart hammer once, heavily in his chest, and then shudder still.

"...it," the nurse finished in a breathless squeak, and it was her somehow, impossible but true. Jobeth Montgomery knelt in front of him, less than a foot away, near enough for him to see the flecks of gold in her hazel-green eyes, and the sprinkling of freckles from sun-kissed summers past along the bridge of her nose, the high apples of her cheeks.

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't say a word. Not even as he watched the color drain from her face, leaving her pallor ashen, her eyes widening to the size of silver dollars. He could hear her breath fluttering, a panicked, frightened cadence; he heard the soft *clink-clink-clatter* of the test tubes falling from her hands, spilling against the floor once more.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, her voice little more than a rush of air from between her lips. She scuttled backward; her tray of supplies crashed noisily to the floor, the sound reverberating off the walls and high ceiling of the corridor. Her rubber-soled shoes squealed as she backpedaled from him. "Oh...oh, my God..."

"Wait," Jay said, snapping out of his stunned stupor and forcing himself to move, to rise, reach for her. "Please, wait—"

She shook her head, her eyes enormous and filled with fright. "Oh, my God," she gasped again and then she turned, running away from him, fleeing down the corridor.

"Wait!" he exclaimed, running after her. He stepped on one of the glass vials, shattering it underfoot. It had been filled with blood, someone's sample bound for a laboratory, and he slipped in the sudden puddle, crashing to his knees. He scrambled up, limping and grimacing, and ran again, just as Jobeth darted through a door at the end of the hallway, an emergency exit leading to the fire stairwell.

“Jobeth Montgomery!” he cried as he plowed through the heavy steel door behind her and stumbled out onto a small concrete landing. His voice bounced over and over off the walls and staircases and he heard the frantic pounding of her feet below him as she raced toward the ground floor. He leaned over the metal railing even as he started his own hurried descent. He caught a momentary hint of her shadow dancing against the wall on the floor below him, and then she was gone.

By the time he reached the second floor landing, he heard the distinctive *whoosh* and click of the exterior exit below flying open, then closed. He rushed down the remaining stairs, taking them a reckless two and three at a time, and darted outside. He was panting, his breath fogging about his face in rapid-fire clouds, but there would be no respite from his sprint if he wanted to catch her. Jobeth was already off like a shot, running along the salted sidewalk toward the parking lot beyond. Her hair had come unfettered and streamed behind her, a long, tangled mess of curls that bounced against her back, spilling down past her shoulder blades.

“Jobeth!” he cried out breathlessly, taking after her again. “Wait, please!”

She glanced over her shoulder as she reached the lot, her eyes still wild, and then she must have darted across a slick patch or a puddle of slush, because she fell, spilling forward, tripping off the edge of the curb and landing on her hands and knees against the cold tarmac.

“Jobeth!” He reached her just as she scrambled to her feet again. When he hooked his hand against her elbow to help her rise, she jerked away from him, nearly slipping again.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, her voice shrill and winded. She danced back, all frightened eyes and flushed cheeks, looking all around her as if desperate to find help. She had no coat on, and her scrub shirt was short-sleeved. He could see chill bumps raising all down the lengths of her arms, and her teeth began to chatter. “D-don’t...don’t you touch me!”

“Alright,” he said quietly, holding up his hands in surrender, making no further effort to approach her. Even in her obvious state of terror, she was beautiful. His mind kept snapping back to his dreams from the night before of making love to her, of tasting her, touching her. He remembered looking into her eyes in the aftermath, and how she had smiled at him, her eyes filled with trust and emotion, mirroring the contents of his own lonely heart—as if they had known each other all of their lives. *I love you.*

“You...you just keep away from me,” Jobeth wheezed, her shoulders shuddering from the cold now. She glanced behind her, wary of ice and slush, and took another hedging, hesitant step.

“Please don’t go,” he said, drawing her to a halt. She blinked at him, frightened and bewildered, loose tendrils of russet hair flapping against her cheeks in the bitter wind. “Please,” he said. “I’m not the one who hurt you.”

He hadn’t been sure to that moment whether or not she had any recollection of what had happened to her, but he could tell when he said this, the shocked look that came over her, that she did; she remembered, and understood him.

Her eyes flooded with tears. She wrapped her arms around herself against the cold and shook like a dried leaf caught in the wind.

“I’m not the one who hurt you,” he said again and she nodded, pressing her lips together in a momentary line.

“I know,” she said, as her tears spilled.

“Is everything alright, miss?”

Jay looked over his shoulder, startled, and saw a young man dressed in the dark blue uniform of a paramedic striding toward them. His brows were narrowed, the corners of his thin mouth turned down in a wary frown, and Jay took a hedging step backward.

*Oh, shit.* He glanced uncertainly at Jobeth, who was still ashen and trembling, her cheeks tear-stained, even though she rubbed at them quickly with her fingertips to eradicate the evidence. *Oh, shit,* he thought again, because the paramedic had



clearly noticed she was crying; his brows furrowed more deeply and now his hands closed into fists.

“I said, is everything alright?” he asked again, and while Jay struggled to think of something to say in reply, the paramedic raised the blade of his hand to his brow, squinting. “Jo? Jo Montgomery? Hey, is that you?”

Jobeth glanced at Jay, then at the paramedic once more, wide-eyed, stricken and somewhat puzzled; very much the deer in the proverbial headlights. Jay felt his stomach close in a tight knot that threatened to draw his balls into the painful coil as well. *Oh, shit.* She’d told him she knew that he hadn’t been the one to hurt her, but she had run from him anyway. *Christ only knows what she thinks of me, what she remembers. And she knows this guy, too. What’s she going to tell him?*

“I...uh...” she stammered. Jay thought about running for his car. He figured he had a wide enough lead on the paramedic that he could out-pace him, especially across a parking lot still riddled in places with ice patches and slush.

“It’s me, Jo,” the paramedic said. “Mick. Well, I mean Gary McAdams—Gina’s partner. You know, your friend Charles’—”

“Girlfriend,” Jobeth finished, recognition at last dawning in her eyes. She swatted at her cheeks again and laughed, a high-pitched, tittering sound. “Of course, yes. They call you Mick for short. Hey, hi. How’s it going?”

She stuck out her hand, just one of the guys offering a shake, and Gary McAdams—Mick for short—accepted the brief clasp. He smiled at her, but cut a dark, suspicious look at Jay. “I thought I heard you scream,” he said. “I saw you fall off the curb a minute ago.”

*Oh, shit,* Jay thought, and now he pivoted slightly, ready to bolt. Jobeth laughed again, that same anxious bark.

“I’m fine,” she said, startling the glorious, ever-living shit out of Jay. She glanced at him, then away quickly, anxiously. “Really. Just lost my balance, that’s all. This...this is my...uh...my friend, um...”

“Jay Frances,” Jay supplied, trying to play it cool and take the escape she’d offered him. “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah.” Mick didn’t look convinced. “Same here. You sure you’re alright, Jo?”

“I’m fine,” she replied.

The three of them stood there for a long, uncomfortable moment, exchanging uncertain looks and sideways glances. “So,” Mick said finally to Jo. “What brings you out here? Moonlighting?”

“Yeah,” Jo said. “You know me. Work, work, work.”

“Me, too,” Mick said. “I took an extra shift while Gina’s off. We’re here for a pick up.” He nodded toward the hospital building, even though there was no ambulance Jay could see. “You know, you shouldn’t be out here without a coat on. It’s freezing.”

“I just...forgot something,” Jobeth said. “In my car. My penlight. Just ran out to grab it.”

“Oh,” Mick said. Another awkward silence fell, this one short-lived. “Well, I guess I’ll see you around then. If you’re sure everything is okay...?” He said this last with a pointed look in Jay’s direction.

“Everything’s fine, Mick,” she said. “I promise. Tell Gina I said hello.”

Mick didn’t offer anything by way of farewell to Jay, and as he walked away, it left Jobeth and Jay standing alone, facing one another, shivering in the cold. “I...I’d better get going, too...” she said at length with a shrug, pinning her eyes on her toes.

She started to move, to cut around the nearest car and walk briskly back to the hospital, but he reached for her. “Wait.”

He didn’t want her to leave, for things to end there, uncertain and unspoken between them. He’d found her again and he hadn’t believed that he would—and sure as hell not by serendipity or anything like fate. “Don’t go.”

He touched her arm, and she shied sideways, out of his reach. "I'm working," she said, sparing him an anxious, suspicious glance. "And I'm cold. I need to go."

"Let me buy you lunch," he insisted, and when she opened her mouth to protest, he held up his hands again. "Please. Just lunch. That's all. I just...I'd like to talk to you. Please."

*You have questions, just like I do, he wanted to say. You remember some of what happened, but not all of it—I can see it in your face. You want to know. You want to trust me.*

She studied him for a long moment, her lips pressed together. Finally, she nodded once, a brief, fleeting movement. "Alright," she said. "Let me go inside first and clean up my mess, get my stuff. I'll meet you in the lobby."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jo had agreed to lunch, but by the time their food arrived at the small sandwich shop near Respite House, she found that she didn't have much of an appetite. Which was a shame, she figured, since the chicken salad sandwich she'd ordered looked like it was made to her favorite specifications—with sliced red grapes, coarsely ground black pepper, walnut chunks and just a hint of rosemary visible among the mayonnaise and generous slices of white-meat chicken. Just the aroma of it alone should have been enough to set her mouth salivating, but instead, she found herself staring at it, poking her fingertip against the top slice of wheat bread as if testing a mattress for firmness, trying her damndest not to look across the table at Jay Frances.

Which was a difficult task, as it turned out, because he was a strikingly attractive man, and every time she'd glance at him, she'd find herself pinned by his enormous, dark brown eyes and remembering

*(Imagining, she'd tell herself firmly. Not remembering—imagining. It didn't happen. It wasn't real. It couldn't be...)*

how the soft golden light in her dream had infused in his light, olive-toned skin; how the muscles in his chest and arms, bridging the twin spans between neck and shoulders, had been glossed and aglow lightly with perspiration. How his hands had felt against her, caressing and exploring her; how his mouth had tasted, how his lips and tongue had traced along the contours of her body with more sensuous familiarity than any man she'd ever known in her life. How it had felt so right,

being with him, making love to him, and how, in the aftermath, she had looked up into the nearly black pools of his eyes and felt as if she had lost herself in a sudden swell of warm, tender emotions.

*I love you.*

She'd heard him say that as he walked out of a patient's room at Respite House. Of course, at the time, she hadn't realized who he was, hadn't been paying attention to anything other than the room numbers posted on small placards outside of each door. She'd been looking for 486, her last stick of the day. Her pace had been hurried, her attention distracted, and she'd plowed face-first into his chest.

He had been visiting a friend or so he had told her in the moments of awkward silence interspersed with idle chatter as they'd waited for their food. Jo watched him now as he toyed with his own food, a BLT he had yet to taste.

("Hold the mayo, please," he'd told the waitress with a smile, and she'd smiled back, a perky college-aged kid who had seemed to know him, or at least recognize his face. "I come here at least once a month," he'd explained to Jo. "When I get up to the hospital to visit. They make a great cup of coffee.")

That may have been so, but neither of them had yet to touch their coffee, much less the sandwiches. She forced herself to lift one of the overloaded halves in hand, sending a small shower of chicken and grape slices down onto her plate as she stuffed a bite into her mouth. *What am I doing here?* she asked herself. *I don't know this guy. Hell, for all I know, he could be the one who tried to rape me...if I wasn't dreaming that, too.*

Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew the attack had been real, just as she knew Jay hadn't been the one in the service closet with the garrote around her neck. She hadn't needed him to tell her that in the parking lot at the hospital; she had always known it instinctively. But the thought of it, the dim and unpleasant memories of her assault, left her stomach suddenly sour, and she choked down the mouthful of sandwich.

She glanced up and found him looking at her, his brows lifted slightly, his gaze fixed on her. His dark hair drooped in waves from the crown of his head, spilling past his ears and toward his shoulders in a haphazard mess. She fought the urge to reach out and swat at it with her fingertips, to draw it back from his eyes.

“You know what happened to me,” she said as she set her sandwich down. He blinked at her, as if surprised out of deep thought. “I keep dreaming of things...they feel like memories, but they don’t seem possible.” *None of this does.* She met his eyes and again remembered how safe she had felt making love to him, as she had with no other man ever; safe and loved and meant to be with him.

“I didn’t see who hurt you,” Jay replied. “But yes, I found you when he was finished. I know what happened.”

*When he was finished.* The words sent creeping chills along Jo’s arms.

“Will you tell me?” she asked softly, and when Jay nodded, she didn’t know if she felt relieved or frightened.

“It’s going to sound crazy to you...” he began, but she shook her head and managed a clumsy laugh.

“Trust me. Nothing about that night is going to sound any crazier than it already does inside my own head.”

She was wrong.

Fifteen minutes later, after her coffee had grown cold and the mayonnaise from her sandwich had seeped into the bread, making little soggy patches, he at last fell silent, having spoken to her all the while in a quiet voice, nearly a whisper, as he’d leaned over the table and spared occasional, uncomfortable glances around him.

He’d told her a story that seemed like something out of a movie, too impossible to even sink into her brain at first. A wild tale about finding her dead in the mall garage, strangled in the service closet—murdered—and then touching her and somehow restoring her, resurrecting her from the dead.

*He’s nuts.*

Jo blinked at him for a long moment before at last, she made the muscles in her face twitch out of their paralysis, stretching her mouth into a polite, awkward smile. “Well,” she said.

This hadn’t been the first time something like this had happened to him, either. He hadn’t gone into any details, but it had always been something he’d been able to do—helpless to prevent, he’d told her. Some people could touch their tongue to the tip of their nose. Jay Frances could raise the dead.

*He’s fucking nuts.*

“I know how that sounds,” he said, looking down at his plate. “What you must think...”

“I think that’s quite a story,” she told him. *He’s absolutely fucking nuts.* She rose to her feet, hooking her coat from the back of the chair. “Thanks for sharing it with me.”

“Wait,” he said, looking wounded and abashed.

“So tell me,” she said, still struggling to grin brightly as she shrugged her way into the parka. “Do you...uh...turn water into wine, too? Divvy up loaves and fish among the multitudes? I’m probably forgetting one of my miracles somewhere along the line, but it’s been a few years, and I’m not the world’s best Catholic.”

“Wait,” he said again, rising to his feet.

Jo backed away from him and the table, the strained smile slipping as she turned for the door. “Thanks for lunch. I hope you enjoy the rest of your psychosis.”

“Wait.” He caught her by the parka sleeve and she whirled, dancing back and shrugging him violently away.

“Get your hand off me!” she snapped, drawing the sudden, curious attention of the young waitress behind the counter. There was no one else in the small dining room, no other customers who might have offered Jo some rescue. “You’re crazy!” she said to Jay. “You do realize that, don’t you? You need serious help of the pharmaceutical and straight-jacket sort, pal.”

“Please, just listen to me,” he said. “You don’t understand. There’s more I—”

“More?” Jo exclaimed with a laugh. “Oh, boy, no, thanks. I’ve heard enough for one day.” *More like one lifetime*, she thought, as she stormed out of the diner, listening to the shrill clatter of the bell on the door ringing as she threw it open wide.

She made it about three broad strides out into the parking lot before he caught her again, his hand against her sleeve, but this time, before she could jerk away, he spoke to her, his voice quiet against her ear, his breath warm against her skin, drawing her abruptly to a halt.

“When you died, you found yourself in a gigantic bed that went on and on forever, covered in satin sheets—dark brown satin sheets.”

Jo felt all of the blood drain from her face, her throat constrict down to pinhole-sized proportions. *Silk*, she wanted to say, but only gulped for breath. *They were silk, not satin. Oh, God, he can’t know that, he can’t!*

He stepped against her from behind, keeping his lips so close to her ear, his mouth danced lightly against the outermost curve of her lobe as he spoke. “You were naked there, and so was I. You let me make love to you. For hours, it seemed like, over and over, you let me make love to you and when we were finished...”

*Oh, God!* Jo’s mind hiccupped. Each word stabbed into her, that vicious little knife-point again, and she nearly moaned aloud. *It can’t be true! It can’t be! He...he can’t know this...he can’t...!*

“When we were finished, you told me that you loved me,” he said softly against her ear.

“Oh, God!” Jo gasped, stumbling away, turning to face him. “You...you can’t...! It wasn’t real! How do you know...? How...how can you...?”

His brows lifted gently, as if in sympathy. “Because I was there, Jo. Because it *was* real—all of it. Everything I said. Everything you remember. It all happened.”



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She let him draw his arm around her and lead her back into the restaurant. This brought her within a wonderful proximity to him, enough so that the smell of his cologne, something faint and warm and spicy, seeped into her clothes and lingered the rest of the day, a reminder of him.

They sat at the table again, and she shuddered, trembling from head to toe, unable to control herself. "You said there was more." When he looked at her puzzled, she added, "Earlier you said that. You had more to tell me."

Jay shook his head. "Never mind. You've heard enough for one day." When she tried to protest, he said, "I want you to talk to my brother, tell him what happened, what you remember."

Jo's eyes widened. "What? No."

"He's a police officer," Jay said. "A homicide detective, Jo. He might be able to help you."

"Sure." Jo laughed. "Right after he locks me up in the loony bin. I can't go to the police with a story like this. They—"

"Not the police. My brother. Paul knows about me. He knows what I can do."

*What I can do.* Jo shivered anew. "No," she said again, shaking her head. "No police." When he opened his mouth to speak, she said it again, more firmly. "No police."

She didn't explain to him because she couldn't. She couldn't tell him about her ex-husband, Rich, or all of the things he had done to her, and all of the restraining orders she'd filed against him in the past. She couldn't tell him that when she'd called the police and had Rich arrested—right in her own living room, meth pipe in hand—that she'd been humiliated, made to feel as much a criminal as Rich.

*"Why did you let him in the house if you have a restraining order out against him?"* they'd asked her, their expressions dubious, and the next day, narcotics investigators had showed up on her doorstep with a search warrant in hand. They'd torn apart her tiny bungalow under the pretense of looking for

evidence against Rich, but she'd known the truth. They'd been looking for evidence against *her*, too. Because she'd let Rich into her house. She'd felt sorry for him, and still somehow thought she had loved him, and she'd let him inside, so they thought she was as guilty of any drug charges as he was.

Jo couldn't tell Jay about that, or about how whatever scraps of faith or trust in justice or the police that had survived those horrible incidents had shattered the afternoon that Daniel Porter, social worker with the Saint Lawrence Resource Center for Men, had showed up in the parking lot at the hospital to tell her that Rich was out of prison, that someone somewhere had dropped the ball, and she hadn't been notified of his parole hearing.

"I need to go," she said. He opened his mouth to protest and she shook her head firmly. "I need to go, Jay. I need to get my samples back to the lab, turn in my paperwork. Please just take me back to the hospital now."

She thought he would object. It was obvious from his expression, the way his mouth remained slightly ajar, his breath momentarily bated that he wanted to try and talk her into staying awhile longer. *And he could, too.* That was the kick in the ass of the whole thing. Jo would have stayed if he'd asked her to.

But he didn't. He closed his mouth and cut his eyes to the ground, his shoulders slouching somewhat in reluctant concession. "Alright," he said, forking his fingers through his hair and pushing it back from his face; a weary and defeated gesture.

She and Jay had ridden together to the restaurant in his car, a bright, shiny, expensive-looking Volvo station wagon that had made Jo instantly, simultaneously ashamed of her own beat up Datsun, and grateful that he hadn't seen it at the hospital parking lot. When she walked back outside and stood shivering in the cold, watching through the restaurant window as the waitress doled out dollar bills and loose change against Jay's palm, Jo found herself wishing she'd swallowed her pride and any sense of humiliation she might have felt and driven for herself. *I want out of here. Right now.* Sitting with him in the

camel-colored leather seats of his Volvo, within arm's length of him—close enough to be a distraction—alone in the car suddenly made her feel uncomfortable and anxious. *Because I know that will be the end of it. I'll never see him again.*

Through the window, she watched Jay drop the change from their lunch tab back on their table, a tip for the waitress. He glanced up as he did this, his eyes finding Jo's through the glass, and he offered her a small, fleeting smile that left her heart suddenly racing.

*And I want to see him again,* she thought.

He walked outside, the small brass bell affixed to the top edge of the door ringing noisily as he passed. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said, tucking one hand into his coat pocket for a moment and pulling out his key ring.

Jo shrugged and nodded, trying to be nonchalant, and kept her arms crossed tightly over her bosom. She followed him over to the Volvo and when he thumbed the remote to unlock the doors, she wasted no time in sliding into the passenger seat.

She glanced over her shoulder as she drew her seatbelt into place. A paperback book, *Ella Enchanted*, lay against rear seat, along with a miniature purse—hot pink and glossy vinyl—against the upholstery. *He has a daughter,* she told herself, remembering the girl she'd seen on the stoop of the brownstone. *That means there's a wife, too. No matter what I think, no matter how I feel, no matter what did or didn't happen, I can't see him again.*

But damn, he smelled good, his cologne something faded but discernable, warm and spicy. As he dropped the car in gear and looked over his shoulder to back away from the restaurant, he reached around her seat and she enjoyed a brief but pleasant whiff of him. He glanced at her as he put the car into drive, and Jo could see it plainly in his eyes. *He wants to say something, stop this somehow. He doesn't want it to be the end of things. And God help me, neither do I.*

He drove her back to the convalescent center in relative silence, making the polite pretense of turning on the

radio and letting the inane chatter of an afternoon de-jay substitute for anything further between them. To his credit, he didn't mention contacting the police again, or as much as bat an eye in her direction when she pointed out the Datsun to him, as if every person in the world he knew drove a battered, Kermit-the-Frog-green car that had once passed as sporty, but now only looked small and rather pathetic.

"Thank you," she said after he'd pulled into an empty slot. "For lunch...for everything."

She reached for her seatbelt buckle, unfastening it, and he caught her hand. "Wait."

"I told you," she said, trying to pull her hand away. "I...I have to go. I'm technically still on the clock, and I'm going to be—"

She looked up, meeting his eyes, and her voice abruptly faded. He held her gaze, his large, dark eyes round and unhappy, his brows lifted. He reached for her with his free hand, brushing his fingers against her cheek, unfurling them slowly in the loose tendrils of hair framing her brow. The sensation of this, his skin lightly against hers, left her breath caught somewhere beneath her sternum, unable to force its way up.

"Wait," he said again, his voice soft, nearly a whisper. He leaned toward her, pressing his palm against her cheek, cradling her face in his hand. She wanted to pull away from him, to recoil from his touch, but she couldn't.

*Because that's not really what I want,* she realized. *Not at all.*

The tip of his nose brushed hers and she felt his breath against his mouth. Her eyes closed and he kissed her, leading with the tip of his tongue, parting her lips even as his settled against hers. Using his hand, he guided her closer; the kiss deepened, lingering, his tongue delving more deeply, touching and twining against her own.

Jo relaxed against him, forgetting her instincts to shove him away, forgetting her own damn name for the moment. In her mind, she snapped back to their first surrealistic meeting, what Jay had described at the restaurant as

her *deathscape*. She had wanted him there, with no inhibitions or hesitation, and all at once, despite her innermost protests, she wanted him like that again. Now. She coiled her fingers in his hair and held him near, pulling against him as he shrugged his way out of his seatbelt and leaned over the center console, pushing her back against her seat. She reached between them, her hand sliding beneath the flaps of his coat, and he groaned against her mouth as she touched him, her fingers closing against the outlining swell of his growing arousal. She felt the heat of him through the fly of his jeans, and his mounting urgency, his desire, in his ragged breaths.

In that moment, Jo could have taken it beyond the edge of reason. She could have pulled him against her, dragging him from the driver's side of the compartment and atop her in the passenger seat. She could have fumbled between them, pushing her seat back as far as it could go, dropping the reclining lever so that they were both practically lying down. It would have been only too easy to shrug herself loose of her parka, to raise her hips beneath his weight and unfetter the ties of her uniform pants. While she was at it, she could have unfastened his jeans, undoing the button, unzipping his fly. In less than thirty seconds, Jo had no doubt whatsoever that she could have Jay inside of her, plunging and powerful, both of them completely oblivious to the fact they were making love in the front seat of his car in the middle of broad daylight, not to mention a crowded parking lot.

It would have been so easy, but Jo pushed him away nonetheless, severing their kiss.

"Stop."

He looked at her helplessly, winded and flushed. "Jo..." he began, reaching for her again.

"Stop." She ducked away from his hand and found the door handle blindly. "I can't do this." She pushed the door open, the sudden rush of bitter air against her suffocating any residual passion in her body, snapping her brain back fully into focus. "I can't get involved with a married man."

He had been leaning over the console again as she'd climbed out of the car. Now he jerked back, blinking as if she'd slapped him. "What?"

"You have a kid, for Christ's sake," she said, leaning into the car long enough to flap her hand demonstratively toward the back seat, the little pink purse. "I can't do this. I...I just can't."

She slammed the door, her eyes flooded with sudden tears, her throat choked with them. *No matter how much I want to.*

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Jo hurried inside Respite House and stood in the foyer at the entrance, watching Jay's station wagon pull out of the parking lot. Her breath frosted lightly against the glass and she could feel the cold air from outside seeping through the heavy panes, chilling her, but she didn't move or turn away, not until she was certain. Not until Jay was gone.

"You okay, honey?"

She glanced over her shoulder and found the receptionist, a tall, heavyset black woman in nursing whites, watching her with a curious, concerned expression.

"Yes," Jo said, with one final look toward the parking lot. The Volvo was gone; she could see it following the winding drive toward the highway beyond, a loose trail of exhaust following it. "Yes, I...I'm fine." She turned to the receptionist and struggled to smile, batting at her eyes with her fingertips as she approached the main desk. "I just...I was here earlier with Syntac Lab Corps. I forgot to pick up my paperwork."

She could feel the woman's eyes on her, boring inquisitive holes into her back as she stood at the elevator bank. As she rode up to the fourth floor, Jo rubbed fervently at her eyes, hoping to eradicate any last remaining traces of tears.

"That man who was here earlier," she said at the nursing station, while the floor's supervising R.N. signed her lab orders. "The one with the dark hair who ran into me in the hallway. Does he come here a lot?"

She'd been thinking about the little girl—Jay's daughter—and about what she'd heard him say as he'd come out of a patient's room just before they'd plowed into one another. It had sounded to her like he'd said, "I love you, Spider." And the more she considered things, including the peculiar, somewhat surprised expression that had crossed his face in the car when she'd mentioned being married, the more Jo began to wonder if the patient he'd been visiting had been someone close to him. *Like his wife. Like maybe there's something wrong with her, and she's catatonic or dying of cancer or something horrible like that.*

"Jay?" the nurse asked, handing Jo the carbon-triplicate forms. "I'd say at least once a month. He's a real sweetheart." She smiled somewhat sadly and shook her head. "I've always thought it was such a shame, what happened to him. He's such a good-looking man, and he's showed me pictures of his little girl. Just a doll."

Jo felt a peculiar, creeping sensation shiver along her arms. "What do you mean?"

"He was in a car accident a few years back." The nurse's expression grew solemn and she leaned forward, speaking quietly. "His wife was killed. A terrible thing. And the daughter still so young."

Jo blinked in surprise. "Killed? But I...then who...?" She looked over her shoulder down the corridor. "Who was he visiting here?"

"Sleeping Beauty," the nurse replied. "That's what we call her, anyway. Her name is Eileen Dancer. They were friends in high school, apparently."

"What happened to her?"

"Closed head trauma," the nurse replied. "Happened when she was a teenager. She's as healthy as a horse physically, but her mind is gone. No discernable brain activity. It's heart-breaking, really. Her poor family. Jay helps pay for her bills here. He pays for everything, in fact."

*Oh, my God,* Jo thought. If she could believe what he'd told her—which she did, no matter how insane it sounded—

then Jay Frances could raise the dead. That he'd been unable to save his own wife must have weighed on his heart like iron.

"I don't know what he must do for a living," the nurse told Jo, snapping her from her thoughts. "But whatever he does, it pays well enough to afford private care for Eileen. How many people do you know who'd do something like that? I mean, for someone who isn't even your family."

"None," Jo murmured, looking down the corridor again, any relief she should have felt at learning that she hadn't just enjoyed one of the most wondrous make-out sessions of her life with a married man stifled by a new but equally persistent sense of unease. *So why would Jay?*



## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Daddy?”

Paul groaned as a hand fell against his shoulder, shaking him lightly, and his daughter’s quiet voice punched through the otherwise impenetrable cloud of slumber that had, to that point, engulfed him.

“Daddy? The phone’s for you.”

He grumbled again, something inarticulate, the best his sleep-leaden brain and tongue could manage. He shrugged his shoulder to dislodge Bethany’s hand and burrowed more securely beneath the tangle of sheets and blankets swathed around him.

“Daddy.” Bethany shook him again, more roughly this time, and he opened his eyes a bleary and reluctant half-mast. She leaned over the bed, holding the cordless phone in his face. “The phone’s for you.”

“Who is it?” he croaked. *And it better not be anyone from the office*, he thought. *Jesus Christ, I can take a fucking day off, get some sleep for once without someone calling to breathe down my goddamn...*

“It’s Uncle Jay,” Bethany said, waggling the phone. “He said it’s important.”

Paul nodded, forcing himself to lift his head from the nest of his pillows, to sit up in bed. “Thanks, Beth,” he said, taking the phone from her. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb and doing his damndest to will blood flow restored in full to his head.

*Someone had better be dead, Jay, he thought. Or at least, in your case, brought back from the dead.* “Hey, kid.”

“I’m sorry,” Jay said. “Beth didn’t tell me you were sleeping.”

“Sleep? What’s that?” Paul mumbled, since a quick glance at the clock revealed he’d only been out for about four hours. That wasn’t *sleep*. That was resting his eyes.

He glanced up, realizing Bethany hadn’t left the room. She lingered by his bedside table, her expression uncertain as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other like a small child in need of the restroom. “What’s the matter?” he asked, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone.

