



RESURRECTION

by Sara Reinke

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novella was originally published in serialized format through a now-defunct electronic publisher. One of few attempts on my part at a paranormal thriller, it was through stories like this that I continued developing as an author. It also made me realize my niche was not in police procedural thrillers (ha, ha), so please pardon any inaccuracies.

CHAPTER ONE

She was dead.

Jay Frances knew this even before he saw her body. The lights on the fourth floor stairwell of the parking garage landing were out, and it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. She lay slumped against the cinderblock wall to his right, at the bottom of the steps that led up to the fifth floor landing. But even before he had seen her, he had sensed her presence the way he always did when the time would come. He'd felt it first in his hands...and he'd known.

His mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of his daughter, Emma, who would be celebrating her sixth birthday in another week. Sometimes people would remark to him about how horrible it must be, having a child born so close to Christmas, but Jay always tried to make each occasion separate and special for Em. Especially over the last two years, since Lucy was gone.

It was desperately, bitterly cold outside. Jay had bundled up in his wool overcoat and taken the afternoon off from work so he could head to the mall and get a jump on birthday shopping. He was on his way home, tired from fighting the Christmas shopping crowd and ready for some supper as he made his way up the stairs in the mall garage. The garage was not heated and the air was painfully cold to breathe. The warmth, the tingling had begun in his hands,

spreading underneath his gloves the way a shot of good whiskey will spread inside your belly.

He'd noticed the sensation, but it had been so long since he'd felt it, his mind dismissed it. After all, there had been more pressing issues that required his mental attention. He was thinking of Em's birthday wish list, and of the Easy Bake Oven he had found on sale at the mall toy store. Emma had been pleading for one for months now, and she was going to be so pleased when she unwrapped it on her birthday. Jay carried the oven in an oversized plastic shopping bag, along with a couple of other gifts he had found.

He was so lost in thought that he walked right past the small yellow sign at the top of the third floor stairs, the one that cheerily informed him: "SORRY! Staircase closed for maintenance!"

Jay never even noticed it as he climbed the flight of stairs to the fourth tier, where he had parked his car. He was imagining Emma grinning ear to ear and squealing with delight when she pulled back the wrapping paper from her Easy Bake Oven.

I need to talk to Marie this afternoon and make sure she's got everything she needs so she can whip up that Dutch-chocolate cake Em likes so much, the kind with the cherries on top...

Jay had hesitated midway up the steps from the third floor, pulled inexplicably from his train of thought. He stared at the dark landing above him and his brain finally began to process the peculiar, tremulous sensation in his

hands. He felt as though there was something there in the gloomy darkness that drew him near, beckoning to him. Suddenly his mouth went very dry and his throat seemed to constrict and tighten.

Can't be that, it can't be, he told himself. There's nothing there. Nothing at all. I've got to get home. I've got too much shit to do and

He walked up the remaining steps, his body moving seemingly of its own accord, as if he suddenly found himself a marionette being led by invisible strings. There was something on the ground; something sticky and damp that made his shoes slide on the rough concrete floor. His breath drifted around his head in a dimly-lit halo.

There's nothing here, he thought, pressing his hands together, feeling that dim heat shooting up his wrists and arms, tightening in his shoulders. I have to go. There's nothing here. Please let there be nothing here. Let there

Then he realized he was stepping in blood, just as his eyes grew accustomed to the shadows and he saw her there, saw what someone had done to her. He drew in a sharp, startled gasp and the plastic bag containing the Easy Bake Oven and other birthday delights dropped to the floor.

His hands were thrumming now, pulsating, guiding him closer to her.

Oh, God, please no! I can't do this, not again. Not now.

She stared at a point beyond his left shoulder, her eyes unblinking, frozen wide in stark terror. Her lips were parted slightly, and there was blood coming from her mouth

and nose, smeared against her chin. Someone had slashed at her breasts, her stomach and groin. There was blood everywhere, pooled around her hips in a black, glistening puddle.

No, please

She was propped against the wall, nearly seated. Her legs were spread apart and her white slacks were bunched clumsily down on her hips, as if someone had tried to yank them down. Her feet turned in towards one another, pigeon-toed and she was wearing white rubber surgical clogs. One had fallen off and lay on its side next to her.

Jay could feel an incessant, electrical humming in his chest, hear it crackling inside his skull, throbbing. He realized he was shaking violently all over, as if he'd grabbed hold of a live wire.

He knelt next to her. He didn't want to see her, but couldn't take his eyes off her. He reached out for her once and jerked his hand away. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, wanting to block out the sight of her, the smell of her, the *sensation* of her.

What the hell are you doing? Get out of here, for Christ's sake! Get out of here and call Paul! Call someone, anyone, please! I can't do this. I can't...I can't.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, helpless to prevent himself. Maybe it was a hallucination, or the dim light, but he could swear there was steam rising from her eviscerated abdomen. She was dead, but her death was a

fresh and new thing, and her body's grimmest secrets
steamed in the frigid air.

He took off his gloves. They had been a present from
Lucy; real Italian leather

*("Rich, Corinthian leather," she'd giggled in a rotten
Ricardo Montalban impersonation on that once-upon-a-time-ago
Christmas morning.)*

but he let them fall, as forgotten as the gifts, to the
ground.

The pounding deep inside his skull was deafening.

*Please don't let me do this please there's Emma now and I
can't do this because I have Emma to think of.*

Please don't let me touch her.

His hands moved, again as if some malevolent
puppeteer jerked his strings, forcing him to move, and he
reached for her, hands outstretched, fingers spread wide.

*It's not too late if I don't touch her, some last, desperate
part of his mind pleaded. Jesus if I just don't touch her...*

His fingers brushed against her face, trailing into her
hair as he cupped his palms against her battered, bloodied
cheeks.

My God, he thought. She's still so warm.

And then there was light, brilliant, blinding, searing.
It swallowed the sky, swallowed the girl, swallowed
everything, and he threw his head back and screamed in
both agony and ecstasy.

Jay Frances blacked out.

And raised the dead.

* * *

Jobeth Montgomery heard a soft, droning buzz in her ear, and as she stirred from unconsciousness, she wondered if she'd left the kitchen window open again and a fly had found its way into the apartment.

She wanted to ignore it, to fall back into the deep, warm cocoon of sleep, but the buzzing was persistent. She opened her eyes and looked up at the source of the noise: a ceiling fan spinning lazily overhead. Something about the fan didn't quite fit to her, but she was groggy and didn't know what exactly.

Who gives a shit? she thought dimly. *Go back to sleep, Jo.*

She closed her eyes and now she could feel the gentle breeze from the fan against her face. Her head throbbed and her mouth and throat felt parched. She could feel the pulse in both temples marking rhythm just behind her eyes, deep in her sinuses and she knew if she opened her eyes again in that bright sunlight, it would be very, very painful.

Did I go out drinking last night? she wondered dazedly. *Feels like one of the all-time hall-of-famer hangovers coming on here. Sure hope someone got the license plate of that dump truck that plowed into my skull. Not to mention the squirrel that apparently shit in my mouth.*

And then she realized. *No...*

That wasn't right. She hadn't been drinking. She knew it. She struggled to think, to clear the cobwebs from her mind. She had a dim but distinct recollection of being at the mall. *I was looking for a "Secret Santa" present,* she thought.

I drew Laney's name in the hospital pool. I was looking for a picture frame for her.

There were blankets on her, heavy and stifling. Jo felt claustrophobic from the heat, but her hands and arms seemed to weigh a ton and she couldn't will them to move, to shove the covers back. *Just lie still*, she told herself. *Lie still and sleep it off, Jo. You must be coming down with the flu. You went shopping. You came home. You fell asleep and woke up with a fever. It's not too hot. The ceiling fan is on.*

Now it clicked in her mind and her eyes flew open.
I don't have a ceiling fan!