She shrugged slightly. “Mom’s at the grocery store.”

She left the end of the sentence dangling in the open air like a carrot on a string and Paul, ever the dutiful donkey, bit at it. “And...?”

Bethany shrugged again. “M.K. left a little while after that. Some guy came and picked her up.”

Paul’s brow rose. “What guy?”

“I don’t know,” Bethany said. “M.K. didn’t tell me his name. She said she was going to the movies and had her cell phone with her. You guys could text her.”

*Terrific*, Paul thought. He didn’t know a damn thing about technology. Working a fax machine was often beyond his level of comprehension, much less figuring out how to send a text message on his cell phone. He wondered if it would be inappropriate to ask Bethany to do it for him: *Dad says to get your ass home right the fuck NOW.*

“Paul?” Jay said in his ear.

“Yeah, Jay, I’m here,” Paul said. To Bethany, he added, “Look, I’ll take care of all that when I get off the phone. Just give me a minute here.”

Bethany nodded, turning for the door. “Okay, Daddy.”

When she was gone, Paul sighed heavily. “Alright,” he said to his brother. “What’s going on? You okay?”

“Yeah,” Jay replied. “I’m fine.” He then launched into a ten minute story about how he had found the woman he’d resurrected. He’d stumbled upon her by nothing short of a freakish good luck at a local convalescent center where he’d been visiting an old childhood friend—the second person Jay had ever raised from the dead.

“What?” Paul asked. “Wait a minute. You *told* this woman what happened? What you’d done?” He sighed again, shoving the heel of his hand against his brow because an insistent, throbbing ache had begun to stir there. “Jesus Christ, do you *want* to get yourself locked up in the nut-barn? You can’t just—”

“She believed me,” Jay said.

“Or she just *told* you that because she wanted to get rid of you.”

“It’s not like that,” Jay insisted, sounding somewhat wounded, as if he couldn’t understand why Paul wasn’t lauding him for his forthrightness and good fortune. “She listened to me, believed me. She went with me to lunch and I explained everything to her. She wouldn’t have gotten in my car if she didn’t believe what I’d said.”

Paul groaned, digging his fingernails into his scalp. “You took her out to lunch?”

“I told her I thought she should talk to you, tell you what—”

“You gave her my name?” *Terrific. So she can run to the media now and tell them all about it. ‘Detective Paul Frances—head of the Watcher task force—has a brother who claims he can raise the dead. Film at eleven!’ They’ll have my ass for lunch with a goddamn side of strained butter.*

“Yes, but she doesn’t want the police involved. She’s frightened, Paul. She’s really spooked, but I just couldn’t convince her.”

*Can't imagine why not*, Paul thought, grimacing because the pounding ache in his head had increased ten-fold. "Jay, you can't just go around telling people about what you can do," he said quietly through gritted teeth, sparing a glance at the bedroom doorway to make sure he was alone. "You know that. Hell, you never even told Lucy about it."

"This is different."

"How?"

"Because Jo is different, Paul. She's not like Eileen or Danny Thomas or...or the other time."

*Christ, nothing and no one on earth could be like that*, Paul thought with a horrified shiver.

"Jo is different," Jay said again. "She's all of the way back. She remembers what happened to her, her deathscapes, everything. She remembers."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No," Jay replied. "Not all of it, anyway. She said it all happened very fast, and she never saw the guy's face. The way she described things, the way I found her, I must have just arrived after it all went down. Hell, Paul, I'm surprised I didn't walk in on the guy strangling her."

Paul lowered his hand away from his face, something finally sinking in through the headache gnawing through his skull. "Me, too," he murmured.

He opened the drawer on his bedside bureau, fishing for a pad of paper and a pen. "What did you say her name was?" he asked, jotting down *Jobeth Montgomery*. "And there was no one else in the room with you when you found her?"

"No, I'd remember that. There was nothing in there, just a sink, a toilet, I think...a locker..."

"A foot locker?"

"No," Jay said. "One of those tall kinds, like from high school. There were brooms and mops in there, cleaning supplies. It was a janitor's closet. There was no place to hide inside."

*A locker...one of those tall kinds, like from high school,* Paul thought. Someone could hide in one of those. It would be a cramped fit, if memory served from his own adolescent years in which he'd sometimes pitch in and help lock diminutive freshmen boys in their lockers for pranks.

*"It doesn't hurt them,"* he remembered one of his friends explaining. *"And it's not like they're going to suffocate in there or something. It's got those slits in the top you can breathe through."*

*And see through, too, I'm willing to bet,* Paul thought, an uneasy, icy little shiver sliding along his spine.

"I'll keep trying to get her to talk to you," Jay said. "Even if it's just a phone call, I—"

"No," Paul interrupted. "I don't want you to see her again, Jay. She obviously wants to just let it lie, so I say let it."

"But..." Jay began, sounding bewildered. "But I thought...I mean, I..."

"If you're that hard-up for a date, the city's got a whole morgue," Paul said, and after a moment in which he heard his brother's startled intake of breath, Jay laughed.

"Fuck you, Paul."

"Just promise me you'll steer clear of her," Paul said, trying to make his tone of voice casual and light. Like it was no big deal. Like everything was right as rain. "It's for the best, and you know it. You don't want to take the chance on anyone else finding out about this...what you can do."

"Alright," Jay said at length, sounding unhappy but resigned.

"Go on," Paul told him. "Go home. Have supper with Emma and Marie. Have a fucking weekend, for Christ's sake." At this, it was Jay's turn to groan. "What?"

"I just remembered. I'd told Emma I'd bring her home McDonald's for lunch."

Paul glanced at his clock. "Good luck with that one."

"Shit," said Jay. "I need to go."

*Yeah*, Paul thought as he traced another circle around the woman's name. *Jobeth Montgomery*. "Me, too."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Marie was frying chicken for supper. Jay could smell the tantalizing aroma from the stoop of his brownstone as he unlocked the front door. It wasn't fully dark outside yet, but it was close enough to dusk for the old-fashioned replica streetlamps lining the sidewalk behind him to have automatically switched on.

As he slipped the key into the brass-plated deadbolt, he paused, glancing over his shoulder. He had the strangest feeling all at once, the uneasy sensation of being watched, and it had nothing to do with the knot in his stomach that came with the prospect of facing his daughter and housekeeper once inside. It felt like unseen eyes bored into his shoulders, nearly tangible, and he frowned, panning his gaze to either side of the street beyond the brownstone.

He heard the distant sound of a dog barking, low, lazy and unalarmed. He heard the faint growl of a car motor from somewhere along a nearby cross-street, the dim but distinctive *thud-thump-thud* of an over-tuned stereo bass. He watched one of his neighbor's doors down the way open, a rectangular swatch of light against the encroaching dusk, and silhouetted figures embracing, muted voices overlapping as someone headed down the stoop.

He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, no obviously unfamiliar cars parked along the street, no strange figures loitering about or lingering in alleyways. There was nothing at all, really, but still that feeling persisted, stirring the hairs along the nape of his neck.

*I'm imagining things*, he told himself with a shake of his head, returning his attention to his own front door. *Trying to delay the inevitable, I guess.*

He hunched his shoulders, feeling like shit, and steeling himself for the rebuke he knew he deserved as he walked into the foyer. He shrugged his way out of his overcoat and hung it in the hall closet, listening to the soft sounds of Marie working in the kitchen as he mounted the steps to the living room. The television was off, the Christmas tree in the corner unplugged, living room dark. He'd been expecting to find Emma here, cross-legged on the couch perhaps talking on the phone or listening to her iPod while Marie cooked, but there was no sign of the girl.

There was, however, sign of Marie. The housekeeper, visible through the open window bridging kitchen and living room, looked over her shoulder at the sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floors. Their eyes met, locking briefly, and there was no mistaking the stern disapproval in her gaze.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling very much like a little boy again, standing in front of his mother, caught at some kind of mischief.

Marie *hmpbed* as if pretending not to notice him, and returned her attention to the stove. Jay went to the kitchen doorway and lingered there, watching as she poked at a steaming, sizzling cast iron skillet resting on the front burner.

"Smells good," he said, hoping to lighten the mood somewhat.

It didn't work. Marie made that *hmpb* sound again without sparing him a glance. The edge of her spatula scraped against the rough surface of the skillet as she flipped browning tenderloins.

"What else is on the menu?" he asked.

"Mashed potatoes," Marie replied, pretending to be absorbed with adjusting the burner's heat level. "Creamed peas and biscuits."

He hated creamed peas. She knew it, too. Emma loved them, though, so whenever Marie would fix them, she usually



made something else for Jay, like broccoli or green beans, maybe a tossed salad. She didn't mention any of these as an alternative that night, however, so it didn't take a genius to figure out this was his punishment for staying out all day, forgetting the promise he'd made to Emma.

"Sounds terrific," he said, because she was itching for a quarrel and he didn't have the heart to give her one. Primarily because he knew she was in the right. He hadn't thought about Emma all afternoon. He'd found himself caught up with Jo and everything else in the entire world had faded into absolute and utter oblivion. That much was obvious from the reckless way he'd kissed her in his car upon their return to Respite House.

*Kissed her, hell! I practically ripped her clothes off and tried to fuck her in my front seat.* His behavior had been so out-of-place, so unlike his ordinarily reserved character that he'd shocked even himself. *What the hell was I thinking?*

He'd scared her. She'd bolted, and now he'd never see him again. She hadn't even given him time to explain.

"Where's Em?" he asked Marie.

Marie cracked the oven, backing up a step or two to peek at her biscuits. "She's in the office on the computer."

Emma wasn't ordinarily allowed in his office or online without Marie or Jay present. That Marie had granted her this privilege—that she'd referred to it as *the* office rather than *Jay's*—only further served as proof to him. She was pissed and there would obviously be no appeasing her. She was still somewhat residually angry from the day before; this had only opened up a new can of worms.

He watched her pull a plate down from a cupboard and line it carefully with folded paper towels. "Okay, then," he said, as she scooped fried chicken pieces out of the skillet, arranging them neatly to drain. "Thanks, Marie."

Abandoning the pretense of idle conversation, Jay left the kitchen doorway, following the adjacent corridor down to the office. The door was partially ajar, spilling yellow light out into the shadow-draped and darkened corridor, and from

beyond the threshold, he heard the soft sounds of clicking and tapping as Emma's fingers danced along the computer keyboard.

He rapped his knuckles lightly against the door, and the sounds from within abruptly quieted. "I'm almost done, Marie," Emma called.

"It's Dad," Jay said, easing the door open and poking his head inside.

Emma sat at his drafting table in front of the flat-screen monitor. Her eyes widened in surprise and color bloomed in her cheeks. "Oh," she said. "Uh...hi, Daddy. Marie said it was okay for me to use the computer."

She seldom called him *Daddy*, usually reserving the reference for those occasions when she thought she might be in trouble or she might otherwise need the extra emotional ammunition that childhood term of endearment would give. Paul had warned him about this; it was apparently a common enough tactic both M.K. and Bethany tried, too.

"I know. She told me," he said, watching as she visibly relaxed.

He walked across the room to the table. "What are you working on?"

"Just some homework," she replied. "I have to turn an essay in this week on the origins of a holiday tradition. We had to draw topics out of a hat. I got the Hanukah menorah but I traded with Missy Seaver for the Christmas ham."

"Why?" he asked.

Emma shrugged. "Because Missy said her aunt is married to a Jewish man, so she could get all kinds of information about Hanukah from him. And Christmas hams come from an old Viking celebration that became the feast day of Saint Stephen for Christians. That's on December twenty-sixth, my birthday."

"Is that your birthday?" Jay asked, feigning innocent obliviousness. "I'd completely forgotten."

Emma laughed. "You did not."

“Yes, I did.” He made a show of slapping his palm against his forehead. “Man, I can’t believe that. I didn’t get you a present or anything. Can we move it a day or two? Maybe even a week?”

She tried to frown, but giggled and ruined the effect. “Quit it, Dad.”

A futon sat beside the computer desk against the wall, and Jay sat down against its lumpy, well-worn cushion. He watched as Emma returned her attention to the computer, scanning a web page she’d found about Christmas. “Marie’s pretty mad at you,” she said after a moment, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

He nodded unhappily. “I know.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, Em. I didn’t mean to be so late.”

She moved the mouse, opening a new screen in a word processing program where she’d apparently been typing her school report. “That’s okay. Where did you go?”

“To visit an old friend at the hospital,” he said. “I ran into someone there. You remember Jobeth?” She nodded, glancing at him again. “I saw her there, completely by accident. She’s a nurse and she was working at the hospital. I took her to lunch and just lost track of time after that.”

Emma’s face had brightened, her mouth lifting in a smile. “Really? Cool! Are you going to see her again?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I don’t know if she wants to see *me* again or not.”

“Of course she does.”

She seemed so certain of this, so unabashedly confident, that he couldn’t help but laugh. “How do you know that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just do.”

He rose to his feet and hooked his arm around her, giving her a hug. “Thanks, Em.” He kissed the top of her head. “Look, I’m sorry about lunch today, the salad from McDonald’s I promised you. I—”

“That’s okay,” she said, ducking loose of his embrace. “Marie made me a grilled cheese.”

“We can go tomorrow, if you’d like,” he offered. “I’ll give Marie the night off and you and I can go for supper.”

Emma shook her head. “That’s okay,” she said again. “Thanks anyway, though.” Once upon a time, she would have jumped eagerly at the chance to have a night out, just her and Jay. Anymore lately, however, it seemed like she sometimes felt embarrassed to be out with him. She didn’t want him walking too close to her in the mall. She kept begging to ride the school bus in the mornings instead of having him drop her off on his way to the office. And if her friends came over to visit and he came anywhere near her room, she’d hunch her shoulders, roll her eyes and otherwise act like she wished she could sink through the cracks in the floorboards and vanish from view.

The cordless phone sitting beside the computer monitor began to ring. Emma jumped, her expression growing excited, and she looked to him expectantly. “Go ahead,” he said with a nod, and she beamed, snatching the phone in hand. “It’s probably for you anyway.”

And it was. He watched with a doting sort of fascination as her smile widened.

“Oh, hi,” she said, rosy blush blooming in her cheeks. She glanced at Jay, then pivoted in the chair away from him, hunching her shoulders. That sort of body language, and the soft, nearly giddy tone to her voice told him all he needed to know—it was boy on the other end of the line. And obviously one that she liked.

She was beginning to notice boys now. Posters of Barbie and the Disney princesses in her room had slowly but steadily been giving way to pictures of Orlando Bloom and Zak Efron over the last year. When he’d mentioned this to Paul once in a sort of melancholy passing, Paul had only shaken his head and chuckled.

“Just wait,” he’d said, enigmatic yet ominous, clapping his hand against Jay’s shoulder. “Just you wait.”

Marie called them to supper, her voice carrying down the hall from the kitchen. At this, Emma winced and cupped her hand over the phone's mouthpiece, sparing Jay a pleading look. "Dad, can I talk for just a few more minutes? Please? I'll be right there, I promise."

"Alright," he said, and because he'd given in, she didn't draw away or stiffen when he stroked his hand against her hair and kissed her brow. "Ten minutes. I'll stall for you."

As he started to walk to the door, he paused, turning again. "Em, listen, honey," he said. "After supper, I want to talk to you, okay? There's just...I mean, I'd like to..."

His voice faded, even though he wanted desperately to talk to her about what had happened the night before; what had happened to Jo and to him. *But what the hell am I going to say?*

He could go with the truth, which would sound absolutely implausible, even to a kid:

*Hey, Emma, guess what? Your dad can raise the dead! That new friend of mine you think is so pretty—Jo? Guess what? She was murdered! I found her strangled in a closet, and I brought her back to life! How cool is that?*

Of course, the alternative was to lie, and that was equally unappealing:

*Hey, Emma, guess what? Marie's right—I went out on a bender last night! I drank myself into oblivion, picked up some woman I didn't even know and brought her home for a quick casual fuck! Then I spent the rest of the day sleeping off a bangover! Or better yet, I'm brain-damaged! Completely lacking in impulse control! How cool is that?*

He was trapped; damned if he did, double-damned if he didn't, and while he could just let it drop without saying anything, he would then feel like an even bigger shit heel. Whether he wanted or liked to admit it or not, Emma was growing up. She wasn't a baby anymore; she was old enough to know when something was wrong, old enough to be affected by it.

Emma looked up at him, her expression curious and shifting toward that pre-adolescent wariness again. "What is it, Dad?" she asked.

He shook his head and forced a smile as he left the room. “Nothing. It’s nothing, Em. Never mind.”

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“Where’s Emma?” Marie asked as she set a small stack of plates on the dining room table.

“She’s coming,” Jay replied as he began to pass the plates out, one atop each linen placemat. “I told her she could have a few more minutes on the phone.”

Marie made that *bmph*-ing noise again as she walked back into the kitchen. She returned within moments with a handful of silverware and stood, arms folded across her middle, as Jay took it and finished setting the table.

“I think you should call Dr. Thompson,” she said at length.

He had his back to her, so when he grimaced, she didn’t see it. She’d gotten over being angry with him, then, at least enough for her to say more than three words to him. “Marie, I’m fine.”

Dr. Thompson was his neuropsychologist, who had helped Jay deal with the emotional effects of the car accident and his injuries. He’d coached Jay in the various ways his head trauma might affect his behavior in both the short- and long-terms.

“You’re not fine, Jay,” she said. “Something is going on and I think you should call your doctor about it. This makes two days in a row you’ve done things that are completely out of character for you—staying out until all hours of the night without even calling to let us know you’re alright or where you’re at, stumbling in well after midnight, bringing home some tramp you—”

“She’s not a tramp,” Jay cut in, his own brows narrowing now.

“I was here, Jay. I was sitting right in there on the sofa when you got home.” Marie shoved an emphatic forefinger toward the living room. “You didn’t even notice me, didn’t answer me when I called to you. You staggering around like a

zombie, that woman too drunk to even walk so you had to carry her, both of you crashing into things—you still haven't noticed the hall lamp is gone. You knocked it over and broke it."

*Jesus Christ.* Jay shoved the heel of his hand against his brow, humiliated and aghast. How could he explain himself now? How could he argue against what she'd seen with her own eyes—and not make her think he'd lost his fucking mind?

"I'm sorry, Marie," he said quietly, hoarsely.

"Thank God Emma was asleep," she said. "She wanted to sit up with me. She was worried about you. I can't imagine what she would have thought to see you like that."

*I can't either,* Jay thought in dismay.

"After everything that poor child has been through in her life," Marie said. "If what happened had nothing to do with when you were hurt, then you should be ashamed of yourself, because it was well within your control. I've never known you to be irresponsible and selfish, not in all the years I've known you, and certainly not where Emma is concerned. But if you're telling me there's no other explanation for what's been going on here this weekend other than your own poor choices, then I'm shocked and saddened and more than a little disappointed in you."

She marched past him, returning to the kitchen, and there was nothing he could say to defend himself, nothing he could do, because he couldn't tell her the truth.

"Marie, I...I'm sorry," he said again helplessly. When she looked at him over her shoulder, he said it again. "I'm sorry."

"This isn't going to be a pattern, is it?" she asked. "Something new, the way things will be around here from now on?"

"No." He shook his head, looking down at the floor, abashed.

“Because if it is, tell me now and I’ll give you my notice. I love you and Emma like you’re both my own, but I’m not going to go through another weekend like this.”

“No, Marie. I promise. I swear to Christ.”

“Let’s leave Him out of this.” She brushed past him, entering the dining room again, bearing a ceramic bowl filled with mashed potatoes.

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Late that night, after Marie had left and Emma had been tucked into bed, she pushed back her covers and climbed out of bed. She’d been sleeping, nestled comfortably beneath the heavy folds of her sheets and comforter, when all at once, her eyes had opened, her mind snapping suddenly, inexplicably wide awake.

*Something’s wrong.*

She got out of bed and stood for a long moment in the middle of her room, bare-footed, her hair tangled about her head as she’d squinted blearily around. Everything seemed just as it had before she’d gone to bed—her bookshelves, desk, toy box and dresser all outlined in dim yellow light and heavy shadows from the glow of her bedside nightlight. Nothing looked out of place, and yet that peculiar but unshakable feeling remained.

*Something’s wrong.*

She heard the muted sound of a voice speaking from beyond her bedroom, and curious, she tiptoed toward the door. *Dad.*

She pressed her ear to the door and heard him again, laughing this time. Puzzled, she eased the door open and stole out into the dark hallway. His bedroom door was ajar, spilling a narrow beam of light out across the corridor floor and wall. She could hear his voice as he talked beyond the threshold; he was on the phone.

Emma knelt at the doorway and tried to peer through the sliver of open space. When her father walked past the door, close enough that she could feel the breeze from his



movement against her face, she drew back, wide-eyed and startled.

“...I’m glad, too,” he was saying, and she heard his footsteps as he changed directions, pacing barefooted across the hardwood floor. “I don’t blame you for that, Jo.”

Jo. No wonder she’d heard him laughing, why the tone of his voice made it sound like he was smiling even now. He was on the phone with Jo.

“I would like that, too,” he said. “How about dinner? How about tomorrow?” He sounded farther away now, across the room, and she risked easing the door open a bit more to peek. She saw him in front of the windows flanking the far wall, a semi-circular arrangement of panes that formed an alcove where he kept his television. He stood with his back to the door, and thus to Emma, parting the closed Venetian blinds with his fingertips and looking out into the darkness beyond. When he laughed, turning away from the windows, Emma shrank back into the shadowy sanctuary of the hall.

“How about breakfast, then?” he said. “I can meet you somewhere after I drop Emma off at school.”

He was happy. Jo had called him and that made him happy. She knew it. Just like she always did.

She should have been happy for him, and a part of her was, but all at once, Emma realized there was another part of her that still felt uneasy. She glanced over her shoulder; never one to be afraid of the dark, suddenly the shadows of the corridor, broken only by the splinter of light coming from her father’s door, and a pale, dim splash of illumination spilling from the kitchen where Marie had left the overhead light above the range aglow, seemed ominous. She felt the tiny hairs along the backs of her arms prickle and she shivered.

*It’s just dark, she told herself. Stop being silly. Go back to your room and get in bed before Dad catches you—because if he does, then he’s not going to be happy anymore, and you won’t be, either.*

Emma rose to her feet and tiptoed down the hallway. Ignoring her own inner admonition, she crept past her bedroom doorway and headed for the living room. The closer

she drew, the more her anxiety mounted. She stole past the sectional sofa, toward one of the large, nearly floor-to-ceiling windows along the far wall. The blinds had all been closed, but she could still see muted grey-blue light seeping through them from the streetlamps outside.

Emma stood in front of one of the windows for a long, uncertain moment, before poking her fingers between two slats in the blinds and spreading them slightly apart, as she'd seen her father do. She leaned forward and peered through the narrow opening; her breath frosted almost instantly in a dim haze against the cold glass.

It was snowing again, an observation that might have ordinarily delighted Emma. She could see it coming down in large, heavy flakes and clusters, dusting the sidewalks and shrouding cars parked along either side of their narrow block. There was nothing else to see; it was late, and all of the windows in neighboring buildings were dark. Only one or two porches, much further down the block, remained aglow with twinkling Christmas lights. Everyone else had turned theirs off for the night. Nothing moved outside. No cars passed. No people walked outside. She didn't see any stray cats stealing from alley to alley between the close-knit brownstones, and no dogs trotting along the empty streets to sniff at trash cans for food.

There was nothing that she could see, and yet Emma had the strangest sensation that there was something there nonetheless, or more specifically, *someone*.

*He's watching us*, a part of her mind whispered, the part that always seemed to know things, even when it shouldn't. *He's out there and he's watching us. He followed Dad home.*

Emma drew away from the blinds, sucking in a sharp, frightened breath, snatching her hand back so quickly, the blinds snapped noisily closed.

"Emma?"

She whirled in new start, frightened anew by the silhouetted figure of a man standing at the threshold of the

living room, bathed in shadows from the glow of stove light from the kitchen.

“What are you doing up, honey?” her dad asked, walking toward her. “It’s late. You should have been sleeping hours ago.”

As he came into better view, his face discernable to her now despite the shadows, Emma heaved a quiet but heavy sigh of relief. “It’s snowing again.”

“Is it?” He leaned past her, peeking through the blinds and out the window. She wanted to cry out to him not to, to grasp him by the free hand and jerk him away from the glass, but she stood there, immobilized, wide-eyed and rigid.

“Hey, it’s coming down pretty good. If this keeps up, we might just wind up with a white Christmas. That’d be...” He glanced down at her, and in the light filtering in from the street, he must have noticed her aghast expression. His brows lifted, the light humor in his face fading. “Emma, what’s wrong?” He knelt in front of her, pressing his hand against first her forehead, then her cheek, checking for fever. “Do you feel okay?”

She shook her head, all at once feeling inexplicably close to tears. “Did you have a bad dream?” he asked, and when she nodded, his expression softened all the more. “Come here.”

He drew her against his shoulder. Emma tucked her face against his neck and clung fiercely to his shirt. “Can I sleep with you tonight?” she whispered near his ear.

Just as she was never fearful of the dark, she never asked to sleep in his room. She knew the question surprised him, but he nodded anyway. “Sure, Em.”

He turned around and held her hand, leading her toward the hallway. Emma peeped over his shoulder as they left the living room, her eyes pinned on the windows.

*He knows where we live now. He followed Dad home.*

*Shut up*, she thought to that nagging little voice, that part of her mind that she sometimes wished would simply go away. *Please just shut up and leave me alone.*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jo shook as she hung up the phone. She had been trembling even before she'd picked up the line and dialed the only number listed in the phone book for *J. Frances*. She'd kept telling herself it was crazy to call him; hell, she was telling herself that even now. But once she'd been home for the evening, behind the double-deadbolts and locked windows of her house, once she'd heated up a frozen dinner and downed several glasses of bargain-shelf chardonnay to help quiet her restless nerves, she again found herself jumping at shadows again.

She'd tried to call Charles, but Gina had answered, telling Jo that he had picked up an extra twelve-hour shift at the hospital.

"He's on the third floor tonight," Gina had said. "You can probably reach him through the unit secretary."

"That's alright," Jo had said, not wanting to bother Charles over something as foolish as her being chicken-shit to be alone in her own home. Besides, the third floor was the cardiac/acute care ward, and Charles had been jockeying for a promotion to that unit for the last several months. He frequently picked up shifts there, even though it meant walking the floor and not supervising, as he did on the medical-surgical wing, where he normally worked with Jo. She knew he was trying hard to make a good impression on the third floor staff and she didn't want to compromise that for him.

"Has he seemed alright to you lately?" Gina had asked, interrupting Jo's thoughts.

“What?”

“Charles. He’s just...I don’t know. He’s been acting different lately. Has he seemed alright to you?”

Jo had thought about it momentarily. “I guess so,” she replied. “Really tired, maybe. But he’s been picking up a lot of extra shifts. He really wants to get on full-time in CAC.”

After saying good-bye to Gina, Jo had sat on her couch, an afghan draped about her legs, the cordless phone cradled in her lap. She’d thought about going to bed, but knew all she’d do was lay beneath her blankets, blinking up at the ceiling, cringing and cowering at every little creak or groan. She’d reached for the phone book, not really intending to call Jay. After all, she’d figured, what could she possibly tell him? *Sorry I ducked out of our make-out session today. I thought you were married. I didn’t realize your wife was dead, killed in a car crash. Since that’s the case, how about you come over and pick up where we left off?*

For the first time since her divorce, Jo had found herself lonely, longing for the security that she’d once enjoyed just to know she wasn’t alone in the house; that Rich was there, even if in the other room. She missed having someone to turn to when she was frightened, someone who could comfort and reassure her.

She’d looked up his number, then chewed on her thumbnail and channel-surfed for another twenty minutes, trying to convince herself she was crazy to even think about calling him. *Besides, it’s probably not even his number anyway. How many people named J. Frances can there be in a city this size?*

Apparently, not too many, because Jay answered the phone himself on the second ring. Only then did Jo take notice of the time and bite her teeth against a groan. *Oh, shit, he’s got a kid—one I’m sure is in bed, or at least was in bed!*

“Hi, it...it’s Jo Montgomery.” She’d thought about hanging up on him without saying a word. Her number was unlisted, so even if he had caller I.D., he wouldn’t have been able to find out it was her. But just hearing his voice, even if only saying “hello” in a cautious, curious tone, as if he was wondering who in the hell would be calling him so late, stirred

that nest of butterflies in her belly, and they fluttered about happily.

“Well, hi,” he’d said, sounding surprised and—unless she was mistaken—pleased.

They had launched into a conversation that had lasted nearly two hours. She’d started things out by apologizing to him for her hasty retreat. “One of the nurses inside told me what happened to you...to your wife,” she’d said, feeling tongue-tied and intrusive. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I didn’t realize.”

“How could you?” he’d replied, not sounding troubled in the least. “I mean, I wanted to tell you. I was going to. I tried to tell you, but you got out of the car.”

Within moments, her anxiety was gone, her fear of being alone in the house, and he had her laughing out loud. She enjoyed another two glasses of wine just for pleasure, as she always had, and not to try and escape the insecurities of her own mind. Just before they hung up some time later, in a moment of admitted impetuosity, she’d said, “I’d like to see you again.”

“I would like that, too,” he’d said, causing those damn butterflies to erupt anew. “How about dinner? How about tomorrow?”

She’d laughed at his enthusiasm. “I can’t. I’m working tomorrow, seven at night until seven the next morning. It’s a bitch but it pays well.”

“How about breakfast, then?” Jay said. “I can meet you somewhere after I drop Emma off at school.”

The wine had made her bold, her mouth have a mind of its own. “How about you meet me at the hospital on Tuesday morning, seven-thirty?”

“It’s a date,” he’d agreed, and the word *date* had left her feeling giddy and giggly like teenager again.

It was snowing again when Jo went to bed. She peeked out the window, peering between the slats in her blinds long enough to see large, fluffy flakes drooping down from the

thick overhang of clouds overhead, dancing and spiraling in the streetlight. It left an unbroken blanket against the front yard that made her feel comforted if only because there were no footprints apparent, nothing to indicate anyone had been stealing about the bungalow. Nothing, that is, except for a zig-zagging series of diminutive indentations in the sparkling white. She caught sight of her neighbor's cat, a fat grey tabby named Christopher Robin, sitting almost directly beneath her window in the middle of a mulch bed and landscaping buried beneath the snow. She looked at Christopher Robin and the cat looked back at her, his fur dusted like a powdered-doughnut with snow.

"Guard the fort for me, kitty," Jo murmured, moving away from the window. She switched off her bedside lamp and rolled onto her side beneath her blankets. She didn't recall closing her eyes, but she must have had some point, because the next thing she knew, it was morning.

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The next evening, after Jo had arrived at the hospital and received her shift report from the preceding nurse on duty, she stopped by the unit station where Charles was waiting for her, leaning over the counter, a new, freshly laminated ID card in his outstretched palm.

"Thought you might like this," he said.

"Thank you," she replied, clipping it to her smock pocket, smiling sweetly.

"What happened to the other one? Did you lose it?"

Jo's smile curdled somewhat. "I...I guess so."

Nathan Gambit was sitting behind Charles in front of the chart rack and when she caught sight of him, her smile faltered all the more. True to his word, Charles had put the younger man on clerical duty for the shift, tucking him in a back corner of the station and—Jo hoped—insuring that's he'd keep good and clear of her the night through.

"Did it fall out of your pocket or something at Respite House yesterday?" Charles asked and she blinked at him in surprise. "Mick said he saw you there," he supplied. When this



didn't immediately register with her, he added, "Mick. You know. Gary McAdams, Gina's partner. Drives an ambulance—flashing lights, big loud siren. We tried to fix you up with him once. Last summer, I think."

"Oh," Jo said. She'd nearly forgotten; it had been actually been a double date with Charles and Gina one night, an excruciating evening of forced pleasantries and idle conversation over pizza and beers. It wasn't Gary's fault, she supposed. He'd been a gentleman, nice enough, and had tried his best to keep her entertained. But in the end, she just hadn't been ready for a date, no matter how casual, and she'd kept shooting Charles withering glances all night: *I will get you for this*. "Yeah. I saw him. Maybe you're right. Maybe I did lose it there."

"Mick said you were with some guy." Charles said this with a pointed look and a curious inflection in his voice, clearly asking without necessarily saying aloud, *So who was he?*

She could feel Nathan looking at her; could catch his attention out of the corner of her eye and did her best to ignore him, to keep her focus squarely on Charles' face.

"Mick thought he might have been hassling you," Charles said.

"No." Jo managed a bark of laughter. "He wasn't. He...he was just someone I know, that's all. A friend."

Charles nodded once, his brow hooked slightly, lending his face an expression that said: *Bullshit, Jo*. It occurred to her that Gina may be right to be concerned. He did look haggard.

"You feeling okay?" she asked, eager to change the subject and feeling sheepish and sort of ashamed that this was the first time she'd really taken notice of how tired Charles really seemed to be.

"I'm fine," he said with an immediate frown. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?" He waved her away as if shooing a fly. "Go on. Get your med cart. You'll have to help the aide on potty runs tonight. She's the only one down your hall."

"I can help," Nathan offered.

"No, you can't," Charles replied sharply, with a glower over his broad shoulder that caused the younger man to cringe. "You're pulling charts tonight. Jo administers controlled substances intravenously and debrides open wounds on a regular basis. I think she can handle a bed pan."

She gave Charles a smile. *Thank you*, she tried to convey, and for a moment, the shadow of fatigue lifted a bit from him. He dropped her a quick wink before turning away.

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At the end of her shift twelve hours later, as the sun was beginning to cast a faint glow against the overcast sky, Jo sat in the break room, holding a compact in one hand and trying to pat powder over the weary shadows under her eyes with the other.

"Make up?" Charles asked, sounding surprised, sitting across from her at the table. They'd both delivered their change-of-shift reports and had punched out, technically off the clock. He held a tall, steaming Styrofoam cup of coffee and sipped at it carefully.

"What?" she asked, frowning. "I wear make up sometimes."

"Since when?"

"Don't you have a home to go to or something?" she asked, snapping the compact closed and shoving it in her coat pocket.

"Don't you? Or are you hanging out, waiting for Nathan Gambit to come along?" His eyes gleamed mischievously. "Is that what the make up's about?"

She stood and slapped him in the head as she walked around the side of the table. "Fuck you."

"Such filthy language." Charles laughed, rising and following her as she left the room. They waited side by side for the elevator. "You kiss Nathan Gambit with that mouth?"

Jo laughed, slapping him again. "Stop it. You're awful."

As they rode the crowded elevator down to the main lobby together, he glanced at her. "Want me to walk you to your car? All kidding aside, I didn't see ol' Lurch leave the floor after shift end."

"That's okay." She checked her watch. Seven twenty-two. Her heart hammered suddenly, nervously.

"You sure?" Charles asked.

"Yes," she replied and because she knew he wasn't going to let it go, she added carefully: "I'm getting a ride."

His brows raised in surprise. "With who?" The elevator stopped and she tried to shoulder her way through the mob toward the door. "With who?" he asked again, catching her by the sleeve. After a moment, the puzzlement in his face faded and he laughed. "You have a date!"

She flapped his hand loose as they walked across the hospital lobby. "You have a date," he exclaimed again when she didn't respond. "Holy shit, let me check outside for the plague of locusts and the rain of toads! Jobeth Montgomery has a date!"

Her cheeks blazed with mortified color. "Stop already."

"So who is he? That guy from Respite House that Mick saw you with?"

She sighed. "Yes, Charles, that guy. Jesus, are you happy now? Go home and leave me alone."

"Oh, absolutely not!" He laughed. "I'm staying right here with you so I can meet him! I want to shake the hand of anyone who could get you to agree to a date."

"It's not a date, for Christ's sake," she growled. "It's breakfast. We're just going out to breakfast. Then he's going to work and I'm going home."

"Alone? Well, what good is that?"

Jo caught sight of Jay standing ahead of them, waiting by the automatic glass doors at the hospital's entrance. He was scanning the lobby, watching people congregate around the elevators or make their way to the cafeteria.

"Go away, Charles," she said.

"What? Why?"

"Because he's here and you're going to embarrass me."

Charles pretended to pick his nose, then licked his fingertip. "No, I'm not."

"God!" She gave him a shove. "Please just go away,"

He laughed, holding his hands up in concession.

"Okay, okay. I'm going. But I expect a full report when we come back on duty tonight."

"Fine."

"I mean it. I want details. Including his name."

"Charles."

"His name is Charles? Isn't that a coinci—?"

She pointed toward the door. "Go."

"Going," he said, smiling broadly, walking away.

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Jay smiled when he saw Jo walking across the lobby toward him. She'd been working all night long, since seven o'clock the previous evening, but you couldn't tell it to look at her. She was radiant to him, her smile bright, her long hair bouncing against her shoulders, her cheeks graced with a hint of shy blush as she met his gaze.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi, yourself," she said. They stood facing one another, caught in an awkward moment in which neither knew quite what to do next.

"I brought this for you," he said at length, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out the plastic ID card she'd left inadvertently at his brownstone. She took it, looking

curious and puzzled, and only then did he realize she had another, apparently newer one clipped to the front of her uniform shirt. "Guess I'm a little late with it."

She laughed, her mouth spreading in that glorious, contagious grin. "No, it's fine." She studied the card for a long moment, her smile faltering somewhat, her eyes growing troubled, as if simply seeing it brought back to her mind memories of what had happened to her. She tucked it quickly into her pocket, then zipped up the front of her coat, as if hoping to bury it out of sight and mind.

"Where would you like to go for breakfast?" he asked, glancing at the cafeteria because it was close at hand. "Here?"

"No," she replied, catching him by the hand and leading him through the sliding glass doors. He'd taken off his gloves upon entering the hospital, and her palm was warm and soft against his, her long, slim fingers comfortably settled between his own. "I think I've had enough of this place for awhile. Come on. I have somewhere else in mind."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jo directed him to the Gateway Diner on the south side of downtown, near the waterfront. The long, narrow building was a throw back to a bygone era; with a shiny chrome-paneled exterior and curved roof, it looked more like an old Airstream trailer than a restaurant. The windows were frosted from the inside with steam and when he opened the door for her, a gust of warm air—a stark contrast to the frigid morning and heavy with the aroma of bacon grease and melted butter—belted him in the face.

“You’ve never been here before?” Jo looked surprised as she shrugged off her parka, hanging it on a hook beside a booth before sliding into the glossy red vinyl bench. The interior of the restaurant was lined with framed black-and-white photographs that provided nostalgic glimpses into the diner’s past, along with old signs reading *Coffee 5-cents* or *Brains & Eggs, 25-cents*. When he shook his head, hanging his own coat and sitting down across from her, she laughed. “Wow. I can’t believe that. I thought everyone in the city had.”

The waitress was as vintage as the diner itself, an older woman with frizzy, orange-blonde hair held back from her face by an interlocking network of strategically arranged bobby pins. She wore a pale pink polyester uniform with an immaculately white apron stretched across her broad hips and a plastic name tag—*Ginger*—pinned above the generous swell of her left breast.

“Hey, Jo-Jo,” she said with a fond, familiar smile, clearly acquainted with Jo.

“Hey, Ginger,” Jo replied and when the waitress spared a curious but appreciative glance at Jay, she added, “This is my friend, Jay Frances. Jay, this is Ginger.”

“Nice to meet you.” Jay offered his hand.

“Wow, one with manners.” Ginger accepted the shake, her grip firm but friendly. She laughed and dropped Jo a wink. “You’ll want to keep this one, honey. They don’t make them like that too much anymore. You just getting off work?”

“Yes,” Jo replied and when Ginger asked if she wanted coffee, she nearly moaned aloud. “You’re a goddess, Ginger.”

“How about you, honey?” the waitress asked Jay.

“Sounds good,” he said, and she nodded once, turning and crossing the narrow space between the booth and the chrome-trimmed counter. “I take it you’ve been here before...?” he said to Jo.

She laughed. “Only two or three times a week. At least. It’s my home away from home. It’s hard to cook for one. I live off Minute Rice and microwave popcorn if I don’t eat here.”

He thought back to his own clumsy attempts to cook on those rare nights when Marie wasn’t there, efforts that usually consisted of wrangling open a can of ravioli for him and Emma to share, Chinese take out from Joe’s Wok or pizza delivery from Danny O’s. “I can appreciate that.”

“This place has been around since the 1920s,” Jo said as he took a laminated menu from a clip behind the napkin dispenser. “That’s why I’m surprised you’ve never been. Union Grand Terminal is right over there, about a half a block...” She pointed out the window in the direction of the city’s historic train station, which had long ago been converted into a museum complex. “That’s how it got its name. People used to come into the city by train and stop here first to eat. They called it the gateway to the city.”

Ginger returned with twin white ceramic mugs in one hand and a steaming glass carafe of coffee in the other. “You need a few minutes?”

“I don’t know.” Jay glanced between her and Jo.  
“What’s good?”

“What isn’t?” Ginger replied, making him laugh. “If you’re on one of those low-calorie, no-fat diets, I’d say you’re out of luck here, but otherwise, we’ve got you covered.”

“The corned beef hash is to die for,” Jo said with a wistful enough expression on her face to let him know she wasn’t just saying so for Ginger’s benefit. “The steak and eggs are good, too. Me, I’m going with the Belgian waffles.”

“Hash sounds good,” Jay said and Ginger made murmured indicate her approval.

When she’d walked away from the table, calling their order out toward the window of the short-order kitchen, Jo said, “This is the first place I came when I arrived in the city. Maybe that’s why I love it so much.”

“How long have you lived here?” he asked. She’d mentioned on the phone that she was originally from West Virginia, but they’d moved on to other topics from there without much more elaboration.

“Seven years, I think.” Jo looked pensive for a moment. “Like a dummy, I moved out here with my high school sweetheart. I thought I was in love.” She laughed. “What a dope. We were both starry-eyed kids fresh off the turnip truck and moved into this dumpy hotel over on Lancaster where all we had was a bed and a hotplate and had to share a bathroom with the dope dealer across the hall. I had all my worldly possessions in one big duffel bag and before we’d even dropped them off at the Waldorf—that’s what I called the hotel—we came here. Straight off the bus.” She shook her head, still smiling. “How about you?”

He took a sip of coffee. It was hotter than hell, bitter enough to curdle milk and he savored it. “I followed my brother here after college. He was already working for the police department, had been for several years. I grew up in Kansas, went to college at K-State, hadn’t really ever seen much of a big city. Seemed like as good a time as any.”



They didn't have to wait long for their food, but while they did, they chatted amicably. Jay learned that things between Jo and her high school sweetheart had dissolved within six months of their arrival in the city, but that she'd been too headstrong and proud to tuck her tail between her legs and return to West Virginia. Instead, she'd moved out of the fleabag hotel...

("...and into an equally shitastic efficiency apartment in this little old lady's basement," she'd told him with a laugh. "The plumbing leaked, the radiators rattled and the cupboards had more cockroaches than food in them, but it was mine and it was home.")

She'd applied for a scholarship to nursing school through a local hospital and been awarded free tuition in exchange for employment upon her graduation. When he raised his brows, impressed, she blushed. "I was always pretty book-smart," she said. "Made good grades, the honor roll, all of that. It's common sense I've always been missing."

He laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I always pick the wrong..." she began, then her voice faltered and the color in her cheeks brightened. "...men," she finished clumsily, cutting her eyes to the table.

"Not this time," Ginger said, coming to her rescue by presenting them each with laden plates of food. She smiled wanly at Jay. "I told you, honey—this one's a keeper."

Jo still looked vaguely mortified and wouldn't look at him as she drizzled maple syrup on her waffle. He watched, curious and fascinated, as she slowly panned the bottle over her plate, allotting just enough of the amber-colored liquid to perfectly fill each square-shaped depression in the waffle. There was something charming and meticulous about it.

She glanced up, caught him looking and blushed all over again. "What?"

"Nothing." He shook his head then leaned across the table, pointing with the tines of his fork. "You missed one."

She blinked at him in momentary surprise, then relaxed and laughed, her mouth spreading in the broad,

beautiful grin that had come to haunt his almost every waking thought. “I can’t help it,” she said. “I like to make sure I get enough syrup in every bite.”

When he tasted his first mouthful of hash, the salty tang of the corned beef juxtaposed with the crisp, buttery fried potatoes, he closed his eyes and made a contented, mumbling sound.

“So why did you decide to become an architect?” Jo asked, following the waffle ridges and cutting a bite with the same fastidiousness with which she’d applied her syrup.

“I don’t know,” he replied, making her laugh. “Seriously. I have no idea. I was always really good at math in school and had some artistic ability—years of doodling Spiderman and wanting to make my own comic books, I guess. My first year in college, I thought about declaring a history major, but my advisor swung me toward architecture. I wasn’t bad at it, made good enough grades, so I figured what the hell. Better money—better chance of finding a job—than drawing Spiderman for a living.”

She smiled. “How’d you end up working for the city?”

“It was my first job out of school.” He shrugged. “I like it there. Besides the work is steady and the benefits are good. Paid retirement, health insurance. When you have a kid, you have to think about those things. Lucy used to tell me I could make better money if I joined a private firm, but it’s hard to change when you get used to something...comfortable there.”

“Lucy?” Jo raised her brow.

He’d mentioned her without even thinking about it. Now it was his turn to cut his eyes awkwardly to his plate. “Yeah. My wife.”

He glanced up and saw her expression shift, growing somewhat disconcerted. “She’s still dead,” he offered, trying to make light of the inadvertent comment.

Because he’d said this with a crooked smile, she humored him enough to at least crack a polite one of her own. “How did it happen?” she asked quietly.

“A car accident,” he replied. Ordinarily, he might have felt uncomfortable broaching the subject, but just as he had from the first, he felt remarkably at ease with Jo, no reservations whatsoever in being frank with her. “It was late, the roads were wet and slippery, and a guy skidded over into our lane, coming at us head on. I tried to swerve out of his way, but he wound up T-boning us on Lucy’s side of the car. Killed her instantly. I smashed my head into the side window. At least that’s what I’ve been told. I don’t remember anything about it. I was in a coma for about a month, had what they called ‘traumatic brain injury.’” She was a nurse; the term was familiar to her and she nodded, her lips pressed together, her brows lifted sympathetically.

“You’ve recovered well,” she observed.

“I had physical therapy for almost two years, speech therapy, too,” he said. “Had to learn to walk and talk right again. I still get migraines now and then. My neurologist thinks they’re related.”

Jo looked at him for a long moment. “What happened to you...” she said carefully, leaning forward and speaking quietly. “With your head, I mean. Is that...when the accident happened, is that why you didn’t...why you couldn’t...”

Her voice faltered but he knew what she meant, what she wanted to know. *Is that why you didn’t raise Lucy from the dead?*

He and Paul had debated on occasion whether or not this had constituted the ability to control his resurrection abilities. Any other time he’d been within close proximity to a dead body, he’d been helpless to stop himself from touching them, from channeling whatever force or energy that would surge through him, reanimating them. But, Paul had argued, if that power—which had always felt to him like something wild and electric, beyond his command—hadn’t come upon him, forcing him to act despite his own injuries in the immediate aftermath of the crash, then didn’t that mean it wasn’t something omnipotent after all?

*“Maybe it’s something you have to learn to control, that’s all,” Paul had said. “Maybe it’s something you have to practice, like riding a bike, or—”*

*"I'm not practicing to use the goddamn thing!" Jay had snapped back. "Jesus Christ, I don't want the fucking power, period, never mind using it again and again trying to figure out how to get it down pat!"*

He wanted to tell that to Jo, wanted to make her understand that his abilities weren't something he could just summon on a whim and that her recovery—complete and flawless—was equally beyond his power or control. *You could be eating through a tube in your gut right now, just as easily as you're eating that waffle, Jo. You could be as healthy as a horse, but as mindless as a doll, all thanks to me.*

"Yeah," he said instead. "It's why I didn't touch Lucy. Why I didn't use my power with her."

Jo's face was still soft with sympathy, her hazel eyes round and sorrowful. "That must be so hard for you to think about, deal with," she said.

*I can't wait to make love to you again,* Lucy had written in an email to Michael. *To feel your hands and mouth against my skin, to feel you inside of me.*

*Not really,* he thought. *Not anymore.*

"Lucy was going to leave me," he said, and Jo blinked at him in surprise. "We'd been having problems. Nothing serious, or so I'd thought at the time. Just the usual shit...you know, we'd grown apart; we didn't talk much anymore, and with Emma just a baby, whenever we did talk, it was about potty training or play dates. After she died, I found her laptop and was going through her emails. I found some she'd exchanged with another man, someone she'd once worked with. She was sleeping with him. She'd been planning to leave me for him. I should have seen it all along, but I didn't. I didn't have a clue. What is it you said? What a dope."

"Jay, I'm sorry." Jo reached across the table, draping her hand against his.

He tried to smile, shaking his head. "Hey, it happens."

"You're not a dope." She brushed the pad of her thumb atop his knuckles, a tender, comforting gesture. "We all want to see the best in people we love. Sometimes we want it

so bad...believe in it so much...we can't bring ourselves to see the bad things."

There was a forlorn edge in her voice as she spoke, a hint of melancholy that drew his gaze—and his curiosity. *So who let you down?* he wondered. *What sort of bad things were you willing to overlook in the name of love?*

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They finished breakfast and then tussled over the ticket that Ginger dropped conspicuously onto the tabletop between them.

"You paid for lunch," Jo protested, tugging halfheartedly on the bill.

"I invited you," he replied, snatching it from her hand. "My idea. My treat."

She laughed. "That's the worst excuse for logic I've ever heard."

The playful argument continued even as he held the door open for her and they walked outside onto the damp, salted sidewalk. "You should let me have a turn," Jo said.

"Fine. You can get me coffee sometime."

She stopped, folding her arms across her chest. "How about now?"

Jay laughed. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"No," she said, making him laugh again.

He glanced at his watch. He'd already called in to the office that he'd be late. What was a few more minutes? "Okay, fine." He started to walk back toward the Gateway Diner, but she caught him by the arm.

"You said *get* coffee, not *buy* coffee," she said, and when he arched his brow, puzzled, the corner of her mouth hooked in a wry and mischievous smile. "Come on." She wheeled him about, steering him down the street toward his car. "We're going to my house."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*What the hell are you doing?* part of Jo's mind screamed as she pulled her Datsun out of the hospital parking lot. Jay was behind her, following in his station wagon. They'd left the diner and returned to get her car, underway now to her house. *Are you out of your goddamn mind, bringing him home with you? You shouldn't be doing this—any of it!*

The entire ride from the Gateway to the hospital, she'd wanted to take it back somehow. The invitation had been completely, recklessly spontaneous, something she'd been thinking and wanting inside of her mind, but had never meant to actually say. *Much less do*, she thought. *Jesus Christ, what was I thinking?*

But that was ridiculous. She knew what she'd been thinking—because she was *still* thinking it. *I want this man. I want to take him home, take his clothes off—take him.*

“God,” she said aloud, glancing in her rearview mirror at Jay, visible through the dashboard of his car. The heat in the Datsun was taking its usual damn sweet time in working, and her breath frosted in the air in front of her as she spoke. “I need to get a fucking grip.”

Twice at stoplights, she thought of putting the Datsun in park, of getting out and going to his driver's side window to tell him she'd changed her mind, something had come up; a family emergency, car trouble, scorching case of herpes—something. Three times, she nearly pulled into a gas station or fast food restaurant parking lot with the same idea in mind. But every time, she wouldn't do it, couldn't. *Because I'm nearly*

*there now, almost home, she thought. I've rolled the dice, so let's see where they land.*

Never mind the last two times she'd done something like this—first, when she'd followed her high school boyfriend from West Virginia to the city and again when she'd accepted Rich's marriage proposal—she'd wound up regretting it in a big, *big* way.

She pulled into her driveway and sat there with her engine idling, sending a thin, billowing cloud of exhaust swirling around the Datsun. Her driveway and sidewalks were still covered with snow, and she could see the tracks she'd left the night before as she'd plodded from her doorstep to her car, trekking across her yard.

*Okay, she told herself as she killed the engine and got out. It's not too late. You can still stop this. Just tell him you're too tired, that you need to go to bed. You've been working all night. He'll understand.*

"This is nice," Jay told her, closing the door to his Volvo and looking past her at the house.

He was being polite. She'd seen his brownstone, elegantly restored, stylishly appointed, with nothing cracked, peeling, leaking, dripping or second-hand in sight. She shrugged. "Home sweet home, I guess."

He followed her through the snow up to her porch, holding open the screen door as she unlocked the impressive and imposing set of heavy-duty deadbolt locks and opened the front door. Once done, however, she turned, standing on her threshold, keeping him stuck out on the porch. She wanted to tell him she'd changed her mind; she had emotional baggage to deal with, all kinds of mental and emotional insecurities and defenses to overcome that had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with him and everything to do with her ex-husband Rich. She wanted to explain that it had been a long time since she'd lowered her guard and this wasn't the first time she'd struggled to reconcile the person she wanted to be with the frightened woman she was, the one Rich had made out of her.

“You know what?” she said instead. “My...uh...my house is a mess. I don’t know what I was thinking. I...well, I wasn’t thinking, that’s what it was. I’ve been up all night and I’m hyped up on too much sugar from the diner...all that syrup. Why don’t we just—”

Jay hooked his hand against the back of her neck and pulled her against him. Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a startled breath as he kissed her. Her hands slapped against the front of his coat, her entire body rigid with surprise at first, and then she relaxed, opening her mouth, tangling her tongue against his, and closing her fingers against the lapels of his coat.

Jay walked her backwards into the house, until she stumbled, the back of her knees hitting the arm of a fir-green loveseat in her living room. He kicked the door shut behind him, slipping his hands from her face to tug against her coat, to fight with the zipper holding her parka closed.

When she sat back against the side of the loveseat, he went with her and she fumbled with the buttons of his coat. He shrugged his shoulders and flapped his arms to dislodge it, just as she did the same to send her parka dropping unceremoniously to the floor.

“We don’t have to do this.” He paused, drawing his mouth away from hers. His voice was hoarse and she could feel his growing arousal straining against the fly of his slacks, pushing against her.

“I know.” She caught his face between her hands—internal admonitions be damned—and pulled him close, kissing him again, her lips parted, her tongue pressing against his own in a clumsy, eager dance. When he jerked at her scrub top, she slipped her arms down through the sleeves; it was cut at the neckline in a wide V, and came off easily over her head.

She coiled her hand in his hair, guiding him as he kissed her neck, tracing his lips and tongue along those soft, warm places against her flesh where she directed him. She hiccupped for breath, her voice soft and whimpering as he kissed her through the thin, beige fabric of her bra. Her nipple hardened to a sharp, rigid point against the blade of his tongue



and when he slid his teeth against it lightly, her fingers tightened in his hair. She didn't protest or stop him as he pulled against the nylon, easing the cup away from her to reveal the soft, milky skin of her breast, the café-au-lait crown of her areola.

Jay pressed her back, laying her down against the loveseat. He drew her nipple fully into his mouth, drawing concentric circles against her trembling flesh with the tip of his tongue. He reached between her thighs, stroking against her through her scrub pants, making her gasp.

He freed her other breast from her bra and kissed her there. His lips blazed a trail south, following the contours of her belly, the outward curve of her hip, the slight indentation at the delta of her thigh joint. Hooking his hands beneath the elastic waistband of the scrubs, he pulled her panties and pants down together in a quick jerk, nearly to her knees. She shifted her weight beneath them, kicking her legs to send the pants tumbling to the floor, and then moaned, arching her back as his hand slid against her apex. He explored her first with his fingers and then with his mouth, teasing and tasting her, until at last he leaned back, fighting to unbuckle his belt, to jerk his shirt tails loose from the waist band of his slacks.

Jo reached for him and he leaned over, kissing her, drawing her tongue deeply into his mouth as he tucked one of her legs against his shoulder and entered her. She was wet and eager and he filled her with one deep, single thrust. Again and again, he plunged into her, feeling her tight, velveteen sheath envelop him. When she came, she hooked her fingers fiercely against his shoulders, digging into his skin with her fingernails. She bucked her hips beneath him, tightening in sudden, rhythmic spasms and cried out in a sharp, breathless voice. It was incredible, better even than her memories of her deathscape; better than anything she'd ever experienced in her life. Jay drove himself into her with one last, deep thrust, then crumpled against her, supporting his weight shakily with his hands and gasping for breath.

After a long moment, she touched his face to draw his gaze. His eyes had been shut (a point that, unbeknownst to either of them, his daughter's teacher would have found worth

knowing). He looked down at Jo as she smiled, her cheeks flushed, her face glossed with perspiration, her hair clinging loosely to her brow.

“My God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered, and her smile widened. *I’m in love with this man*, she realized. *Impossible as it seems—as ridiculous as that sounds, I’ve fallen in love with him. I’ve been in love with him from the moment I first set eyes on him in my deathscape.*

Jo brushed her fingertips against him, outlining his mouth. “I think you should call in sick to work today,” she said, making them both laugh.

“Deal,” he replied with a nod, leaning over and kissing her.

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Four hours later, they’d moved from the loveseat to the bedroom—with stops at the living room floor, dining room table, kitchen counter, and shower along the way—and had yet to eat breakfast. Jay lay on his side in the bed with Jo spooned against him, her hair soft against his face, his arm draped over her waist, his fingers twined through hers. It had been so long since he had last felt the warmth of a woman against him, or had worn himself out with enthusiastic lovemaking. He didn’t want to move; he didn’t want the day to end. *If I lie here the rest of my life with her in my arms, it wouldn’t be long enough.*

He kissed her shoulder, drawing her hair aside with his hand and lighting soft nibbles along the contours of her shoulder blade. “What happened here?” he asked, as his lips brushed past a series of narrow scars, alabaster even against her pale flesh.

His attention seemed to fluster her; she shrugged him away and rolled toward him, giving him the distinct impressions she didn’t want to discuss the scars, much less have him look at them. “I want to talk to your brother,” she said suddenly. “The one you said is a police detective.”

He was surprised by this; it seemed to come out of the blue. “Alright.” Because she seemed to be wanting—

needing—to hear more, he said, “Paul’s at his office today, I bet. We could—”

Jo shook her head. “I don’t want to go to the police station. I don’t want to talk to the police. Only to him. Today. Before I lose my nerve.”

*Why would you lose your nerve?* Jay wanted to ask, but kept mute, not wanting to frighten her off the idea altogether. He’d noticed the excessive locks on her front door; Jo seemed to have a real, if not inexplicable, anxiety over matters of personal security, and Jay was willing to bet this had existed long before her assault over the weekend at the mall. *Somebody frightened you, hurt you somehow, and now you don’t trust many people because of it—but especially the police. Why not, Jo? What is it you’re not telling me?*

Paul had warned Jay to stay away from Jo. He wondered what his brother’s reaction would be to discover Jay had spent half the day with her, and naked, no less. *He’ll probably plant his foot up my ass.*

“I’ll call him, then,” he told Jo. “See if he can meet us somewhere...” He glanced at her bedside clock. “...for lunch.”

This seemed to satisfy her, because she nodded, rolling away from him again. He couldn’t help but notice she drew her arm up, crossing it in front of her, draping her hand over her shoulder to cover her scars. “I don’t want you to think badly of me.”

Again, this seemed to come from nowhere. “What?” He shook his head. “No, Jo, of course not.”

“I...I mean...” She sounded distracted, anxious. “This isn’t like me. I don’t do things like this. I don’t just invite men to my house and...and...”

He pressed his lips against her shoulder. “I didn’t think you did.”

“It’s just...it’s been a long time for me...” she said, leaving this last to dangle in the air between them, as if there was something she wanted very badly to say, but struggled to put into words.