She forced herself to sit up, although the sudden movement left her light-headed and nauseated. She closed her eyes and pressed her hands against her face, breathing in slowly and deeply, willing the sensations to pass. At last, she moved her hands slowly, tentatively, and peeked around. She was in a large bedroom with expansive hardwood floors and large windows. There were unfamiliar paintings framed on the walls and an unfamiliar bookcase and bureau across the room from her. In the far corner, surrounded by windows, she saw a treadmill and a large TV set with a DVD player on a small cabinet. There were an assortment of DVD cases scattered on the floor, and a couple of small, colorful stuffed animals in front of the TV.

On the far side of the room, she saw three doors, all ajar. One appeared to lead out into a corridor; one was a closet and the third, a bathroom. Beyond the drone of the

ceiling fan, she could hear the faint, busy hum of water running in the toilet bowl.

Where am I?

She looked down and realized two things simultaneously: she was naked, and she was not alone in the bed.

Jo cried out, startled, and then clapped her hands over her mouth in shocked horror. There was a man sleeping next to her, turned on his side away from her. The blankets were pulled up only to his waist and she could see that he was naked, too, at least from the midriff up. He did not stir at her cry.

Oh, my God, she thought, panicked. What did I do?

She shoved the covers back and swung her legs around until her feet hit the floor. She tried to stand, but her legs didn't want to support her. They folded beneath her gracelessly and she yelped as her knees smacked painfully against the floor. She glanced up at the man, frightened, but still he did not stir.

She tried to stand once more, pushing against the mattress with both hands. She drew her knees up, but the moment she put her weight on her legs, they sprawled out from under her again, and she plopped back down onto the floor.

What's wrong with my legs? she thought, feeling frightened, bewildered tears welling in her eyes. She sucked in a quiet, shuddering breath and struggled to compose herself. *Stop that, Jo,* she tried to tell herself with some

semblance of conviction. *You're a nurse, damn it, a registered nurse, now pull yourself together!*

The sharp words worked like a slap in the face, giving her something immediate and clinical to focus on. She was a nurse; she would assess her condition and then her situation. She would figure out what was wrong with her; what had happened to her. And then she would find a way out of there.

She began to massage her legs briskly. She could feel the friction and pressure of her hands against her skin. *Not paralyzed, then, she thought. Something's happened to me, but at least I'm not paralyzed. I'm not*

And then suddenly, she wasn't sitting on the floor anymore, but in what appeared to be the landing of a public stairwell. It was almost completely dark with only a thin sliver of faint blue light glowing from underneath the edge of a nearby door. Jo could feel the damp, freezing concrete against her bottom. There was a man in front of her

him

and he was leaning over her, pulling at her uniform slacks with one hand

him

while stroking himself into a swollen, obscene erection with the other.

HIM

"Oh, my God!" Jo tried to scream, and she jerked violently. She knocked her arm into something hard and sharp and cried out in pain.

She was in the unfamiliar bedroom again, on the floor. She'd banged her arm against the corner of the nightstand behind her, gouging a fine line into the meat of her bicep.

"Oh, my God," Jo whimpered, staring around her frantically, trying to see every which way at once. "Oh, my God..."

She couldn't remember anything else, but that fragment of memory, so terrifyingly vivid, played over and over again in her mind. She stared at the man sleeping in the bed.

He tried to rape me, she thought, suddenly feeling sick.

The man moaned lightly and rolled over to face her. Jo shied back, drawing her hands up to her face in a childlike gesture of horror but then she realized

not him

the man in the bed wasn't the man from the alley at all. His face was somehow familiar to her, but instead of making her feel frightened, the familiarity seemed to comfort her.

He's so handsome, she thought. *Why do I feel like I've seen him before? Did I sleep with him? What the hell is going on here?*

She decided she would try to stand again. This time, she was able to get to her feet, although she had to lean heavily on the bed to support her weight. Her legs felt like they were made of rubber, and the sudden shift in equilibrium as she stood left her feeling decidedly queasy.

She managed a couple of small, shuffling steps and the queasiness grew immediately alarming. She lurched clumsily for the bathroom, stumbling on the tiled floor and falling against the commode. She grasped the sides of the bowl and leaned over, retching.

What happened to me? she thought after her vomiting had subsided, but there were no memories except for the man in the dark stairwell trying to force her pants down, preparing to violate her.

Jo limped over to the sink and stared at herself in the mirror. Her face was ghastly pale and there were deep, dark patches like bruises around the contours of her eye sockets. Her red hair hung down to her shoulders in matted, knotted twists. She tried to run her fingers experimentally through it and winced.

There was something brown and caked on her skin, on her chin and upper lip. She peered more closely in the mirror at it, rubbing with her fingertips until it flaked away in spots. *Blood*, she realized. *That's dried blood!*

There were no visible wounds on her face and when she pressed against her nose and mouth, there was no pain or soreness.

Maybe I bit his dick off, she thought. *That creep from the stairwell.*

That struck her as absurdly funny and she began to giggle helplessly.

Stop that, she scolded herself. *This is not funny, Jobeth!*

She saw more dried blood on her belly, breasts and shoulders. She ran hot water from the sink faucet and scrubbed at it fiercely. Blood was crusted in her hair, and she struggled to rinse it away, bending over and ducking her head clumsily toward the sink. When she was finished, she stood, shivering from the cold, dripping water all over the floor, and regarded her reflection. "How do I look?" she whispered hoarsely.

If I was a man, I'd do you, she thought in reply. *If you didn't bite my dick off, that is.*

She laughed out loud and realized she was teetering on the brink of some kind of breakdown. She had to get out of there.

She limped back into the bedroom and found a T-shirt and grey sweatpants folded neatly on top of a laundry basket. She put them on and spied her shoes by the bathroom door, the white rubber surgical clogs she wore at the hospital. Of her uniform, her smock and slacks, there was no sign, but she grabbed the shoes, vaguely disturbed by the streaks of dried blood on them.

So much blood, she thought, and she pulled up the T-shirt to make sure once again that there were no wounds on her. There were none; no bruises, scrapes, cuts. Nothing.

Where did all of the blood come from?

Her keyring lay on the floor under the shoes. She stared at the little can of mace she carried on it and felt fresh tears sting her eyes as she thought about the pathetic and false sense of security it had always provided her. Her

hospital photo ID badge rested next to the keys. Both had been tucked into the pocket of her slacks; both were, like the shoes, spotted with blood.

What happened to me? she thought again as she slowly sat against the side of the bed, holding the keys and blood-peppered ID badge in her hands. She felt herself tremble and then she burst into tears, unable to contain them any longer. Her keys and badge tumbled to the floor as she covered her face with her hands, shuddering with the sudden force of her sobs. She was confused, aching, exhausted and frightened and wept like a grief-stricken child.

The man reached out from behind her and touched her arm. Jo shrieked, scrambling to her feet, dancing clumsily back from the bed, her eyes flown wide with terror.

He was awake and blinked dazedly at her. "Please..." he murmured, moving his hand as if to try and touch her again.

She reached down, snatching wildly, grabbing her keys. She scrambled to her feet again, and shoved the can of mace toward him, her finger poised against the trigger. "Don't touch me," she said to him, her voice hiccupping with fright.

"Please," he breathed again. "Please...listen to me. You...you don't..."

His voice faded and he slumped, hanging his head as if overcome with exhaustion. Jo whirled, her heart pounding frantically in her chest like a panicked dove, and she darted out the bedroom door.

"No," she heard the man call out weakly. "No, don't go...wait..."

Jo stumbled down the corridor, looking desperately for some way out. She ended up in a living room with more of the lovely hardwood floors and windows. A large sectional couch divided the room into perpendicular planes and an elegant marble 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 housekeys. She was older, maybe in her late fifties, with a fading brown rinse in her carefully coiffed hair. A little girl stood beside her, her hair up in pigtails, fastened with cheery red ribbons. 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 little 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 bolted, her clogs smacking furiously against her heels. She 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 TWO

Paul Frances didn't mean to work on his weekend off. A detective with the city's homicide division, he put in too many long, hard hours of grueling, exhausting, often heartbreaking work. Most of the time, he'd work nearly sixty hours each week, working until all hours of the night, and most weekends. But he'd been on the force for damn near fifteen years, and that kind of tenure helped insure that at least one weekend out of each and every month was unequivocally his, without interruption. He'd turn off his cell phone and place it with his gun and badge in the side drawer of the desk in his study, locking it all up for forty-eight hours each month. He would spend quality time with his wife, Victoria and their two daughters, Mary Kate—or M.K., as the fifteen-year-old preferred to be called these days—and Bethany, whether they wanted his company or not.

"This is so lame!" M.K. bawled as she stomped down the hall and into the bathroom. She slammed the door, apparently not thrilled with Paul's idea of heading out to the zoo.

The phone began to ring and Paul hoped Vicki would let the machine get it. He stood over his desk in his study, fingering the well-worn tab of an opened manilla file folder. He hadn't meant to open it. He hadn't intended to work. It was his weekend off.

A pair of stark crime scene photographs, one clipped to each side of the manilla folder, stared up at him. They showed a young woman, nude from the waist down, sprawled in an unnatural position behind a cluster of dumpsters. The ground beneath her was littered with broken glass and dried leaves, all choked together in a broad pool of her blood.

Lindsay Amanda Williams, age twenty-three. A bartender at a The Wailin' Wall, local hangout where college kids gathered to listen to live blues music. She had been assaulted one year ago in the alley behind the bar, suffering blunt force trauma to her head and face. She had been forcibly raped and then stabbed repeatedly. One of the deeper knife wounds had severed her carotid artery and she had bled to death.

That was the first one. Two more had quickly followed. Wendy Andrews, killed in an elevator at the office building where she worked nights. Veronica Leyton, who had left a waterfront restaurant two months ago after enjoying dinner and cocktails with a friend, and who had turned up two days later in a storm sewer service access across the street from where she had parked her car. Their files lay beneath Lindsay Williams', each with their own chilling crime scene photos to bear mute witness to their suffering. Both had also been beaten about the face and head. Both were brutally raped, and both had been stabbed to death.

"You ready, Beth?" Paul asked, catching movement out of the corner of his eye and looking up from the folder as his youngest daughter walked past the study.

She glanced unhappily over her shoulder at the bathroom where her sister had barricaded herself and nodded. "Yes, Daddy," she said, buttoning up her cardigan.

He hoped that, unlike M.K., Bethany would never be too "cool" to call him Daddy. He dropped her a wink and closed the file folder. "M.K. will be alright," he assured her.

"Mike Franklin works at the zoo," Bethany said. "He's a junior. She likes him."

"Paul?" Vicki called from downstairs. Apparently, that mental telepathy that was supposed to have been forged between them over the almost twenty years of their marriage was failing that Saturday morning. She'd answered the phone.

"So you think it would embarrass your sister if I started making monkey noises in the gorilla house and doing this?" Paul asked Bethany, hunching his shoulders and scratching at his armpits, grunting loudly all the while.

Bethany's eyes widened and she giggled. "Daddy, you wouldn't dare."

"Paul?" Vicki called again as she came up the narrow staircase from the kitchen, holding the portable phone.

"In the study," he called back. He passed Bethany a wink as Vicki stepped into the doorway. He knew Vicki didn't miss what was on the desk in front of him. She knew exactly what it was, and what he had been doing. She didn't

say anything aloud, but the furrow between her brows spoke silent volumes.

"It's Marie," she said, holding the phone out to him. "She says it's important."

He accepted the phone from her and cupped the mouthpiece with his palm. "See if you can get her out of there so we can go," he said, nodding toward the bathroom door.

Vicki raised her brow. "Are we going?" she asked, sparing a pointed and undisguised glance at the file folders. "You're sure?"

"Yes, I promise, we're going," he said. Bethany followed her mother as she turned and disappeared down the corridor, and Paul removed his hand from over the phone. "Yes, Marie, what is it?"

* * *

He had been the first to realize the pattern. It hadn't taken a genius to see the murders had all been committed by the same perpetrator, even though there had been no physical evidence to tie the cases together — much less to implicate any particular individual as the culprit. No prints, no hairs, no fibers, nothing.

Paul had been the first to look further than the two dead girls. Finding no common threads between them, he had suspected they were random victims. He had turned to recent assault and rape cases, going back almost five years, uncovering a pattern that clearly indicated something sinister had been brewing in their midst for awhile.

The press had dubbed him “the Watcher.” Paul had found eleven incidents of rape and related assaults in the preceding five years that he suspected could be attributed to the Watcher. Again, there was no physical evidence. The assailant in the rape cases had been methodical and meticulous in leaving nothing behind that might implicate him. Each case had grown progressively more violent as the rapist had strengthened his nerve and grown more confident, bolder. *As he worked his way toward murder*, Paul had realized.

The Watcher stalked his victims for weeks, if not months at a time, prior to his assault. Sometimes he would hit multiple victims within weeks of each other. Paul suspected that for every woman he attacked, the Watcher kept at least three under surveillance, simply biding his time and waiting for an opportune moment to present itself. He could pick and choose, depending on his mood and whim, and strike without warning.

Last year, the city’s Police Commissioner had appointed a special task force within the Homicide Division dedicated to finding and apprehending the Watcher. Paul was named to head the task force. He hadn’t enjoyed a weekend off since.

This was to have been the first, but as he hung up the phone following the nearly frantic phone call from his younger brother’s housekeeper, Marie, he knew it was not to be.

She met him at the front door to Jay's brownstone. She was a good-looking woman in a matronly sort of way. Paul couldn't recall having ever seen her in anything but dowdy skirts. Her hems unfailingly came to just below her knees, and she had a seemingly endless selection of sensible SAS shoes to complement the look.

But she genuinely loved Jay's daughter, Emma and had taken a kindly interest in his brother, Jay, the tragic young widower. Paul remembered only too well the night two years earlier when they woke in the night to a frantic phone call. Emma had been spending the night at Paul's while her parents celebrated their wedding anniversary. There had been a violent accident...ice on the road, and a tractor trailer skidding out of control and into oncoming traffic. Jay had tried to swerve, but his car had slammed over the guardrail and down a fifteen-foot embankment. The car rolled at least four times before coming to rest on its roof. Jay had been rushed to the hospital and spent nearly six weeks comatose in intensive care. Jay's wife Lucy had been killed at the scene.

"I'm so glad you're here," Marie said as she opened the door, her hair neatly bundled, her skirt hem at her knees, her shoes ugly but practical.

"Uncle Paul!" Emma cried in delight as he came up the steps from the entryway. She leaped up from the sofa, where she'd been absorbed in a coloring book, and hurtled across the room. She leaped into his arms, throwing her arms around his neck in a ferocious hug.

"Hey, kiddo," Paul said, presenting her with the sort of loud, smacking kiss that his own daughters would never endure from him. Grown ups were still cool when you were a week away from six years old.

"Emma, sweetie, why don't you go in the kitchen and get a piece of cheese out of the fridge?" Marie suggested. "You look ready for a snack."