Jay propped himself on his elbow and eased her gently over to look up at him. To his surprise and dismay, her eyes were glossy with tears, and he brushed the cuff of his fingers against her cheek. “Hey.” He leaned over and kissed her. “You don’t owe me any explanation.”

“You don’t understand,” she said, and he kissed her again.

“I haven’t been with a woman since my wife died,” he told her. “I haven’t trusted anyone, wanted anyone since then. Until now—until you, Jo.” He cradled her face against his hand. “I know it sounds crazy, but I think you know how I feel, what I mean.”

She nodded mutely, a solitary tear spilling down from her lashes. He caught it against his thumb, brushing it away in a damp smear as he kissed her once more. As he shifted his weight, rolling toward her, she parted her thighs. He was already hardening again—a seemingly endless supply of stamina this beautiful woman had instilled in him—and when he entered her, sliding deeply, completely between her silken folds, he whispered her name.

*I love you, Jo.*

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To Jay’s surprise, Paul was at home, not his office, when he answered his cell phone. “Vicki’s not feeling well,” he said by way of explanation. “She’s got a doctor’s appointment in about an hour, and with the girls home for the holiday break, I figured I’d just take the day off.”

“Maybe we can come by then,” Jay suggested.

“We?”

Jay gritted his teeth. “Me and Jo Montgomery. She wants to talk to you about what happened on Friday night.”

He continued to grimace through the heavy silence that followed.

“Yeah, bring her by,” Paul said at length, startling the ever-loving shit out of Jay.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. About a half hour, how about that? Bethany’s watching a movie and M.K.’s grounded to her room. We can talk in the kitchen.”

“Sounds good,” Jay said, not believing how easily he was getting off. He was about to thumb off his cell phone when Paul interjected.

“Are you fucking her, Jay? No, never mind. I don’t even want to know.”

He hung up.

Jay glanced up and found Jo standing in the doorway, an oversized white terrycloth robe lashed loosely around her waist, her hair caught back in a drooping knot against the nape of her neck. He sat against the edge of her bed, still naked, his own clothes in haphazard piles strewn in a messy trail throughout the house leading from the living room to bedroom. She looked hesitant and anxious, and he tried to offer her a reassuring smile. “How’s half an hour sound?”

Clearly, from her expression, it didn’t sound good at all, and he knew she wished she’d never said anything, much less humored the idea to confide in Paul. “Okay,” she said, despite this, and she nodded once, walking back toward her bathroom. “Just let me freshen up before we go.”

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Paul Frances was six years older than Jay, and had Jo not been told they were brothers, she would never have guessed. Where Jay had a full head of dark hair and dark eyes to match, Paul had thinning, sandy-colored hair and blue eyes. He explained to Jo, as Jay had on their way over, that his wife was at a doctor's appointment, and though his teen-aged daughters were home from school, neither would disturb them while they spoke.

Paul lived in a split-level house in a relatively new neighborhood about twenty minutes outside of the city. It was an L-shaped structure, with the smaller segment, a prominent garage, facing the street and seeming to dominate the home's entire façade. Inside, it had a messy, lived-in appearance that hers often lacked; cluttered with furniture, books and papers, photographs stacked two and three deep along shelves and the living room mantle, a basket of unfolded laundry on the sofa, with folded towels, T-shirts and blue jeans piled on the cushions beside it.

Paul ushered Jo and Jay through the maelstrom, past a den that lay shadow-draped, the heavy drapes all drawn. Jo caught a glimpse of a girl sitting on a La-Z-Boy recliner watching TV inside, maybe thirteen or fourteen, with blond hair and large, curious eyes—presumably one of his daughters. Without pause or introduction, Paul guided them into a large kitchen with an eat-in space nestled in a cozy bank of wrap-around windows. The smell of fresh coffee was intoxicating.

He offered her a cup, but once it was in front of her and the moment of conversation upon them, Jo found she

couldn't take as much as a sip and settled for cradling the steaming mug between her hands. Jay sat beside her, close enough that their elbows brushed, and she watched as Paul slid into a chair across from them. His expression seemed relaxed, somewhere between curious and kind, but once he fixed his gaze on her, he kept it locked.

"I appreciate you coming," he said. "I know this must be hard for you."

Jo had thought he looked vaguely familiar upon their introduction, and now she realized why. She'd seen him on TV; he was the detective in charge of the police task force investigating the Watcher. The uneasiness she'd felt the night before—had felt every time she had found herself alone since Friday night—returned in full, twisting in her gut. She had wondered and worried if this had been her attacker, and now she realized that Jay and his brother feared the same thing.

She nodded at Paul. "Jay says you know," she said quietly, feeling clumsy and awkward. "What happened to me, I mean. What he can do."

"Yes," Paul replied. "I do. Why don't you tell me what happened before all of that? Before Jay arrived?"

It surprised her how readily details of her attack returned to her as she answered Paul's questions and described what had happened. She had tried to force memories of the event from her mind, and certainly hadn't spoken of it with anyone. But the more she talked, the more she remembered. Details came unbidden, from the way the man smelled...

"Like soap, hand soap or dish detergent," she offered, but then she frowned and shook her head. "No, it was different than that. Stronger."

...to the way he was built.

"He was tall and thick, muscular," she said, her eyes distant and down-turned toward her coffee cup as she remembered. "And strong. He was really strong."

Jay reached for her, draping his hand against hers, and she curled her fingers about his without even thinking about it. It felt comfortable and welcome to hold his hand, as though it

was something she had done every day of her life when she had found herself in need of support.

“He was wearing surgical gloves. Heavy duty latex. I could feel it against my skin when he...” Her voice faltered. “When he pulled my pants down.” She motioned to her throat with her hands. “He put something around my neck and choked me with it, pushed me down against the sink.”

She recounted the entire assault as Paul and Jay listened quietly with neither comment nor interruption. By the time she finished, she was clutching Jay’s hand so tightly, her knuckles nearly blanched, as if she clung to a lifeline.

“I never saw his face,” she said quietly, looking at Paul. She knew that was what he hoped for; that she could put a face to her assailant, help them put together a sketch of him or pick him out of a line-up. “Only the outline of him, his silhouette reflected in the faucet. When he knocked me onto the floor, the light overhead was going crazy, blinking on and off. I couldn’t get a look at him.”

“It’s alright,” Paul said. He looked ready to say more, leaning forward to speak, when the blond girl Jo had seen sitting in the den came into the kitchen.

“Daddy,” she said, addressing Paul, but blinking between Jay and Jo with shy fascination. “M.K. won’t come out of the bathroom.”

“I’d say she’s probably using it, then, Beth,” Paul replied.

“She’s got the window open and I think she’s smoking in there,” the girl, Beth, protested. “I can smell it through the door, Daddy. And I really need to go. I’ve knocked, but she yells at me to go away.”

Paul glanced at Jay and Jo, hooking his eyebrow and the corner of his mouth simultaneously in amusement. “Excuse me for a moment,” he said, rising to his feet. He left the kitchen, but his daughter remained, lingering shyly in the doorway.

“Hi, Bethany,” Jay said to the girl.



She smiled. "Hi, Uncle Jay. I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Thanks, honey. Me, too," Jay said. He noticed the direction of her attention, that she had spied him holding hands with Jo. "This is my friend, Jo Montgomery. Jo, this is my niece, Bethany."

"Hi, Bethany," Jo said. Bethany's smile grew somewhat uncertain, and she shrank back toward the corridor.

"Hullo," she said, offering a flip of her hand in a wave before turning and ducking after Paul.

Left alone in the kitchen for a moment, Jo and Jay sat in silence. At last, she became aware of just how fiercely she was clutching his hand and, feeling foolish, she released him altogether, folding her hands in her lap. "Sorry," she said, feeling color stoke in her cheeks. "I suppose I should let you get some circulation going again."

He laughed. "I didn't mind. Do you want some more coffee?"

She shook her head, looking down at the now-tepid cup she hadn't even touched in the first place. "No, thank you."

Silence again. Jo was aware of a clock on the wall for the first time, its tick-tocking punctuating the heavy quiet that had descended over the kitchen. She began to tap her fingertip against her coffee cup in time with its rhythm. *Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick*

She could see photographs stuck to the refrigerator door with magnets, including several of Jay with the bright-faced, beaming little girl she recognized from his front stoop. "That's Emma," Jay said, noticing where her attention was directed.

Jo smiled. "She's beautiful."

"You park your ass in that room and leave it there, M.K., I mean it," Paul called sharply, his footsteps heavy and quick as he came back down the stairs. "I'll deal with you in a minute."

“You are so *unfair!*” came a defiant, furious shout from upstairs, just as Paul returned to the kitchen.

He shook his head, sighing heavily. He carried a crumpled soft-pack of Marlboro Lights in his hand. He spared an inexplicably long glance at it, as if thinking about pocketing the smokes and then unceremoniously dropping them in the trash can. “Teens,” he muttered, looking between Jo and Jay as he returned to the table. “I’ll pay either of you to take them home with you.”

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“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Paul told Jo, taking a business card out from his wallet and pressing it against her palm. “But here’s my card. I’ll write my home number on the back. My cell’s on there, too. Call me anytime, day or night, if you need anything or see anything you think is suspect.”

“Are you sure?” Jo asked, glancing at Jay uncertainly. “What if he’s still watching me? What if he comes after me again?”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” Paul said. “It sounds like he was long-gone by the time Jay found you, which means he thinks you’re dead and would have no reason to watch you anymore. I think he’s keeping tabs on several women all at the same time, just looking for the right chance with any of them, so he’s moved on to someone else.” He clapped his hand gently against her shoulder and smiled at her, paternal and reassuring. “Don’t worry. But like I said, you’ve got my numbers. Call if you need anything.”

“Will you let me know if you catch him?” Jo asked.

Paul opened the back door, standing aside to let them exit. “You mean *when* I catch him,” he said, dropping Jo a wink. “And yes, I will.”

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“Are you sure there’s nothing to worry about?” Jay asked Paul that night after Emma had gone to bed and Marie had headed home. Cradling his cell phone between his shoulder and ear, he parted window blinds, peeking out of the

living room and down toward the darkened street below. The harsh, yellow glare of a streetlight splashed against the asphalt and disturbed the shadows, lending outlines to cars parked along either side of the street. The glow from neighboring windows and brownstone facades decorated for the holidays with flickering, colorful lights also played against the darkness. He watched a yellow cat slink across the street, stealing between cars, but nothing else moved or drew his wary gaze. “Are you sure this guy won’t try anything?”

“Sure, I’m sure,” Paul said. “There’s no one in this city who knows this guy like I do. I told you—the thrill for him is in the conquest, the kill. He doesn’t hang around when he’s finished, admiring his handiwork. He’s moving on to stake out whoever’s next. Besides, I’m not entirely convinced she was hit by my guy after all.”

“What?” Jay asked, startled. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Jobeth Montgomery’s husband, who’s just as likely as suspect, if you ask me,” Paul said, his words hitting Jay like a heavy punch to his gut.

“What?”

“She didn’t tell you about him?” Paul asked. “I guess not. But then, that’s the sort of shit that’d kills foreplay pretty fast, wouldn’t it?”

Jay frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I did a background check on her,” Paul said, and Jay’s frown deepened.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know her, Jay, and neither do you, and I wanted to find out more about her. Which is what *you* should’ve done before you stuck your dick in her. I found a string of restraining orders she’s taken out over the last three years against her husband, one Richard Garland. He’s a meth-head. Methamphetamines, Jay. He’s been busted three times for possession and twice for aggravated assault and battery. Apparently, he likes to knock his wife around a bit when he’s high. Busted her nose once, some ribs, sent her down to Metro

South for stitches. Even swung at her once with a butcher knife, cut her up pretty bad.”

Jay’s breath escaped him in a long, slow sigh. *I can’t believe this*, he thought. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingertips, feeling the makings of a headache stirring there. “Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Paul said. “He’s been in prison, but he’s out now, staying at a half-way house, and wouldn’t you know it? Her lawyer filed a complaint a couple of weeks ago with the parole board because Richard tried to get in touch with her.”

The throbbing behind Jay’s temples suddenly intensified. *Married*, he thought, the words echoing in his skull, bouncing back and forth, all of the bewilderment, hurt and anger he’d felt when he’d found Lucy’s laptop and learned of her infidelity welling up in him all over again. *Married...married...Jo is married. I can’t believe this.*

“He knows where she lives. He knows where she works. He has a history of coming after her. I’ve got it right here in front of me, in black and white.” Paul paused for a moment. “Now will you listen to me when I tell you to let something lie? The lady’s bad news. If she’s got some speed-freak stalking her, you want to be miles away. Miles and miles, Jay. You don’t want that shit coming around your house—around Emma.”

Jay sighed, forking his fingers through his hair, but said nothing.

“Look,” Paul said, his tone softening. “I know you like her. I’m not blind. And I know you’re sleeping with her. I’m not a moron, either. But she’s been nothing but trouble for you ever since you found her, and she’s going to be nothing but trouble if you keep messing around with her. I think it’s terrific that you’re moving on after Lucy. I want that for you, kid. I want you to be happy. But it’s not going to happen, not with Jobeth Montgomery. I need you to trust me on this one. Please, Jay.”

“Fine,” Jay said through gritted teeth. All at once, he felt vaguely nauseous, his stomach twisted in an insistent,

painful knot. *Married*, he thought, pained. *Jesus Christ, and I just spent half the goddamn day today making love to her...!*

He thought of Michael Dabney, the man who had fucked Lucy in Jay's bed, who'd fallen asleep against Jay's pillow, beneath Jay's covers with his goddamn arms around Jay's wife.

*And I'm no better than him. Goddamn it, now I'm no fucking better!*

"I know how you feel—" Paul began, clumsy and empty words that Jay had heard one too many times in his life.

"No, you don't." He hung up the phone and turned, hurtling it across the living room and sending it clattering across the hard wood floor. "You don't know shit about how I feel."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next morning, Jay woke to find Emma snuggled in bed with him, her teddy bear wedged beneath her arm. There was still at least an hour before she had to get ready for school, so he eased himself from beneath the covers without disturbing her. He started a pot of coffee and padded down the steps to the foyer to get the morning paper. Marie would be there shortly, and he hoped to have enough time to get at least one cup in him and read through the world news section before she arrived. They hadn't said much to each other since she'd pretty much reamed him a new ass, and he'd found himself deliberately trying to avoid being alone in a room with her, lest she take a mind to lay into him again. Especially now since it seemed she had been right all along.

He had tossed and turned restlessly much of the night, his mind and heart hurt and distracted with thoughts of Jo. *Leave her alone*, Paul had warned him, and from the sound of things, that was perfectly logical advice. *Then why can't I get her out of my head?* he wondered. *Why didn't she tell me she was married? I told her about Lucy, everything that had happened. Why would she do this to me? She has to know how I would feel, what I would think.*

He opened the door and blinked in surprise to find a dead cat on his porch.

Its neck had been broken somehow. Its head lay twisted at an unnatural angle on its neck, so that its chin, crusted with a drying mix of spittle and blood, rested on its shoulder. Its ochre-colored eyes gazed at a point somewhere behind it, fixed and glazed.

“Jesus,” Jay whispered, shying back in the doorway. There were no other marks or wounds on the animal, no indications as to what might have happened to it. He squatted, wrapping his arms around his middle, keeping his tingling hands away from the cat. It looked like the yellow tom he’d seen creeping about the night before, with orange tabby stripes cutting haphazard diagonals through its fur. It had a brown leather collar on it, affixed with a rabies tag and a brass nameplate: SKITTLES.

*Looks like you ran into the wrong end of a moving bumper,* Skittles, Jay thought. Dead animals had never had the same effect on him as dead people. Maybe because they were smaller; maybe because they were more simple in mind and spirit. He could almost resist the urge to touch and resurrect them.

Almost.

He reached out and brushed his fingertips through the cat’s fur. A sharp sensation raced up his arm. A quick flash of light flared, as if he’d been statically charged and shocked by the cat, and he jerked his hand back.

He leaned back against the doorframe, feeling lightheaded and momentarily dizzy. Animals took less out of him than people, but still, the effort left him feeling drained.

Skittles the unlucky tabby suddenly sucked in an audible gasp for breath. It blinked its eyes and shook its head, snapping its broken neck back into proper place. It gasped again, its voice escaping it in a warbling, hoarse croak, and then it moved, its paws wiggling slowly. After a moment of this disjointed effort, the cat seemed to regain its senses. It squirmed, getting its legs beneath it and then stood. It spared Jay a glance, hissed, and scampered off, darting beneath the nearest parked car.

“You’re welcome,” Jay muttered, struggling to rise to his feet. He stumbled back into the brownstone, closing the door behind him. He limped up to the living room and crumpled face-down onto the couch, lapsing immediately into sleep. He was still weak from having resurrected Jo. The cat had been too much, too soon.

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“Dad?” Emma shook his arm, stirring him. She sounded frightened, her voice tremulous, and he struggled to open his eyes. “Daddy, somebody’s knocking at the door.”

*Why in the hell would Marie be knocking?* he wondered. He opened his eyes briefly, blearily and blinked at his daughter. “She...she has a key...” he murmured, his eyelids drooping again, his mind submerging into darkness.

He slept until he felt the cool press of fingertips against the side of his throat, settling against his pulse, and Jo’s voice, soft and soothing; he was dreaming of Jo.

“Jay?” she said. “Jay, can you hear me? Open your eyes, Jay.”

Because she sounded concerned, just as Emma had, Jay forced himself to oblige. His eyelids fluttered open and he looked dazedly up at her, realizing this was no dream. Jo was there somehow in his living room. His vision was murky and blurred, but as it cleared, Jo’s face came into view. She knelt beside the couch, her auburn hair caught back from her face in a ponytail. She was wearing her winter coat, and beneath its hem, he saw her white uniform pants.

“Hey, you,” Jo said, canting her head slightly and smiling to meet his sleepy gaze.

“Hey,” he whispered.

She moved her hand, stroking the cuff of her knuckles against his cheek. “Are you with me?” she asked, and he nodded. “Can you sit up?” He nodded again, but she had to slip her arm around him and help ease him upright. The movement sent a spiraling wave of nausea through him, and he groaned, pressing his hand against his forehead.

“How...how did you get in?” he asked, his voice cracked and hoarse.

“Your daughter,” Jo replied, nodding to indicate Emma. The girl stood nearby at the edge of the couch, still in her pajamas.



“Daddy, are you okay?” Emma asked, her voice warbling, on the verge of tears.

He nodded once, forcing a feeble smile. “I’m fine, Em,” he said. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry.” The nausea passed—without him vomiting in front of both his daughter and Jo, thank God—and the cobwebs that clouded his mind were at last lifting. “You need to get ready for school. Go brush your teeth and pick your clothes out, okay?”

“But, Dad...” Emma began, clearly not convinced that he was recovered. Her eyes remained round and bright with worry, her lips pinched in a concerned frown.

Jay stood up, stumbling slightly, but managed to regain his balance before Jo could move to help steady him. “Marie’s going to be here any minute,” he said to his daughter. “Go on, Emma. It’s school time.”

Emma glanced at Jo and then hunched her shoulders, the crease between her brows increasing slightly with begrudging concession. “Fine,” she grumbled, shuffling off toward her bedroom.

When she was gone, a brief, awkward silence settled between Jay and Jo. He kept thinking about what Paul had told him, replaying his brother’s words in his mind. *I found a string of restraining orders she’s taken out over the last three years against him... Her husband’s a meth-head... Apparently, he likes to knock his wife around a bit when he’s high... Even swung at her once with a butcher knife, cut her up pretty bad.*

“You should sit down,” Jo said.

He shook his head, angry with her all over again, all of his hurt, confusion, betrayal and rage from the night before rekindling in a single, solitary breath. “I’m alright.”

“What happened?” she asked, reaching for him.

“Nothing,” he replied.

“Did you fall? Hit your head again?”

“No,” he said irritably, shrugging away from her. “I told you—I’m fine.” He forked his fingers through his disheveled hair and pushed it back from his brow. He realized

for the first time that he was still in the T-shirt and sweat pants he'd worn to bed. And still in desperate need of a shower and shave—not to mention a tooth-brushing, to judge by the tacky, shitty flavor permeating his mouth. He squinted at the clock on his DVD player across the room and realized it was quarter 'til eight. He nearly groaned aloud thinking of how late to work he was likely to be.

"Do you know what day it is?" Jo asked, a question so out of left field, he thought he'd misheard.

"What? Of course I do. It's Wednesday."

"Are you feeling dizzy?" she asked. "Light headed? Nauseous?" He frowned, but before he could protest, she said, "Jay, you suffered a traumatic brain injury in the past. If you hit your head again, even slightly, you could—"

"It's not that." She'd reached for him again; he swatted her away irritably. "Jesus Christ, there was a dead cat on my doorstep, hit by a car. I touched it." A careful glance to make sure Emma was gone, then another, more pointed one in Jo's direction. "I touched it. That's all." He frowned again. "What are you doing here?"

"I just got off work a little while ago," she said. "I thought I'd come by, see if I could catch you. I remembered the way from before."

"Yeah," he said. "Before. When you told me you didn't want to get involved with a married man." Jo blinked at him, visibly puzzled. "Not counting the one *you're* married to, right?"

She jerked as if he'd slapped her. "What?"

"Richard Garland," he said, because he'd memorized the name even from Paul's fleeting mention. He watched the color drain from Jo's face, her hazel eyes widen in sudden, anxious realization.

"I...h-how...?" she began, her voice sputtering.

"Paul told me," Jay said. "He found records of the restraining orders you've filed against him. He told me your husband uses methamphetamines."

“My *ex*-husband,” Jo said, her brows narrowing slightly at this firm emphasis. “Rich and I have been divorced since last year, and yes, he used methamphetamines. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I—”

“Paul said he’s out of prison on parole. Do you still see him?” Jay asked, and the furrow between her brows crimped more deeply.

“No, I don’t still see him. I told you—we’re divorced. He’s a drug addict.”

“Paul said he used to beat you,” Jay said, and twin patches of angry, humiliated color bloomed in her cheeks.

“That’s none of your business.”

“He said he attacked you once with a knife. Is that where the scars came from? The ones on your shoulder?”

“That’s none of your business, either!” she snapped.

“I think it is my business, considering I spent the better part of yesterday making love to you in his house, in his goddamn bed!”

“It’s not his bed!” she cried hotly. “It’s *mine*! My bed, my house! Rich has nothing to do with it—nothing to do with us!” She stared at him, her breath hitching with sudden tears. “Except there is no *us*, is there?” She laughed hoarsely, bitterly. “Just sex. Whatever else happened, it doesn’t matter. It was nothing but sex.”

Her words cut him to the quick, but he struggled not to let it show. “I don’t know. I don’t know what to think right now, Jo.” He met her gaze and tried to ignore the underlying hurt in her eyes, the tears. “Except that you should leave.”

She balled her hands into fists and spun around on the heel of her surgical clog. “Fuck you, Jay. Fuck you and your cop brother.”

She slammed the door behind her as she left.

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Jo promised herself she wouldn’t cry, and to her credit, she made it through most of the day. She kept herself

busy at her bungalow by giving it a long overdue and thorough cleaning once she'd woken up from less than four hours of restless, unhappy sleep, getting down on her hands and knees and scrubbing linoleum and grout. She vacuumed and dusted, stripped her bed and washed all of the sheets and towels, if only to get rid of any evidence of Jay's presence in her home, his fragrance still trapped and lingering in the fabric.

She cleaned out her refrigerator, throwing away weeks' worth of abandoned leftovers, most remaining unidentified in plastic containers that she pitched unopened. She went through stacks of mail she'd left sitting around on countertops, sorted old newspapers and other recyclables that had been piled up and languishing in the corner of her dining room, and cleaned out her closets, filling nearly three garbage bags with clothes to donate to charity.

She scoured and bleached and mopped, and all the while, held on to a dogged determination not to think about Jay or acknowledge the humiliated anguish that had seized her heart when he'd brought up Rich.

*He had no right, she'd tell herself. No goddamn right whatsoever to judge me.*

What was the worst was not that Jay had found out about Rich, or even had learned the truth about how Rich had treated her. What hurt and shamed her the most was that she had allowed herself to have feelings for Jay. For the first time since Rich, she'd given herself permission to trust a man again, to open herself physically and emotionally again. *I love him. Goddamn it, I fell in love with him.*

She told herself she wouldn't cry and she almost made it to the beginning of her rounds that evening. She had sat quietly in the staff lounge, stiff-backed and stoic, pretending to listen as the second-shift nurse gave her a report on her patients for the night. Her mind was elsewhere; the other nurse's words dissolved into a wordless garble of sounds to which Jo would occasionally offer a nod or a murmur by means of acknowledgement. She wanted to talk to Charles, but couldn't find the chance. He was the floor supervisor that night and deep in conference with the preceding charge nurse.

He hadn't been able to spare her as much as a sideways glance since clocking on.

At last, she couldn't stand it anymore. She felt like she would either choke or burst into tears like a fool in the middle of the staff lounge. She rose abruptly, without an excuse or word of apology, and darted out the door.

She made it to the linen room and sat down on the floor, surrounded by wheeled carts stacked with freshly laundered bedclothes. Jo leaned her head against a pile of folded sheets and began to weep. She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the sound, but couldn't prevent the miserable shudders that racked her narrow form.

*I've lost him*, she thought, miserable. *And I...God, I've only just found him...!*

She heard the linen room door open and froze, her eyes wide, her breath caught in her throat. She was hidden from immediate view, sitting between two laundry carts, but if whoever entered walked more than four steps past the threshold, they'd easily see her.

She heard the soft squeak of rubber-soled shoes against the tiled floor, and she quickly jerked her hands across her cheeks, wiping away the evidence of her tears. It would be Charles, of course. There was no way he'd missed her rushing out of the staff lounge, and no way he'd leave her alone without at least trying to come to her rescue. She sniffled mightily and cleared her throat, just as the person stepped into view.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she said, forcing a laugh and struggling to smile. "Really, Charles, it's just a—"

Her voice faltered.

"Hi, Jo," Nathan Gambit said.

She didn't miss the way he cut his eyes from her tear-stained cheeks down the length of her form and back up again; to her, it suddenly felt like a nest of spiders crawled all over her, and she shivered. "Oh...uh, hi, Nathan," she said, with a slight cough and another sniff. *Oh, Christ, I don't want to see you*

*tonight*, she thought. *Not now, not ever again.* She stood, swatting her palms against the seat of her slacks.

“Are you alright?” He stepped toward her, but she shied back, nearly knocking over the nearest linen cart in her startled haste.

“Yeah,” she said, nodding with overemphasis and forcing a broad, bright smile. She laughed as she regained her footing. “I’m fine. I’m sorry. I’ll get out of your way.”

“That’s okay,” Nathan said. She tried to sidestep around him, but he moved at the same time. Inadvertently, they both moved in the same direction and, when they tried once more, they again stepped into each other’s paths. He brushed up against her, his belly pressing into her, and her mind cut to the night of her attack again, and of the man as he had tried to violate her.

*He’s everywhere you go anymore,* Charles had tried to warn. *Haven’t you noticed?*

“I’m sorry,” Nathan said, looking sheepish and trying again to get out of her way. He brought his hands up, brushing against the front of her smock and the outward swells of her breasts, and she jerked back, startled and alarmed.

*Don’t touch me!* she wanted to cry out, but all at once, she couldn’t force enough air out to whisper, much less scream.

*You just got rid of one stalker with Rich. Jesus, do you really want another one?*

“...at the mall?” Nathan was saying, the word *mall* snapping Jo out of her reverie.

“What?” she asked, her voice a breathless squeak. He was very close; too close, and she could smell him now, the fragrance of his clothes. He wore surgical scrubs from the hospital’s laundry, and the same scent of industrial soap that permeated the bed sheets behind them was infused in his clothes.

"I said, do you like that one store, Clancy's, at the mall?" Nathan asked. "Your earrings. I've seen pairs like them—"

He'd reached out as he spoke, drawing his hand toward her ear, and Jo recoiled, slapping his hand away. "Don't touch me," she said, her eyes widening as she stumbled back toward the linen room door. *That smell, Nathan's smell.* It was *his* smell, the man who had attacked her.

"I didn't mean anything," Nathan said, shying back, hunching his shoulders. "I just...your earrings..."

"Hey, Jo, are you in here?" Charles called, knocking loudly against the door before opening it and poking his head through. "There you are. I saw you take off like your ass was on fire and I..." His voice faded as he noticed Jo's ashen expression—not to mention her company. "What's going on?"

Charles had once been an amateur bodybuilder years earlier, back before he and Jo had gone to nursing school. Although he was older now, and most of the hard-etched musculature from his weight-lifting past had long-since grown soft, he still struck an imposing figure when he furrowed his brows and squared off against someone. Nathan hunched his shoulders even more, dropping his gaze to his feet. "Nothing," he mumbled.

"Then get the hell out of here," Charles said, and Nathan needed no further prompting. He scuttled forward, shouldering his way past them both and out of the room.

When he was gone, Jo uttered a warbling sigh of relief, clapping her hand against her mouth. She began to shake, shuddering violently. "Jo?" Charles asked, his brows lifting in concern. "Honey, what is it? What happened?"

Jo shook her head, closing her eyes against the sting of new tears. She leaned against Charles, clutching at him. "Nothing," she whispered. "I'm just...God, I'm glad you're here, Charles."

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She dug Paul Frances' card out of her coat pocket and ducked into the ladies' room with Charles' cell phone.

“Metro Homicide, Detective Frances,” he said. She’d meant to leave him a voice mail and was surprised when he answered the line himself midway through the first ring, obviously working late.

“It’s Jo Montgomery,” she said, and before he could say anything, she continued. “Look, I don’t know what in the hell you were trying to prove by telling Jay about Rich, but you and I both know he’s not the one who attacked me. So just spare me any bullshit, okay? You said to call if I needed your help.”

“Alright,” Paul said, his tone mild and unbothered. “I’m listening.”