"Sure!" Emma said brightly. She looked up at Paul, the spitting image of Jay, with enormous, dark brown eyes and thick, lustrous brown hair. "Uncle Paul, would you like some cheese? It's very good. And Marie says it's for...fortnified with vitamins."

"Is it now?" Paul asked, smiling fondly at his niece. "Maybe in a minute, kiddo."

After she'd pranced off to get her snack, Marie drew close to Paul and said in a low voice, "I don't know what's going on, Paul, but you should have seen that girl he brought home. She was just filthy. I'm sure she was a junkie."

"Did you see him come home with her?"

Marie shook her head. "No, but I was surprised when I got here yesterday afternoon and saw his car in the drive. I hadn't heard him get up for work, and he wasn't up when I left in the morning to bring Emma to school, but I thought surely he wouldn't keep in bed all day. And his bedroom door has been closed all this while. He never closes his door—you know that. Emma wanted to get a video out of his room this morning, but I didn't know what was going

on, so I opened the door first and peeked. I wasn't trying to be nosy, but..."

Matronly though she may be, Marie had "accidentally" come in on Jay a time or two after he'd stepped out of his shower. Jay had told Paul this with a sort of bemused look on his face. She'd never caught him completely naked, but she'd come upon him with a towel around his waist. Although she'd always seem sincerely appalled at the encounters, Paul liked to tease Jay that this wasn't necessarily so.

"Maybe deep down inside of that retired-nun exterior lurks the heart of a sexual deviant, Jay," he'd said.

Jay had looked at him, his brow arched as he'd tried his damndest not to bust out laughing.

"Maybe she wants you, Jay. I bet she dreams about you at night, all naked and glistening out of the tub..."

"Get bent, Paul," Jay had said, flipping him off, losing his battle to suppress his laughter.

Paul wondered, with momentary amusement, if Marie had been curious to see if Jay had taken someone to bed while she "wasn't trying to be nosy."

"I was shocked to find him in bed with that girl," Marie said, her nose wrinkling as if she smelled something rotten. "I tell you, it's just not like Jay to go out to the bars, drinking and picking up that sort of trash."

"You think he was drunk?"

"What else could it be?" Marie exclaimed.

Paul had an idea of what else, but kept it to himself.

"They were in bed together," Marie said, dropping her voice and glancing cautiously toward the kitchen. "And then this morning, she just burst out of the front door, all wide-eyed and filthy. Just filthy, Paul! I wish you could have seen her face. I've looked all over, trying to make sure she didn't steal anything, but—"

"Jay's in his room?" Paul asked.

Marie nodded. She started to say more, but Paul had heard enough. He brushed past her and walked down the corridor toward Jay's bedroom. "I'm going to stay with him awhile," he said. "He's probably got himself on hell of a hangover and just needs to sleep it off. You go on and take Emma over to my house. Vicki and the girls would love to visit."

"But the girl—" Marie began.

"Marie, he's a grown man," Paul said, pausing and looking at her over his shoulder. "He can do what he wants as far as that goes. I'll talk to him about it and make sure he knows it upsets you."

"Well, you should have seen her—"

"I'll talk to him about it."

"He needs to think about Emma. There are plenty of nice girls out there without him bringing home that kind of—"

"I'll talk to him, Marie."

He couldn't even tell if his younger brother was breathing when he first entered. The room was dark and shadow-draped as evening approached. Paul walked quietly

over to the bed and sat down next to Jay, watching his brother's chest, waiting for it to rise. At last it did, slowly, and Jay sighed out a long, deep gasp of air.

"Jay?" Paul said gently, brushing his brother's tousled hair back from his face.

Jay didn't stir.

"It happened again, didn't it?" Paul whispered, anguished. "Ah, Christ, Jay..."

He sat at Jay's bedside, holding his hand and watching him sleep. It was still a painfully familiar posture for him, as he had spent more hours than he could count in that position while Jay had been in a coma.

When he had been twelve years old, and Jay had been only a little tyke of six, Paul had learned that his brother could raise the dead. It had been a bitterly cold day in early February, and Barnham, Kansas had been blanketed with nearly two feet of pristine, virginal snow. School had been cancelled and their mother had sent both Paul and Jay outside to play with one of Paul's friends, a neighbor boy with the rather unfortunate name of Danny Thomas.

Paul could close his eyes and still see his mother standing in the kitchen of their large, rambling farm house, running hot water into the sink and scraping the remains of breakfast into the dog's dinner bowl while Bowzer looked on, giddy with the promise of half-eaten sausage links and scraps of eggs-over-easy. Dolores Frances had been dead for three years. Their father, John, had followed less than a year later; Paul had always suspected from a broken heart.

On that winter day so long ago, the boys had gone off into the woods surrounding the Frances farm and had a snowball fight. Danny Thomas had climbed up into a tree to play Indian scout, sneak attacking Jay as the smaller, younger boy had toddled unaware into his line of sight. Paul had caught Jay with crossfire, and the two had belted Jay mercilessly, leaving him bawling and threatening to tell. In all of the commotion, Danny had fallen out of his perch in the tree. He broke his neck in the fall, and Paul and Jay had discovered him lifeless and sprawled in the snow.

“Go get Mom!” Paul had ordered Jay, falling to the ground next to his friend. He’d wrenched off his mittens and pawed helplessly at Danny’s body, trying to feel for his heartbeat. Jay hadn’t moved, and Paul had looked up at him, choked with panicked tears. “Goddammit, don’t just stand there! Go get Mom! Now!”

Jay hadn’t gone to get their mother. He had dropped to his knees, his gaze distant and dazed, as if he had been in shock. He slipped off his mittens and reached down, ignoring Paul’s cries and attempts to shove him away. He had pressed his hands against Daniel’s face, and there had been light, brilliant and blinding. Paul had screamed, his hands darting to cover his face as he crumpled sideways in the snow. He had felt the light, too, like the force from a nuclear blast, buffeting his body, tossing him aside, throwing snow and brambles and broken branches against him.

And then it had been over. He could see again, and watched as Jay drew clumsily to his feet, swaying unsteadily as he blinked down at Danny Thomas. His expression was utterly dazed, as if he had no idea where he was, or who Paul was. He blinked about vacuously and then turned about, stumbling back toward the farm house.

Danny had groaned, and Paul had scrambled to his side. The boy opened his eyes and tried to speak, but all that came out was a weird, cawing sound.

Jay had slept for almost seven hours after that. His mother had blamed Paul for his stupefied state, thinking he had bullied his younger brother. *And then there was Danny, he thought. She didn't understand, and I couldn't tell her what had happened. Hell, I didn't even know what had happened. And it sure as hell wasn't something I talked about with Jay, at least not then.*

Paul gave his brother's hand a light squeeze. *He brought Daniel back from the dead. Some how, some way. He doesn't know how it happens any more than I do. Only...he didn't bring Daniel back, not all of the way.*

Daniel had never been able to speak again except for the weird, guttural sounds he'd been making when he had first come to in the woods. He'd never gone back to school. All of the doctors seemed to concur that he had some kind of brain damage from falling out of the tree. He'd been sent away to a special home for retarded children because he had to be hand-fed and wear diapers since he'd piss and shit his

pants. Danny's mother had eventually had a nervous breakdown because of it all.

That was the first time it happened, Paul thought. But not the last.

Paul had suspected when it happened the second time, the night of Jay's senior prom, because Jay had come stumbling home in the middle of the night and had slept most of the next day away.

Mom and Dad had been pissed at him, but only because they thought he was sleeping off a drunk from the prom. But I knew. I remembered. And then when I'd heard about the girl he'd taken to the dance, Eileen O'Connell, and how they'd had to put her away in a convalescent home because she'd had some kind of breakdown, well, then I was damn near positive.

And so he'd taken Jay out one night while he'd been a college student at Columbia, Missouri. The two of them had sat up, drinking beers and eating pizza at Shakespeare's, and talked about raising the dead.

"I can never bring them all of the way back," Jay had told him helplessly, drunk and slap-happy from the beer. He'd laughed, but it had been a miserable, unhappy sound. "I don't understand. Why the hell does this happen to me?"

Paul supposed the only time Jay would have wanted to use his gift, his power, his curse—whichever you wanted to call it—was when Lucy had died.

Only Jay had been in a coma, Paul thought. He had no idea she died in the accident. He didn't find out until almost two months after she'd been put in the ground.

Paul knew if Jay had been able to raise Lucy, if he'd been able to sense her death, to lay his hands on her, he would have tried, whether he'd wanted to or not. Because Jay couldn't control his powers; rather, they controlled him. He'd once told Paul he'd finally come to fully understand that the third time he'd raised someone.

But that time...that was too horrible to think about.

Jay whimpered lightly in his sleep. His brows lifted in visible distress and he gasped for breath. Paul leaned forward and cupped his face between his hands, speaking quietly, trying to comfort him. "It's okay, Jay," he whispered, even as Jay's expression softened and he slept once more. "I'm here. I'm here."

* * *

Paul woke with a start when he heard Jay vomiting in the bathroom. He had fallen asleep in a chair beside Jay's bed, and was completely disoriented at first. It took him a moment or two to remember exactly where in the hell he was, and why he had a nasty crick in his neck.

The bed was empty, the covers shoved back in a messy pile. From the bathroom, Paul heard the distinct sound of his brother retching, followed by the toilet flushing. He got up, rubbing experimentally at his sore neck and went to the bathroom doorway. Jay sat on the floor, naked, cradling his head in his hands.

"Where's Marie? She'd think she's died and gone to heaven," Paul said.

Jay didn't open his eyes. He just uttered a soft, breathless groan and shot Paul the bird. "Fuck you, Paul," he whispered, his voice ragged and hoarse.

Paul went to him, kneeling next to him. He put his hand on Jay's shoulder and enfolded him in an embrace. Jay trembled against him, his breath fluttering, his shoulders shuddering. "It...it happened again," he whimpered, sounding so pained, so frightened, so damn vulnerable and childlike that Paul's heart wrenched

"I know," he whispered, his lips brushing against Jay's hair. "It's alright."

"I tried," Jay pleaded. "I...I tried, but I can't make it stop...I...I can't..."

His voice broke and he huddled against the shelter of his brother's chest. Paul kept his arms fiercely about Jay, holding him, comforting him. "It's alright, Jay," he whispered, over and over. "It's alright."

Finally, Jay heaved a sigh, composing himself somewhat, and pulled back from Paul's embrace. He opened his eyes, wincing as if even the dim light from the bedroom beyond the threshold hurt him. He forked his fingers through his hair and shoved it back from his face. "How long was I out this time?" he whispered.

Paul glanced at his watch. "I'd say a good twenty-four hours."

Jay blinked up at him, his eyes round and stunned, as if he'd just taken a swift punch to his groin. "What?" he gasped. He began shaking again. "Oh, my God..."

Paul reached for him, but Jay shied away, pressing himself against the side of the tub, folding his arms around his midriff. For a long moment, he said nothing and merely sat there, shivering and in shock. Then he blinked again, his eyes flying wide. "The girl!" he exclaimed. "The girl—did you see her? Is she here?"

He scrambled to his feet, and stumbled clumsily for the door. Paul hurried after him, getting an arm around Jay's waist before he spilled ass over elbows onto the floor.

"Did you see her?" Jay asked again, urgently.

Paul shook his head. "She's gone, Jay. Marie said she bolted out of here earlier today like her ass was on fire."

Jay's disappointment, his despair was immediately visible, and Paul didn't understand. "I saw her sitting on the edge of the bed," Jay said. "She was crying, and I tried to touch her, to get her to stay, but I scared her. She was so scared...she jumped up and told me not to touch her, then ran away."

Paul blinked, startled. "She spoke to you?"

Jay nodded. "And she'd gotten dressed, Paul. She was wearing some of my clothes, and she'd found her things...her shoes, I think, and her keys. She was scared, but I don't think it was of me. I think it's because she knew what happened—she remembered."

He clutched at Paul's shirt, his eyes bright and excited. "She was back, Paul," he whispered. "She was *all the way back*."

CHAPTER THREE

Jo remembered the wink of light against the knife blade, and the man's eyes glittering as he'd stabbed her. The light had come from the stairwell above, dim and pale, and the man was little more than a looming shadow against the backdrop of darkness.

She remembered terrible pain in her head; he had struck her hard from behind. She'd crumpled to the ground, dazed from the blow. He had fought with her pants, struggling to jerk her uniform slacks down from her waist. She had heard the seams strain and snap from his efforts.

She had tried to fight him, but the pain had been too great, her consciousness waning. She had pushed at his hands, kicking feebly with her feet. That was when she had noticed the fleeting flash of light against metal; a hunting knife with a broad, hooked blade.

"No," she had whimpered, shaking her head, holding up her hands in a desperate attempt to shield herself. Her breath had hiccupped in her throat, her heart frozen with terror. She remembered the light from the stairwell above glistening in the man's eyes, like moonlight against silver. "No...please...!"

He'd swung the knife at her; she had felt the breeze of the blow against her face and then there had been terrible pain just below her left breast as the blade sank deeply

between her ribs. Again and again, he stabbed her, driving the knife into the meat of her belly, her thighs.

She couldn't defend herself; her strength waned and her mind abandoned her. Her last conscious thought was that she could smell her own blood, bitter and metallic, as it pooled around her hips in a broadening circumference, and then the shadows overtook her and she blacked out.

She had escaped from something horrific into something wondrous, a 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 closed her eyes and smiled, stretching languidly beneath the sheets. She was naked, but unafraid and unashamed. She luxuriated in the soft, tickling smoothness of silk against her bare breasts, her stomach, her legs.

Her attack could not have been further from her mind. It 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 of silk drew her attention, and she opened her eyes to discover a young man lying in the bed beside her. He was extraordinarily handsome: large, dark

eyes framed by a tumble of dark hair, sharply etched features and chiseled cheeks offset a long nose and thin mouth. 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 plain of muscles stacked neatly at his stomach, the lean lines of his arms, the bridge of muscles 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," he said.

She rolled onto her side to face him and reached out, brushing his hair back from his face. "God, you're beautiful," she murmured, making his smile turn somewhat shy as he cut his eyes down toward the bed.

She pressed her hand against his cheek and raised her head 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.

"Come back—" he began to say, and then Jo's lips settled against his, drawing his breath and voice to simultaneous, startled halts. 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 didn't allow him time or breath to protest. She kissed him again, deeply this time, and after a moment's uncertain hesitation, she felt him relax against her, succumbing to the kiss. He whimpered softly, his hands tangling in her hair, drawing her firmly against him. He eased her back, settling atop her, and Jo opened her legs, parting her thighs to envelop his hips. 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 against her breast, his fingers pressing in firm, wondrous 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 slowly, sweetly from her throat to each of her nipples in turn. The tip of his tongue danced against the sensitive buds, causing Jo to gasp for breath and clutch at his shoulders. As his mouth tended to her breasts, his hand slipped further southward, sliding between her legs and down to the auburn thatch of hair marking the apex of her groin. Here, he began to move his fingertips slowly,

deliberately, and Jo's voice escaped her in a fluttering moan of sheer delight.