She remembered he had two teen-aged daughters and realized he was probably using the same tone of voice with her as he would whenever they’d throw a tantrum. It irritated her, but she furrowed her brows and shrugged past it. *I need Paul, damn it.* “I saw him,” she said. “The guy who hurt me. I know who he is.”

“What?” Paul said, and now his voice had lost that annoyingly cool tone. He sounded immediately interested. “You saw him? Where?”

“At Metro General. He’s an aide here on the ward where I work. I should have said something to you yesterday, because I’ve wondered about it, about him, but I wasn’t sure. Not until today. His name is Nathan Gambit.”

“Spell that for me,” he said, and she did. “You’re certain it’s him?”

“Yes,” she said, thinking of how near Nathan had drawn to her in the linen room, and how the man who had attacked her shared Nathan’s height, his build, his smell. “Yes, it’s him. I’m positive.”

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“So are you going to tell me what happened in the laundry room?” Charles asked three hours later. They were alone in the ward’s staff lounge taking their breaks together.



Jo shrugged, pretending to be occupied stirring nondairy creamer in a thin, pale stream into her coffee. Paul had told her he would run a background check on Nathan and put the young man under full and immediate surveillance.

"I don't understand," Jo had said. "I told you—he's the one. Can't you come and arrest him?"

"Not with you as the only eye witness," Paul had replied. "I'd have a hell of a time reporting that you're a victim, seeing as how you don't have a scratch on you. And," he'd added, dropping his voice to a low, conspiratorial tone, "I think the truth would be even harder to explain than that."

She'd agreed and the matter had been settled. With no physical evidence or eyewitnesses, the only hope they had would be to catch Nathan in the act.

"Jo?" Charles asked, his brows raised expectantly.

"It's nothing," she said. "Nathan just startled me, that's all."

"And before that?" he asked, leaning back in his seat, folding his arms across his broad chest in a paternalistic fashion that Jo always found both annoying and charming. "When you took off out of shift reports? I was sitting right over there..." He nodded to indicate a neighboring table. "I saw your face. What's going on with you, Jo? And don't tell me 'nothing,' because I know you. I know something's wrong."

He had softened, both in the tone of his voice and his posture, and he leaned toward her, uncrossing his arms. He draped his hand against hers and offered a gentle squeeze.

"It's nothing," Jo said, and when he opened his mouth to object, she shook her head. "Charles, really, it's nothing. No big deal. You're going to think I'm being silly. It's a guy."

"You're date from yesterday." It wasn't a question, but a statement of fact.

"Yeah," Jo said with a weary sigh.

"You want to talk about it?"

She shook her head. “Not really.” He didn’t say anything, and she sighed again. “His name is Jay Frances and I really liked him, that’s all. I really felt a connection to him...for the first time with anyone in forever.”

“And today is different because...?”

She shrugged, toying with her coffee again. “I went by his house this morning, just to...I don’t know...tell him how I felt. I thought he felt the same way. He seemed to, anyway. But he brought up Rich, and now I—”

“Rich?” Charles sat back, his brows raised in surprise. “How the hell did he find out about Rich?”

“His brother is a cop,” Jo said. “A detective with the Metro Homicide division. He’d looked up all of the restraining orders I’d taken out on Rich.” She sighed unhappily. “Anyway, Jay asked me about Rich, and the way he did it was like he didn’t trust me. Like he thought I had been keeping it a secret from him. But I guess I had.”

Her eyes flooded with tears, her voice growing tremulous, and Jo paused, her brows knotted slightly as she tried to control herself. *Damn you, Jay Frances*, she thought. She hadn’t cried this much since she’d been a preschooler.

“I thought he would understand,” she said quietly, pained. “He told me his wife had died, and he’d found out afterwards that she’d been planning to leave him. I thought he would know what it was like. I watched Rich ruin himself—ruin us, and damn near ruin me—and I hid myself in my work because it was safe. I thought I could trust Jay. I have no idea why. I just felt that, and I think he felt it, too—that he could trust me, because he’d been hurt, too. I guess I was wrong.” She shook her head, managing a short, unhappy laugh. “I told you. It’s nothing. I’m being silly.”

“No, you’re not,” Charles said kindly. “And I’m sorry he hurt you.” After a moment, he raised his brow. “You want me to go and bust his kneecaps?”

Jo laughed, despite herself. “No, that’s alright.” She glanced at the clock and stood. “Come on. We’re due back on the floor.”

“Seriously,” Charles said, collecting their coffee cups and carrying them to a trash can. “It won’t be any trouble. Just me and this guy, Jay Frances, and a rubber-headed mallet. Ten minutes, tops. He won’t be breaking any more unsuspecting hearts.”

Jo reached up and tousled his hair affectionately. “I don’t deserve you, Charles.”

He smiled and dropped her a wink. “No, you don’t.”

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“Jay? What are you doing home?”

Jay glanced at Marie as he walked up the steps from the brownstone’s front foyer. She was in the kitchen working on supper, watching him through the window at the breakfast bar, her eyes surprised and somewhat puzzled. It was only just now five o’clock; he usually wouldn’t leave the office for at least another hour. “I wrapped up early today,” he said. “That’s all.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. He hadn’t been able to get anything done that day and had finally given up even trying. He’d always been able to distract himself with his work. After the car crash, he could have quit his job, retired on full disability from the city, but instead, he’d gone back to work upon his recovery. It had been the only thing to keep him functioning and sane after he’d learned of Lucy’s affair. Work had always been his escape, but for once, it had failed him. His thoughts had kept turning all day to Jo, and how things had ended so abruptly and badly between them. *I didn’t even give her a chance to explain*, he thought, dismayed. *And here, I haven’t been completely honest with her, either. It’s not like I told her she’s the only one I’ve ever brought all of the way back, that she could’ve just as easily wound up a vegetable thanks to me.*

He shrugged his way out of his coat, draping it across the back of the sofa as he crossed the living room. As he loosened his tie, he looked around. “Where’s Em?”

“In her room, doing her homework.” Marie glanced at him over her shoulder as he came to stand in the kitchen

doorway. “She told me that woman stopped by the house this morning.”

She said this carefully, but his heart still felt raw at the mention, and he bristled. “Her name’s Jo, Marie,” he said. He felt immediately bad about the sharp, irritated note in his voice and sighed wearily. “We had an argument.” He pulled his tie loose from around his neck, a frustrated and defeated gesture. “So you don’t have to worry anymore. She won’t be back.”

“I’m sorry,” Marie said, her voice gentle and sincere enough to surprise him.

“You are?”

She was quiet again, and he knew what she was going to say, the lecture he was going to have to hear about how he couldn’t possibly care for her, not knowing her for less than a week; how he was being irresponsible and selfish again, thinking of himself—worse, thinking with his dick, not his head—and not considering Emma at all. She’d tell him he was being impetuous and foolish, naïve and reckless, and she’d be absolutely right and he would absolutely have it coming.

“You know, when my husband, Wallace, died, I felt like a part of me had right along with him,” she said finally. “We were married for thirty-five years, never had any children. We tried, of course, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

This wasn’t what he’d been expecting—not by a long shot, and he shied back in the doorway, uncertain and perplexed. Marie took a long-handled wooden spoon and stirred idly at something simmering on the stovetop, not looking at him as she continued to speak. “It wasn’t like he was perfect or anything for all of those thirty-five years, but then again, neither was I. We were both human beings, both of us with our little flaws and idiosyncrasies. Sometimes he could make me so mad...”

She laughed, tapping the head of the spoon against the side of the pot and setting it aside on the nearest countertop. “He wasn’t perfect, but I loved him anyway, and when he was gone, I missed him. He was my whole world, and when he was gone, it felt like everything had stopped. I remember feeling

like I couldn't breathe, like there wasn't enough air in the world to fill the spaces inside of me that Wallace left behind."

Turning to Jay, she said, "I still go home at night to the house Wallace and I shared, and I still sit up in bed sometimes and think about him. I know I'll see him again someday, and I'm looking forward to it. But you and Emma have come to fill a lot of those spaces inside that used to belong to Wallace. I wish with all of my heart, I could give back to you one ounce of the hope and joy you both have given to me."

"Marie," Jay said quietly, touched. "I don't—"

She shook her head, shushing him. "What I think of that girl, this Jo of yours, doesn't matter. What *you* think of her does—and any fool can see you think a lot of her. She's touched someplace inside of you the rest of us can't reach, someplace you've kept hidden away since Lucy. Like Wallace did for me."

He stood wordlessly in the doorway, struck mute by her earnest sincerity.

"I don't know what you've done to make you think she won't be around anymore, but I'm sure it's nothing that can't be fixed if you just try." Marie opened the refrigerator and stood with her back to him, her hand on her hip as she surveyed the contents. "We're having rosemary chicken tonight," she said, pulling out a stick of butter. She spared a glance over her shoulder at him as she set it on the countertop. "I won't keep it warm waiting up for you."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"I was an ass this morning," Jay said, standing on Jo's front porch with his shoulders hunched against a cold, steady downpour. His hair hung in his face, a drenched and dripping mess.

"Yes, you were." Jo regarded him coolly, her hand on her hip, not opening the screen door to let him inside. She'd answered the door in a pair of sweats and an old, rumpled T-shirt. Her auburn curls had frizzed from the humidity and splayed about her face in what was surely an unflattering and disheveled tumble. *Could I look any more repulsive?* she thought, mortified, as she struggled to keep a stoic and stern expression on her face. *He drove all of the way out here in the rain to apologize, and I look like hell. Spectacular! And are those flowers?*

"I need to tell you something," he said. "The woman at Respite House, the one I was visiting on Sunday...she's someone I resurrected. The second person I brought back."

Jo drew back, startled. "She's like that because of me," he said. "Because of what I can do. You're the fourth person I've ever raised, and you're the only one who's come all of the way back, who hasn't ended up like Eileen."

She felt an icy shiver race through her. *Sleeping Beauty*, the nurse at Respite House had called Eileen Dancer, the patient Jay had been visiting. *She's as healthy as a horse physically, but her mind is gone. No discernable brain activity. She's been a vegetable since she was seventeen years old.*

“I should have told you that before,” Jay said. “I should have told you that from the start. You had the right to know, and I’m sorry.”

“Why are you telling me now?” Jo asked quietly.

His brows lifted, even as rain trailed into his eyes, and his lips began to tremble from the chill. “Because you were wrong,” he said. “There *is* an *us*. And I don’t want to keep any more secrets from you.” He held out the soaked bouquet of roses, enveloped in soggy green tissue paper. “A peace offering, I hope.”

She couldn’t remember the last time anyone brought her flowers. She opened the door widely enough to pinch the sodden bouquet between her fingertips and draw it indoors. She held it over her doormat to drip and forced herself to make him remain outside a bit longer. *Charles would say to just let him stay out there all damn night. And he’d be right.*

She looked at him in all of his dowsed and dripping misery and felt her righteously indignant façade falter. She stepped back, opening the door again. “It’s pouring,” she said. “Come inside before you freeze.”

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She offered him dry clothes to wear—his clothes, as a matter of fact; the T-shirt and sweat pants she’d taken from his room after her resurrection. He changed in the bathroom while she put a pot of tea on the stove to steep. The bathroom door sat unevenly on its hinges—one of many things in the house that Jo had been meaning to fix since she’d bought it last year—and it never closed completely. It would slowly swing in of its own accord until, eventually, it stood open again. As Jo left the kitchen, returning to the living room to hang up Jay’s drenched overcoat, she glanced inadvertently toward the bathroom and caught a glimpse of him pulling the fresh T-shirt over his head. She paused, admiring the all-too-quick view of the flat plain of his stomach, the muscles in his abdomen stacked neatly, tapering toward his groin. This quick peek stoked an immediate reaction in her, snapping her mind back to the morning they’d spent making love.

“You know, you have a leak in your sink faucet here,” he called, unaware of her watching him.

She jerked in abashed surprise, and hurried into the living room. Just because he’d apologized to her and brought her roses didn’t mean she’d forgiven him yet. “Yes,” she called back, grimacing at how her voice cracked hoarsely, shrilly. She cleared her throat, struggling to compose herself. “Yes, it’s done that ever since I bought the place.”

“I could fix it for you,” he said, walking out of the bathroom. He stood in the doorway to the living room, his dark hair lying in damp, tousled waves about his face. “It’s probably just a worn washer. If you want, I can run out to the hardware store tomorrow after work and get you another one.”

Seeing him there, comfortably dressed as if he belonged in her home, her doorway, her heart, made her resolve crumble. She reached for him, catching his face between her hands and kissing him, letting her lips part, the tip of her tongue brush against his. The kiss deepened and he tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her against him so that she could feel his immediate, hardening heat through her sweat pants.

She closed her eyes, leaning her head back, gasping softly as his lips began to trail along the slope of her jaw, following the length of her neck. He moved his hand, letting his palm fall gently against her breast, moving with slow but insistent pressure. She clutched at him as his slipped his hand beneath the hem of her T-shirt and quickly, deftly unsnapped the front fastening of her bra. His palm was warm against her breasts, and her nipples hardened sharply as his fingertips played against them. His free hand slid down her belly, and slipped beneath the waistband of her sweat pants.

They stumbled backwards across the room, easing their way clumsily around the love seat and banging noisily against coffee table until she fell against the couch. She lay back with Jay pressed on top of her, and lifted her hips so he could reach beneath her panties, his hand dropping between her thighs. She tightened her grip on his hair as his fingertips delved first against her then inside of her. She moaned, pulling



him closer, jerking his shirt up to his neck to feel the warmth of his skin, his belly against her.

Together they fumbled and fought to shed their clothes. She kicked her legs, bucking her hips to lose her sweat pants, while he flapped one arm at a time to rid himself of his shirt. When she tugged at his pants, he helped shove them down from his hips, leaving nothing but air between them.

*I shouldn't do this, Jo thought. I can't let myself trust him again, not this soon.*

He slid into her easily and began to move, driving himself into her, cradling one of her breasts against his hand while leaning over to draw the other nipple between his lips. Jo's hands coiled in his hair as she matched his pace, writhing beneath him, her breath coming in urgent, quickening gasps.

She was aware of the clatter of falling objects as they moved about on the couch, kicking and knocking things off the nearby coffee table. In the end, he was sitting upright, and Jo straddled him. He clasped her buttocks with his hands as she grinded against him, driving them both to tremendous, simultaneous climaxes that left him jerking against her, gasping her name against her ear, his fingers digging fiercely into her skin.

*God help me, I love this man, she thought. With all of my heart and all that I have—I love him.*

She slumped against him, trembling, and when he smiled, she felt any defenses she had left completely disintegrate. "You forgive me, then?" he whispered. "My apology is accepted?"

Jo pretended to look thoughtful for a moment, then leaned over to kiss him. "I'm working on it."

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By the time Jay returned to his brownstone, it was after midnight. He was distracted on his ride home with pleasant thoughts about Jo and their lovemaking. He also thought about Paul, and grew angry at his older brother for conveniently omitting crucial details about Jo's drug-addicted husband.

*Such as he's not her husband anymore.* Despite the late hour, Jay considered calling Paul and telling him to back the hell out of his private life. More than once along his drive, Jay fished his cell phone out of his coat pocket and thumbed the speed dial button to ring his brother's line. He never pressed it, even though he knew Paul was probably awake. *Hell, he's probably still at the office. It's like Vicki is always saying—they should put a cot beside his desk.*

As Jay parallel-parked into a vacant space, he frowned, puzzled by the fact that there were no lights visible from inside the brownstone.

*That's not like Marie,* he thought as he got out of the Volvo wagon and set the alarm. Whenever Jay was out late, well past dinner and Emma's bedtime, it was Marie's habit to wait for him in the living room, where she would read, work on a needlepoint project, or watch television. She always left at least one light on, and usually several.

*What's going on?* he wondered, climbing the stairs and reaching the stoop. Emma couldn't be sick or hurt; Marie would have called him right away on his cell phone if that had been the case.

The porch light was off, and Jay frowned as he sifted through his keys, looking for his house key with only the glow of the streetlight over his shoulder to guide him. His hands felt funny, tingling, and all at once, his fingers didn't want to cooperate. He fumbled and dropped the keys, cursing aloud. He bent over to retrieve them and froze, his eyes flying wide.

*My hands...!*

He stood slowly, holding his hands up in front of him. They felt as though he'd taken hold of something alive and wriggling; he felt them trembling beneath his gloves. It was a sensation he recognized all too well; one he loathed and feared.

*Oh, God, no.*

*No!*

*NO!*

“Emma...!” he gasped, snatching up his keys. *Oh, God, not my daughter. Please, no, not Emma!*

He fumbled frantically until he found the front door key. As he moved to jam it home, the door yielded, already unlocked and unlatched. It swung slowly inward, opening into the darkened foyer beyond.

Now his heart raced, a frightened, panicked cadence. He couldn’t breathe. His throat constricted to a pinpoint and his hands shook, thrumming with insistent, irresistible need.

“Emma!” Jay cried hoarsely, rushing into the brownstone and up the steps from the foyer. He couldn’t see anything. The house lay draped in shadows, and there was no sound, no movement, nothing but the sensation in his hands, growing stronger, more powerful with every step, every second, letting him know he wasn’t alone.

“Emma!” he screamed. “Emma! Marie! Where are—”

His voice cut abruptly short as he stumbled across something and fell, crashing to his knees. He reached out, knowing fully well what he had fallen across was not wayward piece of furniture or upturned rug corner. He had felt soft flesh yield as his feet had stumbled. There was someone lying on the living room floor.

*Please don’t let it be Emma. Please.*

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he realized. “Marie!” he whispered, helplessly, horrified. She lay face-down on the floor, her legs sprawled spread-eagle, her arms outstretched as if she’d tried to crawl away from her assailant. Her skirt was jerked up and bunched around her waist and her underpants lay in a pale tumble beside her. He could see blood standing out in stark contrast, nearly black, smeared against the pale skin of her buttocks. Even in the dim light, he could see she wasn’t breathing.

Jo had told him about Nathan Gambit, the man she worked with at the hospital, the one she had recognized as her assailant—as the Watcher. *Oh, my God, Jay thought. He followed her here this morning. He came back tonight to wait for her, but he found Marie instead. Marie and Emma...!*

He moaned, an anguished, agonized sound. He wanted to scream, but couldn't. The thrumming in his hands, the terrible, terrifying power that consumed them was ready to be unleashed, and it would not be denied, not even for grief or horror.

*I can't do this!* he screamed in his mind. *I have to find Emma! Please don't make me do this! Please! I can't—*

He touched Marie's face, his hands falling of their own accord, settling against her. He gasped sharply as pain seized his chest, tightening throughout him, crushing the breath and voice from him. Briefly, he caught a glimpse of someone in the adjacent dining room, the shadowy figure of a man sitting in a chair, watching him.

"She wouldn't scream," the man said, nodding once to indicate Marie. "No matter what I did to her, she wouldn't cry out. I think she didn't want the little girl to hear and come running to help her. She's hiding somewhere. I haven't found her yet."

"You...you son of a bitch," Jay seethed. "Don't you touch my child—"

And then the light hit him, searing through him, knocking him instantly unconscious and stripping from him whatever it needed to raise the dead.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jay came to with a start, his eyes flying wide, his breath caught in bewildered surprise as he looked up at an unfamiliar ceiling and rows of fluorescent lights overhead.

“It’s alright,” he heard Jo say, and he jerked again, whipping his head around to find her standing beside him, leaning over chrome bedrails to reach for his hand. “Jay,” she said gently, her fingers closing against his. “It’s alright. Don’t be frightened.”

A hospital. He was in a hospital, with intravenous tubes connected to his hand, and twin bags of innocuous, clear liquid dripping slowly into him. The head of his bed had been elevated slightly so that he was in a somewhat seated position, and he felt something funny against his face. He raised his hand, slowly, weakly, and touched thin rubber tubing draped across either cheek, positioned under his nose.

“It’s to help you breathe,” Jo said, her voice still calm and soothing. She caught his hand and lowered it to the bed again, preventing him from pulling the cannula away from his nose. “It’s oxygen, Jay.”

His head was swimming, his mind fading. His eyelids drooped heavily, and he struggled to keep them open.

“You need to sleep,” Jo whispered, stroking his hair.

He shook his head, frowning. “Where...where is Emma?” he asked, his voice little more than a ragged croak.

“She’s here. She’s safe.”

His breath escaped him in a long, heaving sigh of relief, and his eyelids closed. It was a short-lived reprieve, however; his eyes flew open again, wide with horror as he remembered. "Marie!" he gasped, closing his hand fiercely against Jo's. "Is...is she...?"

Jo's expression shifted, her brows lifting in tender sympathy, her eyes mournful, and he understood. "She's here at Metro, too," she said. "She's alive but..."

"Oh, my God," he whispered, closing his eyes. He couldn't bear to hear the rest. The words *persistent vegetative state* and *no discernable brain activity* slammed into him with brutal force, and he pressed his hands over his face, crying out softly in anguish.

"What have I done?" He began to weep, rolling onto his side and drawing his knees toward his chest like a small child. He shuddered, his sobs escaping him forcefully, and when Jo folded herself atop him, he clutched at her in despair.

"It's alright," she whispered and she, too, began to weep. She kissed his ear, smoothing her hand against his hair, holding him. "It's alright, Jay. Please...please don't..."

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"If the son of a bitch as much as jaywalks, I want his ass in handcuffs," Paul snapped into his cell phone. It had been three days since Marie's attack; three days since Jay had lapsed into a coma and been hospitalized. No one had seen or heard from Nathan Gambit.

Paul had ordered surveillance on the young man, but by the time officers were en route to both the hospital and Gambit's last known address, he'd apparently finished his shift and disappeared. His car was still in the hospital parking lot but he wasn't due to work again until the following morning. Despite this, and the fact that Paul had a dozen officers posted throughout the hospital building and grounds waiting for him, he wasn't holding his breath. He suspected Nathan Gambit was long gone.

Even if Gambit was still around, the fact was that Paul couldn't touch him. There wasn't sufficient evidence to get an

arrest warrant issued for him. For the time being, he was simply a “person of interest” in the case, a fact Dan Pierson kept unnecessarily pointing out to Paul in his usual, tactful manner.

“I just don’t see why we’re wasting time and manpower here, surveying the hospital, when we’ve got jack-shit on him to begin with.” Pierson’s voice over the phone grated on Paul’s already-frayed nerves like fingernails squealing on a chalkboard.

“We’re here because I say so, Pierson,” Paul replied. “And we’re staying until I damn well say otherwise.” He snapped his phone closed with a swift, angry gesture and shoved it forcefully into his blazer pocket.

He’d been pacing up and down the corridor outside Jay’s room; now he turned and saw his family regarding him with wary, apprehensive eyes. Vicki, M.K. and Bethany all stood huddled together, with one daughter tucked beneath each of Vicki’s arms. They didn’t need to say anything. He knew what they were thinking.

*This is all my fault. If I’d done my goddamn job, none of this would have happened.*

Jay’s frantic cries as he’d entered his brownstone had alarmed his neighbors, who had then called the police. They’d found Emma hiding in a cabinet under the kitchen sink. She had huddled in there for hours, and had undoubtedly heard everything that happened that night. Because she wouldn’t talk—not one word since she’d been discovered—and because Marie was, for all intents and purposes, brain-dead, no one knew exactly when the assault had taken place, or how long she had hidden. Surely it had been hours.

*All my fault,* Paul thought.

Emma was now downstairs in the hospital’s pediatric ward in a state of catatonia. Her eyes were open, but she remained otherwise unresponsive. The doctors said it was shock, a sort of post-traumatic stress reaction that kept her from speaking. She was aware of the world around her, but no longer seemed interested in being an active participant in it.

*It's all my fault. God, if only I'd picked up the phone, made a couple of calls, got the surveillance ordered faster, none of this would have happened. If I'd just dropped what I was doing and listened to Jo, come down here myself, they would still be okay. This is my fault. Sweet Jesus, all my fault.*

He heard the door to Jay's room open, and he turned as Jo stepped into the corridor. "He's awake," she said, adding quickly, "Barely. He's still pretty weak and groggy, and keeps fading in and out."

"May I see him?" Paul asked.

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Jo had turned off the fluorescent overheads, leaving only a corner lamp aglow to light the room. After a resurrection, Jay was always excruciatingly light-sensitive. Paul sat down in a chair at his brother's bedside and reached out, taking Jay gently by the hand.

Jay looked like he was sleeping, but he stirred at Paul's touch, turning his face to him and opening his eyes slowly. He looked at Paul dazedly. "Hey..." he breathed.

"Hey," Paul said, blinking against the sting of unbidden tears. *How many times are you going to do this to him?* his mind railed against an unresponsive God. *When is it going to be enough for you? When will you let it stop—when it takes all he's got left? When he's the one who's dead?*

Jay closed his eyes again, and Paul said nothing. He watched his younger brother sleep for at least ten minutes, and then, all at once, Jay gasped softly, his eyelids opening. "I...I'm going to be sick..." he groaned.

Paul grabbed a wash basin from the bedside table and got his arm beneath Jay, helping him sit up just as the first wrenching waves overtook him. Jay cried out feebly, retching up a thick mouthful of foamy bile. Again and again, he jerked against Paul, heaving into the basin. When he finished, he began to shudder, and Paul held him fiercely, tucked beneath his arm just as Vicki had held the girls in the hallway. "It's alright," he whispered to Jay. "It's alright now. You're alright."



To his surprise, Jay planted his hand against Paul's chest and tried weakly to push away. Paul let him, and when he moved to help Jay lie back, he shrugged clumsily loose. "Go...go away. I don't...need you here."

Paul blinked at him, wounded and surprised. Jay was always humiliated by his frailty following a resurrection, but he had never refused Paul's offers of help before. "Jay, it happened again," he said, thinking Jay was confused. "You're at Metro General. Marie was attacked. You—"

"I know what happened," Jay said, the furrow between his brows deepening. "I...I remember. You said it was Rich. You said he hurt Jo, but it...it wasn't him and you knew it. You knew it."

"I said that because I didn't want this to happen," Paul said, reaching for Jay. "Listen to me. I knew if the Watcher was following Jo, it could wind up with you involved—you and Emma. I was trying to protect you. I—"

"Fuck you, Paul," Jay seethed, jerking away. "You said she wasn't in danger. You said he was through with her. He was in my house, you son of a bitch. He went after my daughter."

"I'm sorry," Paul whispered. Jay's words cut into him brutally, the pain visceral and deep because he was right; it was true. Jay said aloud what Paul himself had thought all along, what no one else had the courage to say. *It's all my fault.*

Jay closed his eyes. "Just leave," he whispered, the angry edge in his voice softening to despair. A solitary tear fell from the corner of his left eye, trailing slowly down his cheek, glistening in the soft lamplight. "Get out of here, Paul. Leave me alone."

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The cool look Jo awarded him as he ducked back out into the corridor and she brushed past him, returning to Jay's bedside, let Paul know that she, too, was still pissed off about the Rich incident. She hadn't said anything to him about it yet but clearly had told Jay plenty.

Paul averted his eyes, not meeting her gaze. He deserved her anger, and Jay's. *It's all my fault.*

"Paul, we're going to go," Vicki said. She and the girls had shrugged their coats on and he watched as Bethany tugged a sock cap over her head, and M.K. wiggled her fingers into her gloves.

"Jo said Jay needs to rest," Vicki said, zipping up the front of her coat and shouldering her purse. "And since there's no change with Marie or Emma, I thought we'd—"

"Go on," Paul said, shaking his head. "What the hell. You've spent your obligatory...what...hour here for the day?"

He wished he could take the words back as soon as they were out of his mouth. He wasn't angry with Vicki, or the girls; he was angry at himself, but unfortunately, they were on hand, and had just inadvertently caught the brunt of it.

Bethany blinked at him, her blue eyes wide and hurt. M.K. stopped snapping her gum long enough to regard him with bewildered surprise. Vicki's brows narrowed slightly, a discernable crease forming between them.

"Nice, Paul," she said dryly. "Really tactful." She slipped a hand against each of her daughters' elbows and steered them out, marching past him.

He let them go, helpless to do anything but return Bethany's mournful gaze with a sheepish and apologetic one of his own. *Don't worry, sweetheart,* he thought, forlornly. *In another year, two tops, you'll hate me, too.*

He went to see Emma. The doctors thought it was helpful for her to have as much interaction with her family as possible, but Paul had been unable to face her. He was too ashamed, too seized with remorse and culpability.

"Hi, kiddo," he said, settling himself into a chair at the girl's bedside. He'd gone to her house two days earlier and brought her favorite teddy bear, Mr. Cuddles, to the hospital. She held it to her tummy, hugged against her. She looked up at the television set, where a montage of noisy cartoon clips played. She didn't acknowledge his entrance or respond when a round-faced nurse told her he'd come to visit. She didn't as

much as bat an eyelash as he sat beside her and didn't turn at the sound of his voice.

"You mad at me?" he asked. When he received no reply, he smiled sadly. "You're in good company if you are. Seems like everyone is all of a sudden. Your aunt Vicki, your dad, Jo. They have every reason to be."

He picked up the remote control and turned off the television. Silence immediately settled upon the room, heavy and stifling. Paul sighed wearily, hanging his head. "I'm sorry, Emma. I've tried really hard to catch the bad guy who did this to you and Marie. I've been trying for awhile now, but I haven't yet. Maybe if I was a better cop, I could have found him by now, and then Marie wouldn't be hurt, and you..."

His voice choked, his eyes flooding with tears. He pressed his lips together, struggling to compose himself. "I'm sorry," he whispered again. "This is all my fault, and I'm sorry."

Her hand draped against his, a soft and sudden warmth that drew his startled gaze. "You're wrong, Uncle Paul," Emma said quietly.

"I..." he began, surprised. He cleared his throat and swatted his hand across his face to dry his eyes. "Well, hey, kiddo," he said, forcing a smile onto his face and bright cheer into his voice. "You're awake!"