He drove her to the brink of explosive pleasure with his hand, and then his fingers slipped away, leaving Jo shuddering with need, whimpering for him. He shifted his weight and entered her, sliding deeply, easily into her warmth, and he moaned softly, breathlessly. He began to move against her, sliding his hand beneath the firm curves of her buttocks and raising her leg to allow him deeper access. He marked a swift, powerful rhythm, driving himself into her, as Jo arched her back to present her hips to him.

They moved together, both of them gasping and clutching at one another. She seized his hair, pulling him toward her as her lips met his fervently, fiercely. She had no idea how long this wondrous eternity lasted but she had wished it would never end. It was the most phenomenal, exquisite lovemaking she had ever known, and he brought her to climax repeatedly, intense waves of release washing over her again and again.

At last, he found release of his own, and he cried out sharply, hoarsely, his body stiffening with pleasure. When he was finished, he crumpled against her, gasping for breath, his hair disheveled, his entire body awash with a sheen of exhausted sweat.

They lay together for a long moment, trembling and silent. *This is heaven*, Jo thought. *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 winded, as she touched his face, tracing the curve of his mouth tenderly with her fingertips. *Who are you?* she thought. *My God, I could fall in love with you.*

"Come back with me," he whispered, brushing his hand against her face, smoothing back disheveled waves of auburn hair.

She blinked at him. "What?"

He leaned toward her, brushing the tip of his nose against hers, letting his lips brush her mouth. "Please," he breathed. "Come back with me."

* * *

Damn it, I have to quit thinking about it. About him, Jo thought, frowning.

She had been making notations on a chart—ten milligrams of zolpidem given by mouth to a patient—when her mind wandered back once again to three days ago when she'd woken up in an unfamiliar bed. *With that man.*

Everything was confusing lately. There wasn't a mark on her, which didn't fit with memories of a brutal attack and being stabbed repeatedly. Jo shook her head, her frown deepening. *Just a dream,* she told herself for at least the ten-thousandth time. *It was all just a dream. The stairwell at the mall, the man with the knife, the heavenly lovemaking in an unending bed.*

She shook her head again. That alone proved it was all just a dream. *No sex that good could ever be real.*

Logically, she knew it couldn't, yet it still kept creeping into her mind, distracting her from her work—and ordinarily nothing could do that. She prided herself on her dedication to her job and her patients. When she hit the floor for her shift at the hospital, she left all of her personal problems behind. She had long ago mastered the fine art of shoving everything else in her mind aside and steeling herself, focusing on the task at hand. A history of broken hearts had given her plenty of unwanted practice.

She finished her annotation as she pushed the dream from her mind. She returned to the nurses' station, locked up her medicine cart and completed her logs on her patients' charts. She debriefed the next on-duty nurse on the patients she'd had in her charge and then gratefully clocked out for the day.

"Are you alright, Jo?" asked one of her coworkers, a nurse named Charles Toomis, as they rode together in the crowded elevator to the hospital's main floor.

"I'm fine," Jo replied. A glance told her Charles wasn't buying that a bit. They had worked together for almost two years. He was a tall man, thick through the chest and stomach with strawberry blonde hair and a well-trimmed mustache. He was probably her closest friend and knew her well enough to recognize when she was lying.

"I'm just tired, that's all," she said. "Really."

"You haven't seemed like yourself for the past couple of days," he said. "You've been acting sort of out of it."

Jo laughed. "It's almost Christmas, Charles. I *am* sort of out of it. Out of money, out of patience, out of gift ideas..."

Charles laughed with her. "I hear you." His laughter faded and he glanced at her again, his brow lifted. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," she said, awarding him her most reassuring smile. "I promise I'm fine."

The elevator reached the lobby, and the two of them waited for the crowd ahead of them to exit first. Charles caught the door with his hand before it could slide closed again, and held it open for Jo with a genteel bow.

"See you tomorrow," she told him, slapping him fondly against his belly with the back of her hand.

It was all just a dream but, even so, the idea of parking her car in the dimly lit hospital parking garage still left her unnerved and Jo now parked in the visitors' parking lot outside. This meant finding a space that was a wearisome hike from the building, but at least it was a hike that was outdoors and in daylight. Jo squinted as she started across the lot. It was cold and she moved swiftly, eager to escape the chill.

"Jobeth!" she heard someone call from behind. She slowed to a puzzled halt, turning to look behind her. Nobody ever called her "Jobeth" except for hospital administrators. *And they don't call you out in the parking lot unless you're in deep shit.*

She saw a dark haired man walking toward her in a long black overcoat that flapped about his shins as he moved. He wore sunglasses, but slipped them off as he drew near. When she saw his eyes—as dark and wondrously expressive now as they had been in her dream—Jo drew back, her breath tangling in her throat.

It can't be...!

"Jobeth Montgomery?" the young man asked—the man she had imagined making love to, the man in whose bed she had awoken three days ago.

Oh, my God! How did he find me?

She blinked at him in mute shock. After a moment, his expression grew sheepish. "Jobeth Montgomery?" he asked again hesitantly, as if worried she didn't recognize him and he was making a monumental ass out of himself.

Jo knew if she didn't say something—say anything—he would turn around and leave, and she'd never learn the truth about what had happened to her. *I don't want to know!* a part of her mind screamed. *It wasn't real! It couldn't be real! I don't want to know what happened!*

"Well...hi," she said, forcing herself to breathe again.

He blinked and then visibly relaxed, the anxious tension draining from his shoulders. He smiled slightly, almost shyly. "Hi, yourself."

Jo started at the coincidence of the situation, and his smile widened, broaching toward laughter as he realized it, too. That he recognized the irony of their greeting only made

Jo want to run toward her car. *He can't know! It was just a dream!*

"Who...who are you?" she whispered, standing her ground despite her desperate, urgent wish to flee. This man was no dream; he was flesh and blood and standing before her, and no matter her mind's protests, she wanted to know. She needed to know what had happened.

"My name is Jay Frances," he said, offering his hand.

She stared at him for a long moment and then reached out, pressing her palm against his, letting his fingers close around hers. "How did you find me? How do you know my name?" she asked.

"You dropped this when you ran away," he said. He drew his hand away and reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a battered, laminated tag—her hospital identification card. She had thought it lost during that peculiar, half-forgotten, half-dreamed weekend, and stared in shock at it, at the blood smeared and splattered across the words *Metropolitan Hospital*. She felt tears sting her eyes and pressed her lips together in a thin line, struggling to stave them. "Thank you, Jay," she whispered, because she knew he had done something to save her. Something had happened to her in that garage stairwell, something terrible. Dream or no dream, she knew that it had—and that he had saved her somehow.

Her tears spilled, and she uttered a helpless little gasp as her hands darted to her face. She felt his hand slip around to cradle the back of her head, and she didn't resist as he

drew her against his shoulder, holding her gently, letting her weep against his lapel.

"It's alright," he whispered, turning his face down to speak softly, his breath warm against her ear. "It's alright."

* * *

Jay had been unable to breathe, much less muster the voice to call out to Jobeth Montgomery when he'd seen her crossing the hospital parking lot. He had taken the afternoon off from work, hoping for the chance to meet her. When he had that chance, he had found himself mute and rooted to the spot.

At last, he'd forced himself to call out her name. She had turned to him, her long, auburn hair drooping out of her hastily secured topknot in long tendrils, her cheeks and nose flushed red with chill. She had taken his breath again. *My God, she's beautiful*, he thought—the exact same thing he'd thought when she had rolled over to face him in her deathscape bed.

When she burst into tears and took refuge in his arms, his heart had ached for her. He couldn't begin to explain the effect this woman had over him. All he knew was that he had been unable to stop thinking about her for almost three full days now, and it wasn't entirely because she was the first person he had ever fully restored—body, mind and soul—during a resurrection.

"Daddy, is your friend, that lady, going to come and visit us again soon?" Emma had asked him that morning over breakfast. He had been lost in thought, nursing a cup of

coffee and a piece of toast, while his daughter sat stirring her Cheerios with her spoon.

Jay had blinked at her, startled from his distracted thoughts, and amazed that Emma had seemed to so accurately share his thoughts. "I...I don't know, Em."

"But you want her to," Emma again uncannily deduced. "You like her."

At this, Marie, his housekeeper, had cleared her throat loudly in disapproval from the kitchen. Marie thought that Jay had brought Jo home and to his bed after an overindulgent night of drinking. *If only you knew, Marie*, he'd thought.

It was ridiculous, of course. He didn't like Jobeth Montgomery. He didn't even know her. He hadn't been able to glance at a woman in the past two years without the image of Lucy's face haunting his mind, wrenching his heart. That he had succumbed so easily and without a thought of his dead wife while in Jo's deathscape—the warm bed and even warmer embrace into which she'd drawn him—left him ashamed.

"What happened that night?" Jo whispered to him in the parking lot.

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee," he said. "I'll explain what I can."

Which is nothing that sounds sane.

She nodded, drawing away from him, sniffing and hiccupping for breath. "Alright," she said, dabbing at her eyes with her fingertips. She looked uncertain and afraid,

and he wanted to tell her that he understood her feelings completely.

* * *

He told her everything that he knew and to her credit, she sat still and listened to him with a stoic expression as she held a cup of coffee untasted between her hands. They had returned to the hospital and sat together in a corner of the cafeteria. It was almost five o'clock in the afternoon, too late for lunch, but too early for the dinner rush yet, and they had the cafeteria nearly to themselves.

He told her about finding her body in the stairwell at the mall garage, surrounded by a pool of blood, her torso riddled with stab wounds, her head bloodied and beaten. He told her about touching her, about what had happened next, when the tingling in his hands had grown too urgent to resist.

He didn't tell her about her deathscape, the endless bed or their lovemaking. He knew she remembered this, but it clearly embarrassed her, and he didn't want to traumatize her more than circumstances surely had.

When at last he was through, he reached for his coat pocket. "I found this," he said. He offered her a small picture frame wrapped in a plastic bag. It had been in the trunk of his car with his own shopping bag, but he hadn't purchased it and had never seen it before. "I think it's yours." It wasn't until yesterday that he'd found the Easy Bake Oven, Emma's birthday present, stowed away in the trunk. That he had carried both Jo and the shopping bags back to his car, and

then driven home in the stupefied state that followed his resurrections left him helplessly aghast.

Jo nodded, holding the picture frame stiffly between her hands. "It was a gift," she said. "I bought it at the mall, one of those 'Secret Santa' gifts. We all drew names on the ward, and I got Laney's. She just had a new granddaughter. I thought she'd like to keep a picture of her in it."

She looked pained, her eyes flooding momentarily with tears again. She pressed her lips together staunchly and looked away over his shoulder, a crease crimping her brow.

"The glass is broken," Jay said clumsily. "I may have dropped it. I'll give you money to buy a new one..."

Jo shook her head. "No, it's alright," she murmured, still not meeting his gaze. "I fell on the stairs. That's when the glass broke."

She seemed as determined not to admit what had happened as Jay was to confide in her. He knew his explanations didn't help it all make sense, and he wished now that he hadn't come to find her. Paul had warned him against it, despite Jay's overeager insistence.

Jay, if you go in there with all guns blazing, telling her some story about how you've raised her from the dead, she's going to think you're a nut-case.

And looking at her now, he realized Paul had been right. He and Jo sat together in a prolonged, awkward silence until at length, she cleared her throat.

"Well," she said, licking her lips as if carefully choosing her words. "That was quite a story, Jay Frances. Do you turn water into wine, too?"

He blinked at her, caught off guard. "What?"

She rose to her feet, taking the frame in hand and tucking her coat over her arm. "Thank you for returning my picture frame," she said, turning to leave the cafeteria. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your psychosis."

"Jo, wait—" Jay said, catching her by the wrist to stay her. She whirled toward him, her eyes flown wide. The picture frame fell to the floor with a clatter as she wildly wrenched herself loose from his grasp.

"Get your hand off me!" she snapped, loudly enough for nearby cafeteria workers to look over curiously as they restocked a salad bar. Jo noticed their attention, and immediately lowered her voice, but her brows furrowed and she glared at Jay. "Don't touch me again. You're insane. Do you realize that? You did something to me—you probably drugged me somehow, brought me back to your house and raped me. Everything else is just a crazy dream."

She didn't believe that. He could see it plainly in her face, but she was terrified of the truth; the truth was simply too unbelievable to deal with rationally. "If you come here again," she said, reaching down and snatching up the fallen frame. "If I ever see you again, I'll have your ass thrown in jail."

She started to march smartly for the door, her voice choked, her face flushed.

"What we said outside, the way we greeted each other—that's how it happened before," Jay called after her, drawing her to an abrupt halt. He could see her entire body tense with stunned surprise. He hated to say more, but had no other choice. "That's why you started to cry. Because you remember it—you remember everything, and so do I."

She didn't move. She remained rooted in place, trembling slightly. He could hear her breath fluttering with tears.

"You told me I was beautiful," he said, and her shoulders hunched all the more. "It was an enormous bed that went on and on in every direction. There were brown silk sheets, and we were both naked."

He went to her, standing just behind her so that he could lean forward and speak softly against her ear. "We made love," he breathed. "For what seemed like hours, you let me make love to you. And then you touched my face when we were through and I asked you to come back with me."

Jo turned to him, stumbling, her eyes wide, her face ashen. She looked ready to swoon and he slipped a steadying hand against her waist.

"It's not possible," she whispered, stricken, shaking her head. "It...it was just a dream. It has to have been just a dream."

He smiled at her sadly, sympathetically. "It wasn't a dream, Jo," he said.

He eased her into her seat at the table once more. "My brother is a police officer. I want you to talk to him. I want you to tell him what happened to you that night."

She blinked at him. "What? No, no, I...I can't talk to the police. He'll think I'm crazy. He'll never believe me. Hell, I don't believe it myself...!"

"Paul knows about me, about what I can do," Jay told her. "He's known since we were kids. He'll believe you, Jo. I promise. I told him about your crime scene, the way you were killed. He thinks you were attacked by someone he's been investigating—a serial killer called the Watcher who's killed three other women."

"The Watcher," Jo repeated, and Jay nodded.

"He stalks his victims for months sometimes before he attacks," Jay said. "That's how he got his name—he watches people. If it was him, Jo, he's been watching you, too, and if he's still watching you, he could try to hurt you again."

Her eyes widened again with sudden fear. She looked about, her gaze darting unconsciously around the cafeteria.

"Please, Jo," Jay said, slipping his hand against hers. "Talk to my brother. He can keep you safe. And you're the only person who might know who this guy is, who has seen him."

She sat there, shivering for a long moment and he worried that she still didn't believe him, didn't realize the danger she could still be in. But at last, she folded her fingers

against his hand and nodded once. "Alright," she whispered. "I'll talk to him."

He nodded, reaching for his cell phone to call Paul before she changed her mind, but she caught his hand and stayed him. "Will...will you be there, too?" she asked softly.

You like her, Emma had told him, with the sort of innocent frankness only a child could manage. With these three words, his five-year-old daughter had summed up what he himself had been struggling not to admit for days. Something had happened to him in Jobeth Montgomery's deathscapes; something far more than sex. He had felt it ever since, and suddenly, as he sat holding her hand, Jay realized that—no matter what she said to the contrary—Jo believed in what had happened to her. She felt it, too.