He wondered if he should call someone or ring for the nurse. Emma hadn't as much as blinked in the last three days; surely, this was some kind of miraculous breakthrough.

"I wasn't sleeping, Uncle Paul," Emma said calmly. "I was listening."

"Listening?"

She nodded.

"To the TV?" he asked, confused.

She shook her head. "Sometimes I hear things in my mind, like other people's thoughts. It's like I get inside of their heads, hear what they're thinking."

Paul sat there for a long moment as she returned his gaze, her eyes round and earnest. Either she was telling him the truth—which was absolutely ridiculous—or she sure as hell thought she was.

“I can’t explain it...” Emma began.

“That’s okay,” he interjected kindly. *She’s still in shock,* he told himself. *Christ, she heard Nathan Gambit rape and murder Marie. She spent hours hiding, alone in the house with that son of a bitch. She’s not thinking straight. Hell, she’s lucky to be thinking at all.*

“...but I can’t explain what Dad can do, either,” Emma finished, startling Paul. Again, she held his gaze evenly, her dark eyes solemn. “You know what I mean.”

She said this last in an undertone, quiet, nearly whispering, but the words still punched into him like physical blows. She couldn’t know; there was no way she possibly could, because Jay sure as hell wouldn’t have told her and he doubted Jo would have, either. There was no way Emma could no about Jay’s power, but he could see it in her face, in the way she pinned him with her stare. *Jesus Christ. She knows.*

“Yes,” he said, his own voice little more than a stunned croak. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

“That’s how I knew to hide under the sink, like you and Dad used to at the farm, your old comic book place,” Emma said. “I knew the bad man wouldn’t find me. And that’s how I knew to stay there, that he hadn’t left the house yet.”

She reached for him, seizing hold of his hand. “He was waiting for Dad. And you’re wrong, Uncle Paul. It’s not your fault. You’re just looking in the wrong place.”

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“He’s not Santa Claus.”

That’s the message Emma had given Paul. “That’s what I keep hearing in my mind,” she’d said and Paul had mentally kicked himself in the ass for letting himself lend her credence for even one fleeting moment.

*She's just a little girl, he thought. A traumatized kid who's imagining that she can read people's minds. He shook his head. And I'm goddamn nuts to have listened to her.*

"I'll keep that in mind, kiddo," he told Emma, leaning over and pressing his lips against her brow.

"You don't believe me," she said, looking wounded.

"Of course I do."

"No," Emma replied and she rolled away, presenting her back to him. "You don't."

*Terrific, Paul thought, as he waited for the elevator. Now everyone is pissed off at me. This has got to be some kind of fucking record.*

He tried to call Vicki, to tell her the good news about Emma's awakening, but Vicki's cell just rang through to her voice mail. He knew damn good and well what that meant. Vicki turned her phone off if she wasn't able to get to it conveniently. If it rang and rang until her voice mail kicked in, it meant the phone was on and Vicki either didn't hear it, or had checked her caller I.D. and didn't want to answer. He suspected the latter and frowned, snapping his phone closed and shoving it into his pocket.

He checked his watch as he stepped onto the elevator. Nathan Gambit was supposed to clock in for his next shift at seven o'clock the next morning, and while Paul didn't have a hope in hell of catching him, he planned to be at the hospital well before that, just to be sure. It was time for some take-out Chinese and some sleep. He figured he'd go by the office and nap. They had a fold-out cot around there somewhere.

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Jay slept through the night, not rousing again until shortly after five in the morning. Jo spent the night with him, dozing in the recliner beside the bed. The chair rattled as she rose, and at the noise, Jay stirred.

"Well, hi," Jo said, smiling. She brushed his hair back from his brow and leaned over, kissing him gently on the mouth.

“Hi, yourself,” he murmured dazedly.

“Go back to sleep,” she told him. “I’m working first shift today and need to be on the floor at seven. I brought my uniform with me, but I need to get ready. I’m going to take a quick shower.”

Despite his grogginess, he managed to arch his brow. “Can I watch?”

Jo laughed. “Behave yourself. We have company.”

He glanced to his left and realized with surprise that Emma lay in bed beside him, still asleep. He nearly burst into relieved tears as he touched her hair, smoothing her disheveled curls back from her face. “How...?” he whispered, looking up at Jo.

“She was asking for you,” Jo said. “And her doctors thought it would be good for both of you.”

He put his arm around his daughter, drawing her near, smiling as she snuggled against him. “Thank you,” he said, his voice choked.

“You’re welcome,” Jo said, walking into the adjacent bathroom.

He listened as water began running in the shower. Emma murmured, wriggling beside him somewhat, and opened her eyes sleepily. “Hi, Dad.”

Jay smiled. “Hi, Em.”

“Are you all better now?”

“I’m working on it, yeah.”

She nodded, still more asleep than awake. Her eyes closed again, and she seemed to drift off. Jay drew in the soft, clean fragrance of her hair against his nose and held her close. “He killed Skittles, too, you know,” she said after a moment.

Jay had nearly dozed again himself, and started at her soft voice. “What?”

Emma propped herself up on her elbows, her hair tumbling down into her face in haphazard curls. She pushed

them back with one hand and looked at him solemnly. “The cat, Skittles. That man killed him, too.”

For a moment, Jay thought he was dreaming, the conversation sounded so absurd. And then he remembered the dead cat on his front porch, the one he’d resurrected, and his breath drew sharply still, as if he’d just been doused with ice water. “How do you know about that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just do. I know about Skittles, and about Danny Thomas. Eileen Dancer, too—and the other time, at the funeral home.”

He couldn’t breathe and felt his stomach wrench in a sudden, painful knot. “Emma...” Stunned and aghast, he sat up. “How do you know about that? Did your Uncle Paul tell you?”

*How could he do this? Jesus Christ, Paul, she’s just a kid! A little girl! How could you tell her about all of that—about me?*

“No. It wasn’t Uncle Paul,” Emma said. “It scares you, doesn’t it? What you can do.”

“Stop it!” He swung his legs around and crawled slowly, feebly out of bed. He felt impossibly weak, and struggled to keep his balance, leaning heavily against the chair Jo had slept in. “Emma, I don’t want you to talk about it, okay? No more.”

“It’s not your fault, Dad,” Emma said, and her voice was eerily grown up. “What happened to them...what happened to Marie...”

“I said, enough!” Jay snapped, turning to her. His brows were furrowed, but his eyes were filled with bewildered fright. *How in the hell does she know all of this? Did Paul tell her? How else could she possibly know?*

“He saw you in the parking garage,” Emma said. “The man who hurt Jo and Marie. He was still there. He heard it when you fell against the car and set off the alarm, so he hid in a locker. He watched you through the slits in the door. He didn’t have time to get away.”

Jay's knees failed him and he sat down hard against the chair seat, staring at his daughter in mute shock.

"He saw everything," Emma said. "That's why he came to our house that night. It doesn't have anything to do with Jo. He doesn't really care about her anymore."

Jay pressed his hand against his mouth. He couldn't repress the vile, bitter taste that had risen at the back of his throat.

"He's going to keep doing it, Dad," Emma whispered, her eyes wide with fear. "He's not going to stop. Now he wants to watch you."

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Paul woke at a quarter past five in the morning with the nasty flavor of Mongolian beef still lingering in his mouth, and a painful crick in his neck from where one of the cot's mattress springs had dug into his muscles during the night. He had slept in the homicide division's break rooms, and when he squinted blearily at a nearby wall clock, he swore aloud. He'd meant to wake up well before now.

"Goddamn it," he muttered, fishing his cell phone out of his pants pocket. He'd set the alarm on it to go off at four o'clock, and had no idea why it hadn't worked until he unfolded the lid. He'd somehow rolled on top of it during the night, and in the process, managed to turn it off. The alarm hadn't gone off, and he saw he had four missed calls.

"Goddamn it," he said, when he realized they'd all come from home. He thumbed the speed dial button for the house, and Bethany answered on the fifth ring, her voice hoarse and sleepy.

"Dad? Is Mom with you?"

He frowned. "What? No, she's not with me. What are you talking about? She's not at home?"

"She got a phone call last night from someone at the hospital. He told her you'd asked him to call, that Emma was awake and you wanted her to come there."



Paul ran his fingers through his thinning hair. *What the hell?* he thought. He hadn't asked anyone to call Vicki. He'd thought about it himself, but she'd been screening her calls, not answering for him, and it had pissed him off so much, he'd hung up without leaving her any messages.

"It was late. We were already in our pajamas, so she told us just to stay put, that we could see Emma in the morning," Bethany said. After a long pause, she added in a tremulous, anxious voice: "She's there with you, isn't she?"

"I'm not at the hospital," Paul said, wincing as he stood up, and the crick in his neck strained in protest. "I'm at work. I spent the night here." He limped toward the coffee machine, hoping the pot of regular was fresh enough to kill the stale garlic and ginger flavors in his mouth. "I'll call her on her cell. Don't worry about it, sweetheart. I—"

"I've been trying her cell phone," Bethany said, sounding even more worried. "It's on, but she's not answering it. I've left her messages. That's why I tried to call you. She said she wouldn't be gone long, only a couple of hours or so."

Paul had poured himself a cup of coffee, but paused now with it poised near his mouth, ready to sip. "When did she leave the house?"

"Around ten, I think. Ten-thirty, maybe."

Paul set the coffee down. "She's been gone all night?"

"Well, yes," Bethany began. "But I..."

*"She got a phone call last night from a nurse at the hospital. He told her you'd asked him to call, that Emma was awake and you wanted her to come there."*

Paul turned, heading for the door. He'd taken his pistol and holster off before going to bed; it was locked in his desk. If something had happened, if it had been Nathan Gambit who'd called, then he knew more than just Paul's phone number—he had to know where Paul lived, as well. "Shit," he hissed.

"Daddy?" Bethany asked, sounding alarmed now. "What's going on? Is Mom okay?"

Paul paused, softening at the sound of her fear. “Mom’s fine, sweetheart,” he said. “I’m going to the hospital right now. I bet she’s just fallen asleep there with Emma.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Bethany said. He could tell by the quiver of uncertainty in her voice that she wasn’t convinced, but he was her father. If he said something, in her eyes, it must be true.

“Good, then,” Paul said. He checked the clip on his nine-millimeter and then locked it home. Before he left, he tried to reach Vicki on her cell phone, but had no better luck than his daughter. He cursed under his breath as he hurried outside for his truck.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Jay, you shouldn’t be up yet. Why are you out of bed?”

Jo had just finished her shower and changed into her uniform scrub pants and tunic. She’d emerged from the bathroom only to find Jay sitting up in the bedside chair. He looked ashen, like he was about to be sick. “Jay,” she said, touching his shoulder. “You’re still too weak. What happened?”

She looked up at Emma, who sat cross-legged on the mattress, still half-swathed in sheets, with her teddy bear in hand. She found no explanation there, only the child’s steady and somewhat eerily stoic stare, and unnerved, Jo looked away.

Jay shook his head. “Nothing,” he whispered, his voice feeble and hoarse. “I just felt sick to my stomach, that’s all. I thought I was going to vomit and got out of bed to reach the pan. I’m okay now.”

“Are you sure?” she asked and he nodded.

He leaned heavily against her as she helped him limp to his feet. He stumbled unsteadily, nearly toppling Jo in the process, and she had to support him as he sat back against the mattress.

“He was wearing gloves like those,” Emma said suddenly.

“Like what?” Jo asked, puzzled, because the comment seemed to have come out of nowhere. Emma pointed, her index finger—and that unflinching, peculiar gaze—indicating

something beyond Jo's left shoulder, and when she turned, she saw the standard box of latex examination gloves mounted on the wall beside the sink.

"Those," Emma said, and now the skin along the nape of Jo's neck crawled. "He was wearing gloves like those. The man who hurt you and Marie." She looked Jo directly in the eyes. "You know. You saw him, too."

"I...I didn't see his face," Jo stammered, taken aback, and turning to Jay in bewildered surprise. *How does she know what happened to me?*

"Emma, the bad man works here at the hospital," Jay said, and he hooked his arm about Emma's neck, drawing her against him in an embrace. "He's not here right now, but when he comes back, your Uncle Paul will be waiting for him. Uncle Paul knows who he is, and he'll catch him. He'll arrest him for hurting Jo and Marie."

Emma turned to her father, her oddly impassive expression softening into something more childlike and fearful. "What if Uncle Paul is wrong?" she whispered.

"I...I need to go," Jo said, turning for the bathroom again. She ducked inside and closed the door, leaning heavily against the sink and allowing a moment to compose herself. Emma's words had startled and disturbed her.

*It's Nathan Gambit, she told herself firmly. He's the one. I know he is. I'm sure of it. It was Nathan, and the police are going to get him. They're all over this building, and if he shows up—when he shows up—Paul is going to arrest him.*

Thus resolved, she hurriedly pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She was ready to get to the floor and begin working, to lose herself in her duties. All of a sudden, she needed that escape desperately.

She stepped out of the bathroom again, fresh-faced and pulled together again. Although she wasn't due on the ward for another half an hour at least, she didn't care. *I'll be there early.*

"I need to go," she said again, leaning over the bedside rail and kissing Jay lightly on the mouth. She glanced quickly at

Emma and then away again, forcing a bright smile. "You two don't go having too much fun without me, okay?"

"Hey." Jay reached out and caught her momentarily by the fingertips. "I love you."

It was the first time he'd told her this; the first time in ages that any man had, and she smiled at him, genuine this time, as she drew away from his grasp. "I love you, too."

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She was surprised to meet Charles in the corridor. She'd been on her way to the elevator; he'd apparently just stepped off of it. For some reason, Gary McAdams, Gina's ambulance partner, was right behind him. "Hey, you," she said to Charles, surprised and somewhat bewildered. "Hey, uh...Gary."

"It's Mick," he said.

*Whatever*, she thought. "What's up?" she asked Charles. "I was just on my way to the floor."

"Right now?" Charles replied, looking equally puzzled. He glanced at his watch. "It's not even quarter 'til yet. Besides, Mick said they were looking for you, asked me to help track you down."

"They?" Jo asked.

"The police," Mick said. "I ran into them downstairs. Man, they're all over the place! Some balding guy with a detective's badge asked if I knew you. I told him yeah, I'd track you down, because I figured Charles would know what floor you'd be on. I saw that green car of yours out in the parking lot and knew you were around here somewhere."

"Paul sent you?" Jo asked, her heart suddenly quickening. Paul had said he would be in early that morning. He'd set up a sort of sting operation both within the hospital and along the grounds outside in the event that Nathan Gambit showed up. "He's Jay's brother. What did he say?"

She'd wanted to call Paul the night before, just to make sure there was nothing he needed from her in the meantime, but even though she'd turned her coat pockets

inside out, emptying their contents, she'd been unable to find the business card he'd given her with his home, work and cell phone numbers on it. She hadn't wanted to wake Jay and ask him for the numbers, and so she was relieved to learn Paul was looking for her. She'd hated to think she'd be standing around like some damsel in distress with her thumb up her ass while the police went after Gambit.

"He wants to see you," Mick said. "He's downstairs waiting."

"Alright," she said. "Thanks, Mick."

"Alright?" Charles caught her by the arm as she moved to step past him. "What do you mean, 'alright?' What the hell's going on, Jo? Does Rich have something to do with this? With what happened to your friend back there?"

He nodded once to indicate the closed door to Jay's room. She hadn't said a word to Charles about what was going on, and felt badly about it. "No, Charles."

"You're not in any trouble, are you?" he asked. The elevator bell chimed, the doors sliding open and they stepped onto the car together. There were several other people already aboard and they moved to the rear of the car, leaving Mick toward the front to punch the first floor button for them.

"No," Jo said, managing a laugh. "Don't be silly, Charles. Paul and Jay had a quarrel yesterday, that's all. He probably just wants to find out how Jay's doing without losing face. You know how guys are."

Charles wasn't an idiot, and she could tell he wasn't buying it. Not for one moment. "You'd tell me, wouldn't you? If there was something going on, I mean?"

She forced a smile for his benefit. "Yes, Dad," she said, trying to sound playful. She slapped his belly. "Stop worrying."

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"Well, hey, nice of you to join us, Frances," Dan Pierson said, his face twisted in a humorless sneer as Paul brushed past him to enter the hospital's main security office.

“Considering you told the rest of us to be here, what? An hour ago?”

“Get bent, Pierson,” Paul growled, leaning over a console lined with small, black-and-white surveillance monitors that showcased views from various angles of the hospital’s grounds and wards. He’d just come from the fifth floor, the pediatric unit. He’d driven around the parking lot until he’d found Vicki’s car, but when he’d checked in with Emma’s charge nurse, he’d been told that Vicki had never made it upstairs. In fact, Emma’s doctor had given his permission and Emma had spent the night on the third floor with her father.

“Anyone call in last night about seeing my wife around?” Paul asked one of the task force surveillance officers.

The younger man flipped through a spiral-bound logbook and nodded. “Yeah, around ten thirty. Doug Richards ran into her in the main lobby. There’s a note of it right here. She recognized him and said hello, asked about you. He told her you’d gone home for the night.”

“We got a tape showing any of this?” Paul asked, leaning past the officer to peer at the notebook. He watched as the younger man spooled back through the video feed from one of the lobby cameras for a few minutes. When he stopped it, the digital time recorded on the tape read 10:28 p.m.

“Should be right around here,” the officer said, and Paul watched a fuzzy image of his detective, Doug Richards, walking into frame. At least, he assumed it was Richards, to judge by the figure’s stocky build. Anything identifiable in his face was completely obscured by the low resolution of the recording.

At 10:33 p.m., the slimmer silhouette of a woman walked briskly into view. She paused to speak with Richards, and Paul recognized Vicki from her posture, and the woman’s visible, short-cropped blond hair. They spoke briefly, and Vicki clearly grew irritated, probably to realize that Paul was no longer in the building. First, she planted her hands on her hips, and then crossed them in front of her, shaking her head as she spoke.

“In deep shit with the old lady again, boss?” the younger detective asked, glancing up at Paul with an amused hook to the corner of his mouth.

“Maybe,” Paul murmured, watching as, on screen, another figure approached Richards and Vicki. He addressed them momentarily, and Vicki’s posture immediately relaxed. She unfolded her arms and seemed to be put at ease by whatever the man said. He was dressed all in what looked to be dark-colored scrubs, a uniform of some type like a hospital employee, and when he turned and walked away, Vicki waved in friendly farewell to Richards and followed him.

“Where did they go?” Paul asked.

The other detective shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, glancing down at the logbook. “Richards radioed it in and said that guy, the nurse, took her up to the fifth floor to see your niece.”

“Who’s the nurse?” Paul asked, but again, the younger man shook his head. “Anyone?” He looked around the room behind him, but was met with only shrugs and head shakes. “Where’s Richards now?”

“He went off-shift an hour ago,” the detective said. “I can call his cell...”

“Do it,” Paul said, nodding. “Get him over here now. I want him to look at the picture of Gambit and see if that’s the guy in the nurse’s clothes.”

“What?” Pierson exclaimed from the doorway. “Nathan Gambit didn’t get in this building last night. No one reported seeing him. We’ve had every entrance and exit under constant surveillance.”

Paul rewound the tape and paused it, freezing the blurred images of Vicki and the male nurse together in mid-stride. The height was right; the build was, too. They’d had no pictures of Gambit to go on in their surveillance, except for a grainy headshot on record from his hospital I.D. Paul wasn’t entirely sure even *he* could pick the kid out of a line-up just by sight alone.

“Get Richards in here now,” he said again.



“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Pierson said. “You know, I love that we’re sitting here, wasting our time and the taxpayers’ money to help you keep tabs on your wife, Frances, but frankly, I don’t give a shit if she’s here, there or on the goddamn moon. This has nothing to do with Nathan Gambit or the purpose of this task force, and I’m not going to let you—”

Paul whirled around, his brows furrowed. He closed his hand against the collar of Pierson’s shirt and shoved him forcibly backwards, slamming him into the wall with enough force to send framed images of employees-of-the-month crashing to the floor. Pierson uttered a sharp, startled yelp that was cut short as the back of his head smacked into the plaster.

“You’re out of here, Pierson,” Paul snapped, not loosening his grip on the other man’s shirt. “You hear me? I’ve had it with your bullshit and I’m taking you off this assignment.”

He shoved Pierson against the wall again and released him, leaving the other man to stumble, gasping for breath. “Get out,” Paul seethed. Pierson’s badge was clipped to his belt, and Paul reached out, snatching it. He grabbed the lapel of Pierson’s sport coat and jerked it open so that he could pull the other man’s pistol out of his holster.

“You can’t do that,” Pierson said, his voice hoarse and wheezing as he touched his throat gingerly. “You can’t take my gun and badge. You don’t have that authority.”

“Yeah? Well, Lieutenant Brady *does* have that authority, and that’s who you can go see about getting these returned to you,” Paul said. “Get the hell out of here.”

Pierson looked around, his gaze sweeping the room vainly for any help from his fellow detectives. Finding none, he scowled, his brows narrowing as he limped toward the door. “You just bought yourself an early retirement, Frances,” he said, jabbing his thick forefinger back at Paul. “I’ll see to that, you son of a bitch.”

“Yeah, I’ll hold my fucking breath,” Paul muttered, shoving Pierson’s pistol down beneath the waistband of his pants.

“Detective Frances—he’s here,” one of the officers exclaimed. He’d been checking in over a hand-held radio with the various officers positioned around the hospital, and now he looked excitedly at Paul. “Nathan Gambit just stepped off the bus on Greere Avenue and is heading for the parking lot.”

Even Dan Pierson paused, pivoting to peer back into the room as the detectives scrambled to find Gambit with the video cameras. “South side of the building,” Paul said, pointing to one panel of screens. “These over here—Greere is on the south side.”

“Got him,” one of the detectives said as a blurred and shadowy image of the parking lot appeared on screen. It was still dark outside and the overhead lights in the lot spilled bright glares down across parked cars and asphalt. They watched a tall figure wearing a heavyweight parka cross into view.

“Are we sure it’s him?” Paul asked.

The officer with the hand-held nodded. “We’ve got a visual confirmation from Jenkins. He’s staked out at the bus stop and damn near bumped into him, he says.”

Paul watched Gambit look around the parking lot. The young man walked slowly among the cars, studying the backs of them, as if looking for a particular vehicle. The longer he watched, the more Paul found himself itching to draw his gun, go outside and confront him. *If the son of a bitch has done anything to Vicki, I’ll shoot him dead where he’s standing, he thought. I swear to Christ, I will.*

The seasoned police officer in him still managed to keep control, however. If he went after Gambit now, it was all over. They had nothing on him, and Gambit had no reason to suspect they had any inkling of his identity. He couldn’t prove Jo was a victim, so his only hope was that Jay or Emma could identify him somehow, finger him as the guy who had gone after Marie.

It would all be ruined if he lost his cool, and so he struggled not to, closing his hands into slow, deliberate fists, and forcing his feet to remain rooted in place.

“What’s he doing?” one of the detectives asked, leaning over next to Paul, studying the video monitors. “His car’s parked in the east lot.”

Gambit paused behind a small, dark-colored hatchback. The detectives watched as he moved alongside of it, and began to try each of the doors in turn, checking to see if any were unlocked. “Run that plate,” Paul said. “Can you see what it is? He makes a habit of stalking. This could be someone he’s watching.”

One of the officers turned to a nearby laptop that was plugged in by wireless network to the city’s server. Less than thirty seconds after typing in the license plate number from the vehicle Gambit was inspecting, the officer looked up at Paul. “That plate’s registered to a Jobeth Montgomery,” he said. “Three fifty-two South Ormsby—”

He continued on with Jo’s address, but Paul didn’t need to hear more. With his heart nearly tangled somewhere between his throat and his balls, he darted for the door, shoving past police officers and sending Dan Pierson staggering gracelessly into the wall again, out of his way.

“What are you doing?” Pierson cried after him. “You can’t go out there now, you stupid son of a bitch! You’ll ruin everything!”

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“Dad?”

Emma rapped lightly, quickly against the bathroom door, and Jay looked up from the sink basin. Jo had left only moments earlier, and he’d limped into the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, shocked by how gaunt and haggard he looked. He was in desperate need of a shave, his chin and cheeks covered in a heavy growth of three-day-old beard stubble. Dark shadows framed his eyes, and his hair was dull, dirty and disheveled. “Dad?” Emma called, her voice warbling with urgency.

*She probably needs to pee*, Jay thought, as he took a towel and blotted his face with it. He opened the door, expecting Emma to rush past him in a frantic dash for the toilet. “Sorry, Em. I was—”

“*Sbbbb!*” Emma hissed, grabbing him by the hand, startling him. He realized she was ashen with fright, her large, dark eyes threatening to swallow her entire face.

“What is it?” he whispered. “Emma, what’s wrong?”

“Listen.” Emma cut her eyes to the door. Jay turned, cocking his head, straining to hear whatever had distressed her so terribly.

He caught the sound of voices from outside in the corridor. At this realization, the tension that had suddenly seized him loosened, and he sighed. “Emma, it’s just Jo. She’s talking to someone in the hallway. She—”

When he heard the man speak outside, his deep, resonant voice drifting in through the door, Jay froze, his eyes widening in sudden, bright panic.

*She wouldn’t scream*, the man had said, the Watcher—the serial killer who had attacked Jo and Marie. *No matter what I did to her, she wouldn’t cry out. I think she didn’t want the little girl to hear and come running to help her. She’s hiding somewhere. I haven’t found her yet.*

Jay’s knees failed him and he sat down hard against the bathroom threshold, his chest hitching as he struggled for breath. He reached for his daughter, seizing Emma roughly by the front of her nightgown and jerked her against him. He embraced her fiercely, and scuttled backwards, kicking with his feet, pushing himself into the bathroom.

“Dad...!” Emma whimpered.

“*Sbbbb!*” Jay hissed, covering her mouth with his hand. He couldn’t breathe; he could hear his heart hammering out a frantic, panicked cadence in his ears.

“It’s him,” Emma whispered in a small and frightened voice when he moved his hand. She met his gaze, her eyes

enormous and glistening with tears. “Daddy, it’s him—the man who hurt Marie.”

He nodded. “I know.” *Why isn’t Jo screaming for help?* he thought. *What is she doing out there?*

He stood again, using the sink to support him as he stumbled to his feet. “Emma, stay here,” he said quietly, limping for the doorway. He couldn’t hear any voices now out in the corridor, and alarmed, he moved to open the door.

“Daddy!” Emma mewled in protest, but she offered no more when he shook his head at her and touched his index finger to his lips. *Shhh!*

He opened the door a brief margin and leaned out, peering into the hallway. At the end of the long corridor, just past the nurses’ station, he saw a bank of elevators. Three people dressed in hospital uniforms were just stepping onto an awaiting car—Jo, unmistakable with her long, auburn curls caught back in a ponytail, and a pair of men he’d never seen before. Jo seemed completely unafraid to be in their company, and as the elevator doors closed, he saw her laugh and slap one in the belly, as comfortably as if she’d known him forever.

*What in the hell is going on?* he thought, bewildered. *That’s the guy—I know it’s him. I’d know his voice anywhere, but...*

Jo had told him that Paul had set up a sting operation to catch the suspect, Nathan Gambit. It was supposed to happen that morning, any moment now, in fact. *How could Gambit have made it inside the building?* Jay wondered. *And why in the hell would Jo be acting so friendly to him? She said she’s positive it was him; she remembers the way he was built, the way he smelled, everything. She said she’s positive.*

Emma’s words from earlier in the morning whispered through his mind, making him gasp suddenly, sharply. *What if Uncle Paul is wrong?* she’d asked.

*What if it’s not just Uncle Paul who’s wrong?* Jay thought. *Oh, my God, what if Jo is, too?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Where is she, you son of a bitch?” Paul seethed, slamming Nathan Gambit facedown against the hood of Jo’s car. He had whipped Dan Pierson’s gun out of his waistband as he stormed across the parking lot, and now he shoved the barrel of the nine millimeter with lethal intent against Gambit’s brow.

“Jesus!” Gambit squealed, his eyes flown wide, his voice breathless with startled alarm. “Don’t shoot me! Jesus! My wallet’s in my pocket! Take it!”

“I don’t want your wallet,” Paul growled as he shifted his grip on Gambit’s coat, flipping him around to face him. He slammed him backwards against the car hood and leaned over him, keeping the pistol pressed against the younger man’s nose. “I want to know where my wife is, you son of a bitch. You have until I count to five to tell me. One...”

Gambit’s eyes widened even more. “What are you talking about? Are you high? Jesus, man, I don’t...!” His eyes cut over Paul’s shoulder, just as Paul heard the rapid footsteps of other police officers approaching.

“Help me!” Gambit pleaded. “Somebody call the cops! This guy’s nuts!”

“I *am* the cops, Gambit,” Paul said, leaning over him. “You’re on two, asshole. Where is my wife?”

“Detective Frances, let him go,” Pierson said from behind him. “Put down the gun and step away from the vehicle.”

“Here’s three, Gambit,” Paul said, ignoring Pierson completely and keeping his gaze locked on Gambit. He thumbed back the hammer, and heard a distinctive wet, spattering sound as Gambit voided his bladder, sending a stream of urine down his pant leg to pool against the blacktop

“Oh, Jesus, what are you doing?” Gambit whimpered. “I don’t know anything about your wife! Somebody please get him off of me!”

“Four,” Paul said, pushing the gun barrel more firmly against Gambit’s nose. Gambit began to wheeze, nearly hyperventilating, as Pierson and another detective caught Paul from behind, grappling with him, hauling him backwards and away from Gambit.

“Where is she?” Paul roared, thrashing between the two officers. “You son of a bitch, if you’ve touched her, I’ll kill you, do you hear me? I’ll kill you!”

“He’s crazy!” Gambit wheezed, his face flushed bright red, glossed with a slick sheen of sweat. He stumbled clumsily, reaching into his coat pocket. As he did, all seven of the officers who’d followed Paul to the parking lot drew their guns and thumbed off their safeties. Seven steady pistol barrels pointed at Gambit.

“Jesus!” he mewled.

“Move your hands slowly out of your pockets! Do it now!” one of the officers shouted. “Put your hands up and get on your knees! Do it!”

“I...I’m asthmatic,” Gambit said, his voice strained now, his breathing quickly growing labored. “I...I can’t breathe...my inhaler...in my pocket...!”

Paul watched as one of the officers moved swiftly forward, patting down outer and inner pockets on Gambit’s coat. When he pulled a plastic inhaler out of one, Gambit snatched it, taking a long, loud gust. He gasped deeply, struggling to get his strangled breathing under control. Paul quit fighting, and although the second detective turned him loose, Pierson kept a firm grasp on Paul’s arms.

“What are you doing out here?” Pierson asked Gambit.

“I...I work here,” Gambit replied, still flushed, but not wheezing as noisily now. “I’m a nurse’s aide. What the hell is wrong with you people? Why did you jump me?”

“Where have you been the past three days?” Paul demanded.

Gambit blinked uncertainly at him, obviously unconvinced that Pierson was enough of a barrier between himself and Paul. He also looked completely bewildered and surprised that Paul knew where he had—or more specifically, had not—been recently. “I...I went to my sister’s house,” he stammered. “To Lake Shores, about four hours north of here. I took the Greyhound. My car died over the weekend. I think the starter’s gone out on it. It’s over there, on the east side of the building.” He pointed.

Paul felt Pierson’s grip tighten, and he shrugged himself forcibly loose of the other man’s grasp. “What are you doing sniffing around Jobeth Montgomery’s car?”

At this, Gambit flushed again. “I wasn’t sniffing around,” he said. “I...I was just...I was going to leave her something.” He reached into his pocket, and again the pistols leveled at him. “Jesus!” he exclaimed, breathless and wide-eyed. “It’s just a present, alright? A stupid, goddamn present!”

He pulled out a small, gift-wrapped box with a miniature red bow. “It’s a pair of earrings from Clancy’s, some kind they only sell there at the mall. I noticed she likes to wear them, so I got her a set. It’s a Secret Santa gift, that’s all. We all drew names, everybody on the ward, and I got her!”

*It’s not Santa Claus*, Emma had told Paul. He blinked like he’d just been slapped, her words reverberating in his mind.

*It’s not Santa Claus. You’re looking in the wrong place.*

“Jesus Christ,” Paul whispered, aghast. He turned back toward the hospital, breaking into a full sprint.



“Frances!” he heard Pierson shouting after him.  
 “Frances, goddamn it! Get back here!”

*You’re looking in the wrong place.*

His cell phone rang, and he shoved Pierson’s pistol back into his pants to answer it. “Yeah?” he barked, ducking and weaving between parked cars.

“Paul, it’s Jay.”

“Hey, kid,” Paul said, as he darted through the main entrance doors and into the hospital lobby. “This really isn’t the best—”

“Listen, Paul,” Jay snapped, his voice so sharp with alarm that Paul skittered to an uncertain halt. “Nathan Gambit isn’t the Watcher—he’s not the one who hurt Jo and Marie. He’s somebody else, someone Jo knows. He’s here in the building, and she’s with him right now.”

He didn’t bother asking Jay how he knew; it didn’t matter at the moment. Vicki was somewhere in the hospital, and Jo was with the person who knew how to find her. “Where?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know. She just got on the elevator with him, going down, I think.”

Paul hurried toward a small crowd of hospital employees and guests waiting before a pair of chrome-door elevators. He could see the floor numbers alight, counting down as each approached the lobby. He heard a soft *ding* as one of them reached the main floor, and saw the doors part.

“Paul, Jo doesn’t know,” Jay said, pleading. “She was laughing with this guy, joking around. She doesn’t realize who he is or the danger she’s in.”

“You stay where you are, you and Emma both,” Paul said. He hurried forward, but a group of people getting off the elevator tangled with those waiting to get on. The second elevator arrived, letting more people off and adding to the confusion.

“Paul, you’ve got to—” Jay began just as Paul caught sight of Jo on the elevator car to his left. The arrow above it

was pointing down, so no one was interested in getting on. Jo moved as if to exit with the crowd, and spied Paul. He watched her register recognition; her brows raised, her mouth opened as if she meant to call out in greeting.

The man who was with her, a tall, burly guy dressed in dark nurse's scrubs, stepped off the elevator and into the lobby. Paul sprang forward, closing his fists against the front of the man's smock. "You son of a bitch!" he seethed, shoving the nurse about in a floundering, startled semi-circle and slamming him face-first against the nearest wall.

"Charles!" Jo exclaimed, moving to leave the elevator. Her eyes were round and bewildered. "Paul, what are you—?"

Just as she stepped across the threshold of the car, another man in a paramedic's uniform who'd been standing at the front by the doors caught her by the arm, pulling her back. In that second, Paul met Jo's eyes and the confusion in her gaze yielded to alarm as the doors slid shut. She was gone.

"Get your hands off me!" the nurse, Charles, snapped at Paul, strong enough so that when he gave Paul a shove, it sent him stumbling back. "What the hell is your problem, buddy?"

"Police officer," Paul replied, his brows furrowed as he reached for his badge, unclipping it from his belt and shoving it beneath the big guy's nose. "You're under arrest, asshole. Turn around and put your hands on the wall."

"Arrest?" Charles asked, his stern expression faltering. "What are you talking about?"

Paul pulled out his pistol, aiming it with pointed inference at the guy's nose. "I said turn around and put your fucking hands up," he said. "*Now*, asshole."

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"Mick, what are you doing?" Jo asked, shrugging herself loose from Gary McAdams' grasp and staggering back a step in the otherwise empty elevator. "Push the button, open the doors. Charles just—"

She started to lean past him, to hit the buttons until the car stopped its descent to the basement, but Mick grabbed her arm again, his fingers clamping hard enough against the meat of her bicep to make her suck in a wincing, pained gasp. When he shoved her away from the doors, she danced back a clumsy step and fell down. Surprised and bewildered, she looked up at him. "That hurt, you asshole!"

It didn't occur to her to be alarmed, not even as the elevator came to a jostling halt and the doors opened onto the shadow-draped, empty corridors of the basement. Without a word or as much as shifting from his strangely impassive expression, Mick reached down, grabbing her arm and she yelped as he jerked her to her feet.

"Hey—!" Jo staggered on her tiptoes as he hauled her off the car and into the basement. Now she felt the first inklings of anxious fear stir in her, and she tried to plant her feet and pull her arm away. "Let go of me, Mick."

He glanced at her as he began to move, strong enough to pull her along in step with him. "No."

"Mick," she said, struggling against his grasp. "I said let me go. Charles is upstairs. Paul grabbed him by mistake. I need to go and—"

Her voice cut abruptly off as Mick whirled. Jo caught a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye and then his fist connected solidly with her face, his knuckles slamming into her cheek and sending her sprawling to the floor. She saw tiny pinpoints of light dancing in front of her eyes as she tried to sit up, her head swimming. It had been a long time since a man had last punched her; too long, and she'd nearly forgotten just how painful it could be. When Mick seized her roughly by the hair, closing his fingers fiercely and craning her head back, she cried out, frightened in full now.

"I saw your car driving down the highway that night," Mick said, speaking in a low, cool voice against her ear, as calm and unaffected as if commenting idly on the weather. "There's no mistaking that green piece of shit you drive, Jo, so I followed you. It was like you were daring me to."

“What...what are you talking about?” she whimpered, but she knew. To her horror, she knew. *Oh, my God*, she thought. *Oh, God, it can't be...!*

“I’m talking about Friday night, the mall garage, fourth floor,” Mick purred, his breath hot against her skin. “You always thought you were too fucking good for me, didn’t you, Jo? Just like that time Charles fixed us up, and there you sat the whole night like you were doing me a goddamn favor. Well, I showed you something, didn’t I, you stupid bitch? And I’m going to show you again.”

She felt his hand drop between her legs from behind, pawing roughly, purposefully between her buttocks, and she cried out hoarsely, struggling against him.

“I bet your cunt’s nice and tight,” he whispered, tightening his grip on her hair, sending pain searing through her scalp. “A goddamn ice queen like you? Oh, yeah. And man, that ass of yours is going to be even tighter. I’m going to take my damn sweet time fucking you, bitch. Because no one’s going to find you down here.”

“Please, no...!” Jo hiccupped, her eyes flooded with tears, her breath hitching as he forced her to walk again, shoving her ahead of him, keeping his hand in his hair. “Mick...oh, God, please don’t...!”

“No more rescues for you, Jo,” he said. “At least, not until I’m ready.”

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Paul raced for the emergency stairwell and rushed down, taking the steps three at a stride. The hospital laundry and building services were all located in the basement. The air was thick and humid with steam from the laundry presses and boilers. Pipes and conduits twisted and wound their way throughout the level, and unused equipment, such as beds, IV stands and wheelchairs were stacked in the corridors for storage.

“You’ve got the wrong guy, pal,” Charles Toomis had told him in the lobby as Paul had slapped cuffs around his thick wrists, still holding him pinned to the wall.

“The only thing I want to hear from you, *pal*...” Paul had seethed, purposely snapping one of the cuffs tightly enough to make Charles grimace. “...is where the fuck my wife is.” He pushed the barrel of the pistol against Charles’ cheek, making the man’s eyes widen and the crowd around them which had gathered to watch the excitement suddenly draw back with a hushed murmur of anxiety.

“Look, I don’t know anything about your wife,” Charles had said, his voice growing breathless. “I don’t even know who the hell you are. I’m the supervisor on the second floor. I was coming down here to look for you guys, the police. One of our ambulance drivers told me you were looking for my friend, Jo Montgomery. Just get them back down here and they’ll both tell you that.”

The barrel of Paul’s pistol wavered, lowering from the nurse’s face. “Ambulance driver?”

Charles nodded. “Yeah, Gary McAdams. He was right there on the elevator with me, and with Jo. You’ve got to have seen him. He told me one of you had sent him upstairs to get Jo. A detective named Frances—Paul Frances.”

Paul reached the basement and ran past the laundry on the way to the elevators. To his dismay, he found the doors closed and locked, with a cheery little sign posted in the window, the kind with a clock face and moveable plastic hands. *Be back in ten minutes!* it promised.

*Damn it*, Paul had thought in the lobby, as the horrifying realization of what he’d done slapped him upside the head. *I’ve grabbed the wrong guy. Again!*

“Damn it!” Paul said. He’d hoped to send the laundry workers to the hospital’s security office for back-up. He hurried to the elevators, but it was too late. He could see the digital numbers counting up again as the elevator car began its ascent to the upper floors. He’d missed them, this guy, Gary McAdams and Jo. The only sound he heard was the hissing of steam and the clattering of electrical equipment.

“Vicki!” Paul cried out, looking all around him. *God, where do I begin?* he thought helplessly. *This place is a goddamn maze!* “Jo Montgomery! Vicki! Where are you?”

He began to move slowly, carefully, keeping the nine millimeter leveled before him. He kept his eyes wide, his breath nearly stilled, his finger poised against the trigger. He crept along, ducking around low-hanging ventilation ducts and plumbing, keeping his gaze constantly sweeping around him for any hint of movement.

“Vicki!” he shouted again, his voice bouncing off the pipes. “Vicki, can you hear me? It’s Paul! I’m coming for you. I’ve got thirty armed officers down here and we’re sweeping the floor!”

That was a lie, of course. Even if his entire surveillance team backed him up, there wouldn’t be half that number combing the basement. Combing? Hell, he didn’t even know if they were on their way. But Gary McAdams didn’t know that; hopefully never would.

The further he delved into the hospital’s basement, the more disoriented he became. He found himself jumping at every shadow and even the most innocuous sounds had him whirling about, eyes flown wide, pistol trained and at the ready.

At last, he turned a corner, and saw Vicki in front of him. She sat in a folding chair, with her hands bound behind her, her ankles lashed together. She wore only her bra and panties, and a rough gag secured with surgical tape. Something had been drawn around her neck, tied and left in place, a crude garrote fashioned out of a length of rubber medical tubing. She stared at Paul, her eyes enormous with terror. She began to wriggle furiously against her bonds, crying out to him in a muffled voice around the gag.

“Vicki!” he cried. He fell to his knees before her, touching her face, hooking his fingers beneath the rubber tubing and trying to pull it loose. “I’m here. I’m here, baby.”

She mewled around the gag as he leaned over, reaching behind her. More surgical tape had been used to bind her, drawn in thick, overlapping layers against her skin. He

struggled to rip it free. "I'm trying," he told her. Her mewling grew more insistent, shriller, and she began to shrug her shoulders against him insistently, rocking the chair with the effort. "I'm trying, damn it!" he said again. "Just give me a—"

Something hard plowed into the back of his head, and he realized too late what he'd forgotten. He'd panicked at the sight of his wife, helpless and trussed; his instincts as a police officer abandoned for those of a frantic husband. He'd forgotten the man who had done this to Vicki—Gary McAdams, the man who'd been watching Paul's every desperate effort.

As his consciousness waned, Paul slumped to the floor. He could hear Vicki crying out his name around her gag, her muffled voice thick with tears. He saw the fuzzy image of a man dressed in dark blue leaning over, picking up Paul's fallen pistol, the gun Paul had taken away from Pierson.

"Why, thank you kindly, Detective Frances," McAdams said to him, his voice oddly cheerful. "I appreciate the gift."

Paul saw a blur of motion and then the man kicked him in the face, stomping heavily with a thick, rubber-soled shoe. The impact slammed whatever wits Paul had left from him, and he fainted.

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"Damn it!" Jay exclaimed, as the line with Paul went dead. The last thing he'd said had been, "You stay where you are, you and Emma both," and then he'd abruptly hung up before Jay could get another word in edgewise.

Jay limped into the hospital bedroom, keeping his shoulder pressed against the wall to steady himself. He went to the bedside closet and opened the door, hoping to find clothes inside. He had no idea what happened to the clothes he'd worn when admitted to the hospital, but closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief that Jo or Paul had grabbed some sweat pants and a T-shirt for him. They were neatly folded and stowed away on a shelf in the closet.

“Emma, I want you to go in the bathroom,” he said as he clumsily stepped into his pants. “Lock the door behind you and wait for me.” He handed her his cell phone. “I want you to press the nine button and hold it until you hear someone answer from 911. Tell them you are Detective Paul Frances’ niece, and that he’s here at the hospital. He’s in trouble and he needs help. Can you do that?”

Emma nodded. Her eyes still gleamed with frightened tears. “Where are you going?”

Jay shrugged his hospital gown off and pulled the T-shirt over his head. “Downstairs somewhere. Wherever Paul and Jo went. I’ve got to find them.”

“But that man is down there,” Emma whispered.

“I know,” Jay said. “I can’t let him hurt Jo or Uncle Paul, Em.”

“He wants you to follow them,” Emma said. “He thinks if you go, he’ll get to see it again, what you can do.”

Jay knelt in front of her, cradling her face between his hands. “Emma, tell me again how you know stuff like that.”

“I...I just do,” she replied hesitantly. “Sometimes I dream about things. And sometimes in my head, I can hear things, see them.”

“Can you see where Uncle Paul is?” Jay said. *Jesus Christ, I can’t believe I’m asking my daughter help me track down a serial killer*, he thought. If it hadn’t been for what Emma said earlier that morning...

*I know about Skittles, and about Danny Thomas. Eileen Dancer, too—and the other time, at the funeral home...*

*But there’s no way Emma can remember that*, he thought. *She was just a baby, and there’s no way she could know about what happened that day. Paul wouldn’t have told her. I know he wouldn’t.*

“I think they’re in the basement,” Emma said, snapping his mind back to the moment. The little girl had been looking thoughtfully over his shoulder, her lips pressed together, her brows crimped slightly, as if she’d been concentrating. “There’s lots of pipes down there, and a laundry



room, too. It smells like soap. I saw it in my head. I saw Uncle Paul walking around, looking at a little paper clock. Aunt Vicki was there, too, sitting in a chair.”

“Vicki?” Jay asked, startled.

Emma nodded. “There was tape on her mouth. And she was only wearing her underpants.”

“Jesus!” Jay exclaimed, rising to his feet. At least he understood Paul’s frantic urgency on the phone. His head swam as he stood, and he groaned, staggering sideways, smacking into the wall. He damn near lost his balance but managed to remain upright. *Terrific. Some rescue I’m going to be.*

“Daddy!” Emma whimpered, frightened by his stumbling.

“I’m alright,” he said, forcing a smile for her. “Just a little dizzy, that’s all. You go on in the bathroom, okay? Remember what I said.”

“Press the nine button and hold it,” she repeated, and he nodded. She hugged him, burying her face against his chest. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, too, Emma,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss the top of her head. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jay stepped off the elevator in the hospital basement and looked around, trying to get his bearings. His hands weren't thrumming, and he took that as a good sign, however feeble. *At least no one's dead yet. There's still hope, then.*

He found the laundry room and the paper clock Emma had seen Paul looking at. It said *Be back in ten minutes!* but Jay found the doors propped open, and two women inside, shuffling heavy loads of bed linens between industrial-sized washing machines and dryers. He staggered into their view.

"Have you seen a police officer down here?" Jay called loudly over the din of the churning equipment.

Both women paused, turning to him in surprise. "You aren't supposed to be down here!" one of them snapped. She was a hefty woman with thick, meaty arms, and she flapped one at Jay as if shooing him.

"Have you seen a police officer?" Jay shouted again and as the room spun, he leaned heavily against the doorframe. "A tall guy, thinning hair, blue eyes?"

Again, the woman waved her arm at Jay. "What are you? Drunk? You aren't supposed to be down here!" she said. "This floor here's for employees only! Go on now! I'll call for security!"

*Good, Jay thought as he turned, darting down the hallway. Call security. Get their asses down here right away.*

He made his way through the basement, ducking in and among abandoned hospital beds, stretchers and other

pieces of forgotten equipment. Many of the overhead lights weren't working, leaving the narrow corridors lined with heavy patches of shadow. He listened for hints of movement or voice, but there were none. He wondered if the laundry workers had called security. *Christ, I hope so.*

He rounded a corner and saw Vicki first, in her bra and panties, with tape around her mouth, just like Emma had said. Paul lay face-down and sprawled on the floor beside her. Jay felt his heart shudder in sudden, dismayed panic and he limped forward, stepping out of the shadows and into Vicki's view. She stared at him, her eyes enormous and frightened, as she mewled at him around her gag.

"That's far enough," a man said from his left, his voice quiet and nearly gentle. Jay whirled, startled.

"Hello, Jay Frances," the man said, the one from his brownstone, the Watcher. This time, there were no shadows to hide him; he stood directly beneath an overhead fluorescent, bathed in its pale glow. To his surprise, Jay recognized him dimly—the young paramedic who had tried to come to Jo's rescue only days early at Respite House. "It's nice to see you again. My name is Gary McAdams."

He had Jo, one large hand closed in a fist in her hair, forcing her head back toward his shoulder. She'd been beaten, her face marked with bruises and scrapes, her nose crusted with dried blood. Her hands were bound before her with white surgical tape. Like Vicki, she'd been gagged, a wad of cotton bandaging held securely between her jaws with more tape. She stared at Jay, her eyes enormous with terror as she twisted her hands vainly, desperately against the tape.

"Let her go," Jay said. His head swam momentarily, and he pressed the heel of his hand against his brow, struggling to steady himself. It was still too soon after Marie, and he was too weak. He shook his head to clear it and then stepped toward Jo, his brows furrowed, his gaze locking with McAdams'. "Let her go, you son of a bitch."

"No." The distinctive click of a gun safety being thumbled off drew Jay's attention, and brought his clumsy stride to an immediate halt. McAdams had a pistol in his free

hand, and he shoved it against Jo's temple, making her cry out in muffled terror.

Jay didn't move. He heard Vicki crying behind him, snuffling around her gag. He could see Jo's eyes glistening brightly in the fluorescent light with frightened tears; he could hear her moist, choked breaths as she began to weep. "Please," he said, holding out his hands. "Please don't hurt her. Don't hurt any of them. The police are coming. They're on their way."

McAdams spared a quick, dubious glance around him and nodded once. "Well, then, we'd better hurry."

He shoved Jo forward, knocking her forcefully to the floor. She cried out, but her voice cut off abruptly as the side of her face smacked against the concrete, stunning her into silence. McAdams crouched atop her, planting his knee against the small of her back. He shoved the barrel of the pistol against the side of her head, and she screamed feebly around the gag, hunching her shoulders and cringing.

"No!" Jay cried. "No, God, no—don't! Don't!" He darted forward, but froze again when McAdams swung the pistol up and out, directing the barrel at him. "Please. I'll do whatever you want. Whatever you want."

"What I want is to watch," McAdams told him, and the skin along the nape of Jay's neck crawled.

*He wants you to follow them, Emma had said. He thinks if you go, he'll get to see it again, what you can do.*

"It's amazing, don't you think?" McAdams said. "The duality of God."

His words made no sense. They seemed utterly apropos of nothing, and Jay blinked at him in bewilderment. "What?"

"The duality of God," McAdams said again. "I see it all the time in my job. Someone has a heart attack—I hit them with a defibrillator, maybe they live. Maybe they die. The machine works the same either way. What changes is God. It's His decision, His to judge. Life, death, yin, yang, heads, tails, it's all one big fucking crap shoot. God gets to make the rules."

He gets to make all the choices. But not anymore.” He smiled. “We can choose, too, can’t we, Jay? You don’t mind if I call you Jay, do you? You can call me Mick. All of my friends do.”

“I’m not your friend,” Jay said with a frown, and McAdams laughed.

“Sure you are. You and me, we’re brothers in arms. I strike ’em down. You raise ’em up. Both of us playing God, getting to pass judgment, beating Him at His own fucking game.”

“You don’t understand.” Jay held his hands out in supplication. “What happened before with Jo...it doesn’t happen like that. The woman you killed at my house...her name is Marie and she’s here now, in this hospital. She’s brain-dead because I couldn’t bring her of the way back. I’ve never been able to—Jo’s the only one.”

McAdams pressed the pistol to Jo’s head again, and she mewled in frightened alarm. “No!” Jay cried. “God, no—stop! You don’t understand! I can’t control it! If you kill her, if I touch her—it’s not life. It’s worse than death. Please don’t do this!”

“It’s what I do!” McAdams shouted. His brows furrowed and his face flushed, twisting with bright, sudden fury. “She’s a fucking whore—they’re *all fucking whores* and if God won’t judge them, if He fails in His ultimate fucking wisdom to punish them accordingly, then by Christ and all that’s fucking holy, *I sure will!*”

He glared at Jay, his eyes blazing with outrage, his brows knotted. “And if you can’t choose, then I’ll fucking do it for you, Jay,” he seethed. “This bitch here...” He shoved the gun more firmly against Jo’s head, wrenching a muffled cry from her. “...that bitch over there...” Now he shoved the gun at Vicki, who cried out in fright. “...or your police-detective brother who couldn’t find his ass with both hands, a flashlight and a week to try.”

Jay felt his chest tighten in sudden, horrified realization. He was going to kill them all. He meant to shoot all three of them. *Oh, God, no! Please, no, I can’t...!*

“I understand what the fuck it means to play God, even if you don’t—the power and responsibility you and I have been given,” McAdams said. “Maybe you can raise them all. Maybe only one, maybe two. We’ll see. But that won’t be the end of it. Practice makes perfect, Jay, and the world is a big fucking place. I’m going to watch you do it again and again. Because that’s what I do, Jay. And like it or not, it’s what you do, too.”

He turned the gun on Jo again, and this time, Jay saw his finger flex against the trigger. There was no time; nothing Jay could do. Even if he leapt at the man, even if he’d been at his full and usual strength, he couldn’t prevent it. He wasn’t faster than a bullet; no one was.

He had a split second to look into Jo’s eyes, her tearful and terrified gaze, and then he heard the booming report of the gunshot. It echoed in the close confines of the basement corridor, bouncing off of overhead pipes and conduits, and Jay cried out in helpless, dismayed anguish, crumpling to his knees, clapping his hands over his face. He waited for the tremors to begin, the trembling that meant Jo was dead.

When a long moment passed and he felt nothing, Jay lowered his hands, bewildered. He smelled the acrid stink of fresh gunpowder in the air and his eyes smarted from its sting. He saw Jo lying on the floor, blinking at him, her face ashen. She squirmed slightly, her voice escaping around her gag in a garbled tangle of sounds.

“Jo!” Jay scrambled to get his feet beneath him. McAdams lay sprawled behind her, nearly spread-eagle across the floor. The front of his uniform shirt had a growing, glistening stain against the breast; his pistol lay against his motionless palm, resting on the floor.

Jay turned and saw Paul on his knees beside his wife’s chair, clasping his gun with both hands, still holding it out level and at the ready. His nose looked smashed and crooked, his face smeared with blood. He turned his face slightly, spitting against the floor and grimacing. “That son of a bitch broke my nose,” he croaked, his voice hoarse.

“Are you alright?” Jay asked as Paul stumbled to his feet, reeling unsteadily.

Paul shook his head dismissively. “He kicked me. Hit me in the head with something, a fire extinguisher, I think, and then kicked me in the face.” He spat again, bloody phlegm splattering to the floor. “Son of a bitch.”

He walked toward McAdams’ prone form, keeping the gun trained on him. “Stay back, Jay,” he said, as Jay started toward Jo. “Let me get his gun first.”

He stood beside McAdams’ body and moved to kick the pistol across the corridor. When McAdams’ hand moved, his arm swinging up to level the pistol squarely at Paul’s head, Paul reacted instinctively, jerking back, his own gun arm taking automatic aim. Vicki and Jo screamed in unison, as Jay darted forward to knock Paul out of the way.

“Paul—look out—!” he screamed, and then both guns fired simultaneously, their resounding blasts overlapping in a deafening crescendo. Jay caught Paul and knocked him sideways, but it was too late. Even as they crashed together to the floor, Jay could feel the humming within his hands, the deep and insistent heat stoking already, and he screamed again. “Paul, no!”

He sat up, leaning over his brother. Paul blinked up at him, his eyes wide with surprise. His breath wheezed in a long, whistling shudder, and with it came blood, spurting out of his mouth, choking him, spraying across his face. The bullet had caught him in the upper chest near his heart, lung, and the critical blood vessels that surrounded them. Jay could tell from the sodden sound of his breathing that Paul’s lung was punctured; he could tell from the rhythmic spurts of blood from the wound that his heart was pierced. Now every frantic, desperate beat pushed him closer to death.

“Paul!” Jay gasped. He cradled Paul’s face between his hands. “Oh...oh, God, no...!”

A glance over his shoulder told him why his hands were thrumming so urgently. McAdams was dead, the floor behind and beneath him splattered with the spongy remnants

of his brain and a widening pool of blood. Jay felt himself being pulled toward McAdams' fallen body, his hands aching to go to him, settle against him.

"Paul!" He stared at his brother, aghast. *I won't leave Paul! Christ, no, please, not for this—not for that man! Please, no!*

"Jay..." Paul croaked, his voice little more than strained breath. As he tried to speak, more blood spewed from between his lips, and he choked feebly.

"I'm not leaving you, Paul," Jay said, as much to that damnable power within him as to his brother. "I'm right here. I'm not leaving."

Even as he spoke, he felt his hands moving of their own accord, abandoning Paul and reaching for McAdams. *No! Not this time—not like this! I won't do it! I won't! Paul is dying—he needs me! He needs my power!*

But he was helpless against it. He'd always been helpless against the energy searing through his hands, and he turned, crying out hoarsely as he left Paul and crawled toward McAdams, kneeling above his body.

*No, God, no, please!* he thought, struggling to hold his hands still, to defy the thrumming, wretched urge within them. "Please don't make me do this!" he screamed.

He pressed his hands against McAdams' face and his head snapped back, his eyes turning up toward the ceiling.

He saw McAdams' deathscape, a vivid and violent montage of images flashing through his mind. He saw McAdams' vision of eternal bliss: bloody tools of unimaginable torment, puddles and piles of fetid, congealing meat. The stink of rot filled his nose and horrifying, anguished shrieks resounded in his ears.

He saw women bound and gagged, suspended by chains from meat hooks. He saw them strapped to hospital tables, their feet bound in delivery stirrups, their legs forced apart. He saw them trussed and chained to a seemingly endless number of unfamiliar, terrifying apparatuses and devices, all of them crying out, choking, all of them with enormous, grotesquely bulbous breasts, and all of them faceless. Their



heads were smooth globes of flesh broken only by lipless slits for their mouths.

*This is how he sees them, Jay realized, feeling his throat constrict as his gullet wanted to heave. God above, this is how McAdams sees the world—how he saw Jo and Marie...all of those women...! Not as people...not as human beings, but as things...as meat...!*

“I knew you’d come,” he heard McAdams say, and he whirled, his feet skittering beneath him on the blood-slickened floor. Naked light bulbs hung from the blood-spattered ceilings, casting ghastly, stark illumination on the grisly scenes surrounding him. He saw McAdams standing beneath one bulb, his nude body glistening with sweat and smeared with blood. He was in the process of taking one of the faceless creatures of his deathscape from behind, keeping his hands clasped firmly against the swollen curves of its hips as he drove himself repeatedly, savagely into it. Soft, choked mewls escaped the slit of its mouth with every blow; he’d drawn a leash around its throat in a crude garrote, and with each thrust, he’d jerk the line more tautly, throttling it.

“I knew you’d come for me,” McAdams said, grinning broadly at Jay. He heaved in sudden, explosive release, and as he did, he wrenched back on the leash. The faceless thing thrashed beneath him, choking futilely for breath, and as McAdams’ climax subsided, so, too, did its death throes as it strangled. It crumpled into a limp, lifeless pile on the floor.

“You sick son of a bitch,” Jay whispered, backpedaling.

McAdams nodded. “Yes, I am,” he said, still smiling. “And you’re going to bring me back.”

“No.” Jay shook his head, stumbling into one of the faceless things that hung suspended from a meat hook by a pair of wrist manacles. It had been motionless and silent until his touch, but now it began to jerk and wriggle against its chains, its voice escaping in harsh, birdlike caws. Jay cringed, frightened and repulsed, and McAdams laughed.

“Yes, you are, Jay. You can’t control it. You can’t stop yourself. It’s what you do.” McAdams walked toward him, spreading his arms widely to indicate the endless scenes of horror that surrounded them. “Just like this is what I do.”

He held out his hand, and Jay—to his dismay—felt himself reaching out instinctively to take it. “No...!” he gasped, but he couldn’t stop. McAdams was right; this was what he did. It was beyond his control.

“I told you, Jay,” McAdams said as he hand settled against Jay’s, and his fingers closed firmly. “We’re brothers, you and I. Twin souls—two sides of a coin.”

Jay stared at McAdams’ blood-smeared hand pressed against his own, and his brows furrowed. He looked up, meeting McAdams’ gaze, seeing the hateful, sadistic triumph that gleamed in his dark eyes. The corner of McAdams’ mouth lifted in a crooked, victorious little smile, and a new heat—fury—stoked within Jay.

“Go fuck yourself,” he seethed, planting his free hand against McAdams’ chest and shoving mightily, sending the man back a surprised, stumbling step. He wrenched his hand free of McAdams’ grasp. “I’m nothing like you, you sick son of a bitch. And you’re wrong. I can stop myself. I will.”

He shoved the heels of his hands against his temples and closed his eyes, his brows furrowed deeply as he struggled with all of his might, as he fought the power within him. “I am not bringing you back!” he screamed, throwing his head back and shrieking the words. “You son of a bitch, it’s my power—*mine!* It belongs to me and *I’m not bringing you back with it!*”

He sensed a bright flash of light surround him, felt it strike him like a hurricane-force wind. He jerked, his breath snatched from him, his entire body seized with crushing, crippling pain. He cried out hoarsely, convulsing, and then it was gone, leaving him to crumple forward, catching himself on his hands, gasping for breath.

“Jesus,” he whispered, tasting blood in his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue as his body had seized. He opened his

eyes warily, spit against the floor and looked up. The hideous deathscape of blood and violence was gone, and he found himself in the hospital basement again, crouched near McAdams' dead body. "Jesus!" he gasped, scuttling back, shoving McAdams away from him.

He heard Paul moan his name softly, feebly, and he whirled, scrambling back to his brother. He leaned over Paul, catching his face between his hands. "Paul!" he cried. Less than thirty seconds had passed since he'd touched McAdams, and no one else had even realized what had just happened.

"Get...get Vicki out of here," Paul whispered to him. "Don't...let her...see me. Don't let her...see..."

His eyelids drooped closed, and as his breath escaped in a heavy, lingering sigh, blood peppered Jay's face. "No!" Jay pleaded, his tears spilling freely. "No, no, I'm not leaving you! I can do this, Paul! I can bring you all of the way back."

Paul laid still, his chest falling motionless. As his life waned, Jay felt the energy within his hands stoke anew, and he wept, leaning toward his brother's face, speaking against Paul's ear as he died. "I'm with you. I'm right behind you, Paul. Please don't be scared. I'm right behind you. I'm—"

And then the light struck him again, slamming into him with all of the brutal force of a runaway train. It crushed the breath from him, wrenching his head back and forcing his voice from him in a helpless, agonized shriek. The light swallowed the world, blinding him, searing through his mind and he fainted.

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Everyone's deathscape was different. That was one thing that always surprised Jay. As a child, he was raised to believe that heaven was some wondrous, golden place where the souls of the good gathered after death to bask in the warm glow of God's eternal peace and love.

But in reality, death was different for everybody. To Danny Thomas, it had been a world filled with downy clouds, just like heaven was portrayed in cartoons and movies. Danny had been a child and hadn't known enough to imagine any

more than this. To Eileen O'Connell, Jay's high school friend, heaven had been a broad meadow surrounded by an autumnal forest, with a mirror-smooth lake in the middle to catch the fading golden rays of sunlight at dusk. Jay had recognized the place—Squire's Pond, near her family's farm. And he'd known just where to find her—sitting in the low-hanging branch of a crooked oak tree overlooking the water, just where he'd found her time and again in life. Jo had envisioned an endless bed, the perfect diversion for a woman who had otherwise known little comfort or freedom from stress in her life. Gary McAdams', of course, had been a place of endless misery and atrocity.

And when Paul died, Jay found himself standing in the side yard of his parents' farm in Barnham, Kansas, the place where he and Paul had grown up. The ground was covered with a blanket of snow a good foot deep, and the sky was painted a pale shade of grey almost to match. Paul had loved the winter, and the escape from school that had come with snow days in childhood.

Jay caught the sweet fragrance of wood smoke in the wind and watched smoke curl in soft, spiraling tendrils from the farmhouse's chimney. The air was bitterly cold, stinging his face, and he gazed up at the sky, momentarily frozen with poignant, fond memories of this place, this season.

He could see the twinkling, multicolored lights from the Christmas tree in the front window as he walked up onto the porch. He stomped his feet and opened the screen door, listening to it squeal on its hinges like an out-of-tune fiddle. No matter how often or how fervently his father had oiled that door, it squawked when it opened, just like no matter how often or furiously their mother had chastised Paul and Jay, the door always slammed with a sharp report when it closed.

Warmth immediately pressed against his face as he walked into the house and the aroma of cooked sausage filled his nose. He could hear clattering from the kitchen, and followed the sounds. He wasn't the least bit surprised to find his mother at the sink, elbow-deep in sudsy water, cleaning up breakfast dishes.

Their German Shepherd, Bowzer, didn't even look up from its bowl as Jay approached. Jay could hear it munching noisily on whatever breakfast leftovers his mother had awarded it. There was no sign of Paul at all, and Jay stood quietly by the stove, looking at his mother, tears flooding his eyes and choking his throat.

Dolores Frances had died a few years before Lucy, and yet she stood there washing dishes, as youthful and alive as she'd ever been. Her graying hair was pinned back behind her ears to keep the curls from drooping into her face. The sleeves to her lilac-colored cardigan sweater were turned back above her elbows to prevent them from getting wet. She glanced over at Jay and smiled at him. "There you are," she said. "I was beginning to think you'd sleep until noon. Well, you're too late for eggs and sausage, young man, but I can fix you some toast, if you'd like. Sit down."

She had died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-nine. Jay hadn't wanted to go to the visitation; he'd been terrified of being so near to his mother's body, but Lucy hadn't understood. Lucy hadn't known about his power, and she'd shamed him into going.

"Your poor father is just brokenhearted, Jay," she'd told him in a conversation that was eerily prophetic. "He's lost his wife. How would you feel in his place? His entire world is gone. He needs you there."

Jay had spent the entire visitation in the corridors of the funeral home, unable to approach the viewing gallery. His hands had tingled the entire time, despite this effort at distance, and he'd busied himself by holding the then-two-year-old Emma, bouncing her in his embrace and helping her explore the quiet corners and stately receiving rooms of the funeral home.

When the visitation was over, he'd thought himself safe. He'd waited while his wife, along with Paul and Vicki, met with the funeral home director to discuss the final arrangements. His father, long since overcome with grief, had already left for the evening.

Jay had walked too close to the viewing room, and the heat in his hands had stirred. He'd been helpless against it. Even with his daughter in his arms, he'd been drawn toward the casket. He'd tried to stop himself, just as he always had, but it had never worked before—or since, for that matter—and it hadn't worked that day. He'd balanced Emma against his hip and looked down into the casket at his mother's waxen, painted face. He'd reached out with one trembling hand, whispering out loud in a desperate, futile plea. "Please, God, no. Please, no...please..."

He'd touched his mother, but there had been nothing to restore. Her body had remained, but she'd already been embalmed. There was no blood left, no vital tissues to renew. He'd touched her and stumbled back as the light had struck, and something within his mother's corpse was reignited, if only for a moment. Her eyes had opened, the wax seals holding them closed breaking audibly, and she'd tried to open her mouth. Her lips had been sewn together discreetly, as was customary, so nothing had escaped but a muffled, mewling sound. Her hand had darted up and out of the casket, closing against Emma's soft, plump wrist. His mother had heaved, bucking momentarily, violently in the casket, while her eyes rolled about in her skull and her voice squealed out of her sealed lips.

It couldn't have lasted long, no more than thirty seconds. Nothing could have lived with only embalming fluid and preservatives within it. But there had been impossible strength in her icy grasp, and it had left bruises on Emma's arm. The baby had screamed in fright and pain, and her piteous wails had been enough to snap Jay out of his stupor. He'd stumbled back, wrenching Emma away from his mother's grip, his eyes flown wide in horror. He'd clutched the shrieking girl against him, watching, aghast, as his mother continued to struggle in her casket, her strangled cries fading as her strength waned. At last, she'd fallen still, whatever life he'd restored within her gone once more, and Jay had turned, rushing from the room only seconds before his lunch of consolatory casseroles and too much red wine had come spewing up from his belly.

Dolores' brows lifted gently, as if she knew what Jay was thinking, what horrific memories had suddenly twisted his face with angst. "Never you mind about that," she said, patting her hands dry on a towel. She brushed the cuff of her knuckles against Jay's cheek and canted her head, trying to draw his gaze. "It's ancient history and long-forgotten."

In the fleeting moment he had touched her in the funeral home, Jay had been able to see his mother's version of heaven. It had been this house, this place—this room. Her heaven had been her home.

He blinked at her, his tears spilling. "Mom," he whispered, trembling. She went to him, drawing him against her, and he wept against her shoulder, clutching at her. "Mom, I'm sorry! I...I didn't mean to! I'm so sorry!"

"Hush now," Dolores whispered, stroking her hand against his hair. "I don't want you to worry about it anymore. There was no harm done to anyone."

She stepped back from him, taking his face between her hands. She rose onto her tiptoes and kissed him, pressing her lips against his brow. "I know you can't stay," she said. "I know why you're here, Jay."

He nodded, still trembling, his breath hitching. Dolores turned, walking away from him, heading for the kitchen door. "He's under the sink, in your old comic book place," she said. The dog, Bowzer, moved as if on unspoken cue, abandoning the breakfast scraps and padding after her into the dining room.

Jay stood in front of the sink for a long moment. How many countless hours had he and Paul spent in that oversized cabinet, with shoulders hunched and knees drawn toward their chests, an old flashlight propped against the pipes so they could read?

He squatted, folding his legs beneath him, and opened the cabinet door. "Hey."

Paul glanced at him. In this, his deathscape, he was a young boy again, no more than ten or eleven years old. "I'm reading here," he said, his brows narrowed slightly. He reached

out, snatching the cabinet door and moving to swing it closed again. "Wait your turn, dirt monkey."

"Paul," Jay said, catching the door, staying it with his hand. "I need you to come back with me."

Paul froze, saying nothing. Jay didn't know if he'd remembered anything up until that point, but he knew by the way Paul looked at him, the way his expression shifted with sorrow that he clearly recalled now. After a moment, the sadness faded, and his brows crimped again. "No, thanks," he said, and he swung the door shut.

"Paul," Jay said, opening the cabinet. He planted his hand firmly against the door so that Paul couldn't close it again. "Come back with me."

"I said no, Jay. Go away and leave me alone. I'm happy here."

"Don't you want to see Vicki again?" Jay asked, and at this, Paul visibly softened again. "Or M.K.? Bethany? They need you." His voice grew strained with fresh tears. "I need you, Paul. Please."

"I don't want to end up like Danny or Eileen," Paul said, his voice tremulous, his eyes growing round and frightened. "I don't want to be like that, Jay."

"I won't let that happen, Paul," Jay said, leaning toward him. "I swear to you I won't. It's my power, and I can control it."

"No, you can't."

"I can," Jay insisted. "I wouldn't let it make me raise Gary McAdams from the dead, and I won't let it keep me from bringing you all of the way back. I promise, Paul. I swear to you."

Paul looked unconvinced, and Jay didn't blame him. *Hell, I'm not convinced*, he thought, but he furrowed his brows and steeled himself against his fears. He held out his hand and met his brother's gaze. "Please, Paul. I can do this. I know I can. Take my hand. Come back with me."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jay stood in front of the mirror in Jo's bedroom, slowly adjusting his tie. His black wool suit coat lay on the bed, spread neatly to keep it from wrinkling. It was hard for him to get the tie's knot situated and straight. His hands kept trembling, his eyes clouding with tears.

Finally, he gave up and sat on the edge of the bed. He covered his face with his hands and wept, his shoulders shaking. He didn't hear Jo come into the room, her stocking feet slipping silently against the floor. She wore a modest black dress and matching hose, but hadn't put on her low-heeled black pumps. She knelt beside him.

"Jay, I'm sorry," she breathed, pressing her hand against the back of his head and drawing him to her shoulder. She kissed his ear and stroked his hair, murmuring soft, comforting sounds.

"Dad, I found this in one of our boxes," Emma said, coming into the room. She wore a starched white cotton blouse with a charcoal cardigan overtop and pleated wool skirt, the closest a third-grader had to funereal garb. Her hair had been combed until it hung straight and glossy past her shoulders, caught back from her face with a plastic tortoise-shell headband. She held out a photo, and Jay smiled, wiping his tears with the back of his hand and trying to compose himself.

"What is it?"

"It's from my birthday last year," Emma said. "My party, see? I thought we could put it down inside the coffin."

Jay looked at the photo for a long, fond moment, at the image of his brother, Paul, holding Emma in his lap. Both of them wore party hats and laughed while Marie kissed Emma's cheek, offering her a birthday cake with eight candles ablaze. It brought back such poignant, bittersweet memories that he had to tear his gaze away before he teared up again.

"Do you think Marie would like it, Daddy?" Emma asked.

Jay smiled. "I think she'd like it very much, Emma."

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Marie had died three days after Gary McAdams—"Mick" to his friends and "the Watcher" to the police—was killed. In the years following her husband's death, Marie had meticulously planned her estate, including a living will that provided strict instructions should she ever become mentally or physically incapacitated. She had wanted no resuscitation, no means of mechanized life support. She had loved her husband and known no fear of death. She hadn't wanted to prolong her natural life any more than was necessary. Jay knew this. It was why resurrecting her had pained him so terribly. In accordance with her wishes, Marie's life support had been discontinued. She'd lingered less than seventy-two hours before passing once again. This time, Jay had taken no chances. He'd stayed at home, putting as much distance between himself and Marie as possible. It hurt him beyond measure, but it had been the least he could do for her.

She was buried midmorning on Christmas Eve and after the funeral, the family and mourners gathered at Jo's house. Jay couldn't return to the brownstone; it would never feel safe or like home again. He'd hired movers to pack up their belongings, and he and Emma moved in with Jo. The arrangement hadn't bothered Emma in the least; in fact, at the sight of Jo's fenced-in backyard, Emma's thoughts and conversations immediately and eagerly turned to getting a puppy.

While people gathered in the living and dining rooms for food and cocktails, Emma watched her Uncle Paul walk

outside on his own, slipping out of the kitchen door and onto the wooden deck beyond. She followed him, curious.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He had just lit a cigarette and stood by the deck railing, a freshly opened bottle of beer sitting on the ground beside him. “Well, hey, kiddo,” he said, smiling in the forced way he had sometimes, as if he didn’t want her to know the truth, that he was hurting inside. “I just...I thought I’d get some fresh air.”

“With that?” Emma asked, wrinkling her nose at the cigarette.

Paul glanced at it for a moment and then laughed. “Yeah, I guess that sort of defeats the purpose, doesn’t it?”

“Why are you smoking again?” Emma asked, walking over to stand beside him. “They make your clothes smell awful, Uncle Paul. Your breath, too. And Marie told me once they give people cancer.”

“I’ll quit,” he promised.

“When?”

“Soon.” He draped his arm across her shoulders and pulled her close in a brief but fond embrace. “It’s cold out here, kiddo. You should be inside where it’s warm.”

“I’m okay,” she said, but then her teeth started to clatter together and she shivered. Paul didn’t miss this, and he shrugged his way out of his suit coat, leaning down and holding the cigarette clamped between his teeth while he put the coat around her.

“Here,” he said. “At least you won’t freeze to death.”

She had always adored her Uncle Paul. He was a police officer—a hero. She’d always believed that, even before the Watcher, and before everyone else had started to think so, too. She’d never understood why Uncle Paul thought so badly of himself. He would never admit that he did, of course, but she knew it anyway. Just like always.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” he said. When she looked up, he met her gaze. “That day at the hospital. What you told me about Santa Claus. You were right. I didn’t believe you and I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright. I understand.” She slipped her hand against Paul’s, twining her fingers through his. “Sometimes it’s hard to believe me. I’m just a kid.”

He smiled and leaned over, kissing the top of her head. “No,” he said. “You’re special, Emma. You’re not just a kid.”

He was special, too, but she didn’t tell him that. He wouldn’t believe her again, no matter what he’d said to the contrary, no matter how true it was. *He’s special, too*, she thought. *He doesn’t realize it yet, but he will—and soon.*

“Aren’t you cold, Uncle Paul?” she asked, looking up at him.

“No, I’m tough,” he replied, smiling down at her in a sad sort of way that let her know he meant in more ways than just fighting off the cold air.

Emma smiled back at him, that little inner voice echoing softly in her mind. *He doesn’t realize it yet, but he will—and soon.*

“I know you are, Uncle Paul,” she said. “You and my dad are the toughest men I know.”

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Jay found Paul outside sometime later, a beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other as he watched the sky darken with dusk.

“You know, I didn’t raise your ass from the dead just so you could kill yourself with cigarettes,” Jay remarked.

Paul glanced at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be using your walker?” he countered.

The corner of Jay’s mouth lifted wryly. “Touché.”

He’d languished, nearly comatose, for four days following Paul’s resurrection. At one point, his vital signs had

dropped to such low levels that his doctors had assumed death would be eminent. He'd survived, but his body and mind continued to pay the toll for his exertion. In many ways, it was like he had undone all of the years of rehabilitation and hard work that had seen him recover from the car accident and his head injury. Even the most mundane of activities left him weary and winded, the strength in his limbs all but gone

"There are some slick spots out here," Paul warned. "You sure you don't...?"

He reached out a steadying hand as Jay approached, and Jay flapped it away. "I'm fine." He kept trying to reassure Jo and Paul that his strength would return, that he'd just taxed himself too much by harnessing his power three times nearly back to back. He kept trying to convince himself as much as them, too.

"So you're smoking again now?" Jay asked, wanting to change the subject before he felt too insecure and infirm. It was bad enough that Jo had to see him like this. She had offered him nothing but encouragement and tender support, but he felt humiliated and feeble nonetheless.

Paul glanced at the cigarette in his hand. "It's either this or divorce," he said, wagging it demonstratively. He drew it to his mouth and took a long, deep drag. "And right now, this is cheaper."

Vicki hadn't asked for the truth about what had happened, about Jay resurrecting Paul, and neither of the brothers had offered it to her. She pretended to believe that he'd been wearing a bullet-proof vest, and nothing more had been said about it.

Paul had become a hero and overnight media celebrity for having killed the Watcher. There was talk of the mayor giving him a formal commendation, and rumors of a promotion to lieutenant flying around the Metro police force. He'd appeared in countless local newscasts, as well as on the *Today* show and *Good Morning, America* in live satellite interviews. There had been a brief mention in *Time* magazine, and his picture had graced *USA Today*. He'd told Jay that representatives for Oprah Winfrey had called just that morning,

wanting to book him for an upcoming show, while Diane Sawyer and a camera crew from *Primetime Live* wanted to come next week and shoot a profile of his story.

All of that had meant little time at home to comfort his wife and family, and it seemed inevitable that the spotlight would continue to shine upon him. Paul knew it. Vicki apparently knew it, too. Paul had told Jay that although neither one of them had mentioned divorce specifically yet, it was all but certain. They had taken separate cars to the funeral that day. Paul's change of clothes hung on a hook in Jo and Jay's bedroom, not in his closet at his own home.

"I'm sorry, Paul," Jay said.

Paul shrugged dismissively, tilting his head back and draining his bottle of beer in a single swallow. He uttered a low, moist belch, and flicked his cigarette out into the darkness. "I just sent your daughter inside a little while ago," he said, turning to Jay. "I gave her my coat, but she was about to turn blue anyway."

Jay managed a clumsy laugh. "I'll find her before you go and get your coat back for you."

Paul shrugged again and looked out across the yard. "It was a nice service," he said at length.

"Yes." Jay nodded. "Yes, it was."

"Marie loved you and Emma like family, you know."

Jay nodded again. "I know."

Paul sighed. "She was a good woman. A damn good woman. And she's in a better place now."

Jay smiled sadly. "I know. I've seen it."

Paul hooked his arm around Jay's neck and drew him near, kissing his forehead. "I love you, Jay," he whispered.

Jay hugged him, clapping his hand against Paul's back. "I love you, too, Paul."

The back door opened suddenly, startling them, and Paul's daughter, Bethany came out onto the deck. "Daddy," she said. "I saw M.K. sneak one of your cigarettes out of the

pack in your coat pocket. She took it out onto the front porch.”

“Where’s your mother?” Paul asked.

“In the bathroom,” Bethany replied. “Daddy, she’s out there with Marie’s nephew. He’s seventeen. He had his hand all over her butt as they were walking out the door.”

Paul turned to follow his daughter, pausing long enough to glance over his shoulder at his brother. “Thanks for bringing me back, Jay,” he said dryly, making Jay laugh. “Can’t tell you how much I would have missed moments like this.”

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Later that evening, long after everyone else had gone home, Jay tucked Emma into bed. Her toys and clothes still remained mostly in boxes stacked around the small bedroom, but he noted that she’d already taped a Jonas Brothers poster above her bed.

*Just wait.* Paul’s words, a good-humored but still somewhat grim warning, echoed in his mind. *Just you wait.*

“Long day, huh?” he asked as he pressed the edge of her comforter beneath the shelf of her chin.

She nodded. “Yeah. Are you feeling okay, Dad?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m fine. Just a little tired, that’s all.” When she looked dubious—because she’d been concerned about him as much as Jo and Paul—he smiled. “I’m fine, Em,” he said again. “And I don’t want you to worry about Santa Claus finding you here, either. I have it on good authority that he’ll be able to, no problem.”

“Dad.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t believe in that stuff. I’m not a baby anymore.”

“No,” he agreed somewhat sorrowfully. “You’re not.” He leaned down and kissed her brow.

“We don’t have to do the slumber party,” she said as she kissed him back, her lips brushing his cheek.

“Of course we do. It’s for your birthday.”

Emma toyed with the blanket hem. “Are you sure Jo won’t mind?”

“I know she won’t.” Jay sat against the edge of her bed. “It was her idea to have it here. She thinks it’s going to be fun.”

*“It’ll be great,” Jo had said, grinning. “We can all sit up and eat popcorn and watch movies and paint our toe nails. Besides, Emma needs this—she needs something to look forward to, feel happy about. After everything that’s happened...we all need it.”*

“But she’s not used having kids in her house,” Emma said. “She’s not even used to having *us* here yet, you and me.”

“This is our house, too, now, Em. Our home.” He pressed his hand against her cheek. “Jo wouldn’t have asked if she didn’t want us to be here. She wants you to have a happy birthday, just like I do. Because she loves you.” He kissed her again. “Just like I do.”

She hadn’t understood much of the pomp and circumstance of the wake, even though Jay had tried to explain that it was a chance for her to say good-bye to Marie, to see her one more time before the funeral. Instead of going with Paul to the visitation, however, she’d decided to stay home with Jay. Because Jay hadn’t gone to the graveside service, either, Paul had picked Emma up and delivered her to the cemetery. She’d cried here at last, Paul had told Jay, as if seeing the glossy, cherry-finished casket had finally cemented in the girl’s heart and mind once and for all that Marie was gone. It pained Jay that he hadn’t been there to comfort her; that he hadn’t been able to take that risk.

He reached for her, draping his hand atop hers. “I don’t want you to be afraid, Emma. The man who hurt Marie and Jo is gone. Uncle Paul killed him and he’ll never hurt anyone again.”

She nodded.

“Anytime you want to talk, I’m here. About what happened, about Marie—anything. Okay?”

She nodded once more, pressing her lips together, looking troubled nonetheless.



He rose to his feet and walked toward the door.  
“Good night, Em. I love you.”

“Daddy?”

Her voice was small and meek, and he paused, turning at the doorway. Again, her fingertips pawed restlessly at the blanket. “Is Marie...okay? Where she is, I mean. Is she happy?”

When he’d touched her, Jay had seen Marie’s deathscape. It had looked like a motel room with 1950s décor—sea-foam blue walls with almond trim; pale, crisp bed linens; mango carpets and matching armchairs; chrome fixtures and a large console television set.

He almost hadn’t recognized Marie. In death, she had envisioned herself as the young woman she’d been when she’d first married, not the middle-aged woman he’d known. She’d come prancing out of the bathroom wearing a swimsuit, young and pretty like a Hollywood starlet from the cinema’s Golden Age. “What did you forget...?” she’d started to say, then her voice and smile had both faltered in unison. “Oh, I...I thought you were Wallace.”

Her deathscape had been her honeymoon. He knew this because she’d told him; when he’d asked her to come back with him, his voice choked and pained, she’d smiled at him in polite confusion. “Why, I can’t do that,” she’d protested. “I...why, I couldn’t possibly. I’ve only just gotten married.” She’d held out one youthful hand to show him the diamond on her finger, glittering and bright. “See?”

In death, Marie had gone back to a time in which her husband was not only alive, but no longer suffering from the ailments his strokes had caused in the latter part of his life. Indeed, she had returned to what was undoubtedly a time in which her most precious and cherished memories had been born.

“Is she, Dad?” Emma asked again, and now her dark eyes glistened with the sheen of tears. “Is she happy?”

“Yes, Em,” Jay said to his daughter with a gentle smile. “She is.”

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Three hours later, Jo and Jay lay side by side in her bed, spooned together after making love.

She rested with her back to him, and he lay against her, stroking his hand against her shoulder. She tried to feel warm and safe with him there. When he slept beside her, it kept the nightmares away, dreams in which she felt McAdams' hand close against her arm, or the gun shoved against her head as his finger curled around the trigger.

"Marry me, Jo," Jay murmured, his lips lighting against the slope of her shoulder.

She closed her eyes against the sting of tears. She loved Jay. She wanted him and Emma to be a part of her life, her world. She had opened her heart and home gratefully and gladly to them both, and didn't regret it for a moment. But still, there was a portion of her that remained afraid of growing too close, a part that had been hurt too often and disappointed too much and feared that something that felt so right was surely too good to be true.

He laughed softly, propping himself up on his elbow so he could nuzzle her ear. "This is the part where you say, 'Okay, Jay, of course I'll marry you.'"

She rolled over and met his gaze. She was worried about him, too, and knew that was part of her problem. He was so weak now, his body easily exhausted and even though he kept telling her that it would pass, that he was—and would be—fine, that wasn't the only reason it troubled her.

Earlier that evening, she'd had the chance to talk to Paul. Both of them had stood together and watched as Jay and Emma together in the living room, side by side on the couch, going through a photo album filled with images of their lives with Marie. Everyone else from the wake had already gone home, but Paul had lingered, seeming hesitant, if not somewhat loathe to leave. He'd been drinking quite a bit, and even though he'd refused her gentle invitations to spend the night on the couch, insisting he was fine, he'd downed enough

beer to make him speak frankly to her, a display of vulnerability that had surprised and touched her.

“I think it takes something from him,” he’d remarked in a low voice, his eyes melancholy as he’d looked at his brother. “When he does it...with you, with me. I think that’s why he sleeps so long afterwards. Because it takes something out of him, his life force or whatever the hell you want to call it.” He’d tipped his head back, draining the last in a long line of beer bottles. “I think he gives up a part of his life so we can have ours back. And one of these days...he’s just not going to have anything left to give.”

*I don't want to lose you, she thought as she gazed into Jay's eyes. I'm afraid Paul's right. You brought us back from the dead. But who's going to save you in the end?*

He smiled and her heart softened, that frightened, anxious place inside of her finding sudden, unexpected ease. “Hey,” he said. “It was just an idea. Nothing we need to figure out right now. I know things have been moving pretty fast...”

*They'd been moving at damn close to warp speed, especially in terms of relationships, but that wasn't what troubled Jo. It's the fact that I don't even care about that. I'd marry him right here, right now. I feel like it's right somehow, like we're meant to be together. I've felt that all along. And I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for God to say, 'oops, sorry, Jo, I made a big cosmic mistake,' and take it all away...take Jay away from me.*

Jay leaned down to kiss her and she remembered when he had come to her doorstep in the driving rain, his eyes filled with earnest remorse. Then, as now, he couldn't disguise the honesty of his emotions, the sincerity of his feelings for her, and then, as now, she found herself believing him, believing *in* him.

“Okay, Jay.” She touched his face, making his smile widen. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

His lips settled against hers again, the tip of his tongue delving lightly, gently into her mouth. He rolled toward her, settling against her, and she could feel him hardening against her thigh. “I love you, Jo,” he breathed.

“I love you, too,” she said, and dropped him a wink.  
“‘Til death do us part, right?”

He laughed, kissing her again as she wrapped her legs about his middle, drawing him into her and making her moan softly with pleasure. “Not if I can help it.”

*End*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Definitely an author to watch." That's how *Romantic Times Book Reviews* magazine describes Sara Reinke.

*New York Times* best-selling author Karen Robards calls Reinke "a new paranormal star" and Love Romances and More hails her as "a fresh new voice to a genre that has grown stale."

*Dark Thirst*, the first in her Brethren Series of vampire romance is available now from Kensington/Zebra Books, while the sequel, *Dark Hunger*, will be available September, 2008.

Other available titles include *Tethers*, a science-fiction thriller, the historical romance, *An Unexpected Engagement* and the fantasy series, the Chronicles of Tiralaenn.

Find out more about Reinke and check out more of her free electronic reads at her website: [www.sarareinke.com](http://www.sarareinke.com).