"Will you stay with me?" Jo asked, her eyes swimming with a gloss of tears again.

"Yes," he said. "I'll stay with you, Jo."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jo trusted Paul Frances almost immediately. The police detective had a quiet, unassuming manner about him that put her at ease nearly from the moment of their introduction. She felt uncomfortable going to police headquarters to speak with him so Jay arranged for them to meet at Paul's house.

The three sat around a small table in Paul's kitchen. Paul was six years older than Jay, and had she 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 that his wife was still at work, and though his teen-aged daughters were home from school, both would be preoccupied with talking on the telephone or playing on the internet, and neither would disturb them while they spoke.

Paul fixed a pot of coffee, but as at the hospital cafeteria earlier, Jo settled for cradling a steaming mug between her hands without really sipping at it. 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 spoke, 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," she said, her eyes distant and down-turned toward her coffee cup as she remembered. "Taller than either of you, and heavier set. But it wasn't muscle, even though he was strong. He was sort of fat."

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, holding his hand. It felt as though it was something she had done every day of her life when she had found herself in need of support.

"He hit me in the head from behind with something. The lights were out on the landing, but I didn't really think anything about it when I was going up the stairs. I heard something behind me, and I started to turn around. That's when he hit me."

She touched the back of her head, just behind her ear, toward the base of her skull. "It knocked me out for a minute or two. I fell down. That's when the picture frame in my pocket broke. He was wearing surgical gloves. Heavy duty latex. He kept getting frustrated because he couldn't pull my pants down with them on."

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 his eyes. I saw light shining in his eyes."

"It's alright," Paul said. He didn't press the matter, which surprised her. He looked ready to say more, leaning forward to speak, when a girl around twelve or thirteen years old came into the kitchen.

"Daddy," she said, addressing Paul, but blinking between Jay and Jo with shy fascination. "M.K. won't get off the computer, and I need to use it for homework."

"You guys are supposed to share that thing in the afternoon, Beth," Paul asked. "If it's her turn, it's her turn."

"You said homework comes first," the girl, Beth, protested. "And she's not doing homework, Daddy. She's looking up pictures of Orlando Bloom."

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. "My daughter. She's five, going on thirty."

He laughed fondly and Jo smiled politely. "She's beautiful," she said. "I saw her when I left your house. She was standing on the stoop with your wife."

Of course, she knew the older, matronly woman she'd seen outside Jay's brownstone couldn't possibly be his wife, but she wasn't sure how to broach the subject otherwise. She hadn't noticed a wedding ring on Jay's hand, and he hadn't said anything to her about having a wife, but obviously his daughter had to have a mother somewhere.

"My wife..." His expression shifted, his brows lifting slightly, his gaze growing distracted and forlorn. "You must mean Marie, my housekeeper. My wife died two years ago."

He looked stricken even at this brief and passing mention, and Jo could have kicked herself in the ass. *Brilliant, Jo, she thought. Could you have possibly picked a worse thing to say?*

She started to apologize, but Paul's footsteps, heavy and quick coming down the stairs, interrupted. "And no phone calls, either, M.K. I mean it," he called sharply. "I want that chemistry book open and your nose in it until your mom gets home."

"You are such a dictator!" came a defiant, furious shout from upstairs, just as Paul returned to the kitchen.

He shook his head, sighing heavily as he reached the table. "Teens," he muttered, looking between Jo and Jay. "I'll pay either of you to take them home with you."

* * *

"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."

* * *

When they were gone, Paul slipped his cell phone out of his coat pocket and dialed his office. "Hi, Laurie," he said when his unit secretary came on the line. "I need a

background check on a woman, Jobeth Montgomery. I want to set up some surveillance on her.”

He slipped the curtains on the back door window aside with his fingertips and watched Jay’s car back out of the drive. The woman, Jo, sat in the front passenger seat, her eyes still haunted and fearful.

He suspected that she had every damn right to be afraid.

“Yeah, I’m on my way back in,” he said. “But I need you to go ahead and move on this for me. Jobeth Montgomery. I’ve got her address right here...”

* * *

Jay drove Jo back to her house, a small, two-bedroom bungalow in an older, quiet neighborhood tucked among the city’s closest suburbs. He’d followed her here after leaving the hospital earlier in the evening so that she could change out of her work clothes before meeting with Paul.

All along the drive home, an awkward silence filled his car. It had begun to rain, a slight, cold drizzle, and Jo had seemed to distract herself by absently watching drops of moisture bead on the passenger-side window. At last, as Jay pulled into her driveway, she cleared her throat slightly, drawing his gaze.

“Would you like to come inside?” she asked. She glanced down at her hands and picked at the lap of her jeans. “I’m not much of a cook or anything, but it’s

suppertime, and I owe you at least a pizza." She glanced at him and smiled. "At least."

He laughed, and she added, "I have a bottle of wine I could throw in, too."

"Sold," he said.

She was worried, despite Paul's best assurances that the Watcher would think she was dead and no longer be interested in her. Jay worried, too. In fact, before they had even left Paul's driveway, he had said something about it. "Maybe you could go and stay with a friend for awhile."

She'd glanced at him, her brow raised. "Until when? I can't do that. I can't live my life, day in and day out, afraid." She'd frowned. "He's already taken enough away from me."

Jay followed her up to her front porch and held the screen door while she fumbled with the key to her deadbolt. "It's small," she said of the house, glancing at him apologetically over her shoulder. "It needs a paint job and new carpets, but the mortgage is cheap and I don't have to answer to a landlord."

"It's fine," he said, stepping into the house behind her. She turned on a tabletop lamp as she crossed through the living room while he stood on the threshold, admiring the small, modestly furnished room. "It's very nice," he called after her.

A light came on in the adjacent room; a dining room that had been converted into a home office, to judge by the cluttered bookshelves and computer desk. Jo poked her head through the doorway at him. "Yeah, I like to call the look

‘working-class chic,’” she said, rolling her eyes and ducking out of view again. He laughed, watching her shadow bob on the wall as she shrugged her way out of her coat. “Take off your coat, toss it on the loveseat there. Make yourself at home. I’ll grab some wine glasses.”

Jay draped his overcoat against the back of the fir-green couch, first fishing his cell phone out of his pocket. He winced to see he had seven missed calls. *Probably the office,* he thought. *Andy in a panic, wearing his thumb out on the speed-dial.* Jay was an editor at a publishing company. End-of-the-month deadlines were looming, and he couldn’t really afford the afternoon he’d taken off to find Jo. No doubt his senior supervisor, Andy, had worked himself into a near-frantic state at Jay’s absence.

Andy and work could wait until the morning. Jay hit his speed-dial for home, and smiled broadly as Emma answered.

“Daddy!” she exclaimed brightly in his ear, making him wince.

“Hey, lamb,” he said. “How was school today?”

“It was good,” she said. “Nathan Brighton ate a bug during recess and we all got to pay a quarter and watch if we wanted. Mrs. Dickens found out and got really mad. She made him give everyone their money back.”

Her first economics lesson, then, Jay thought, shaking his head. “Did you do your spelling words already?”

“Yes, Daddy. Marie helped me with them. Where are you?”

Jay glanced around the living room. "I'm...at a friend's house," he said.

"Your friend, that lady?" Emma asked, sounding absolutely delighted. Jay winced to imagine Marie's face, if the housekeeper happened to be within earshot. "Is it that lady, Daddy? Is it?"

"Yes, Em, and her name is Jo. Will you tell Marie that I won't be home for supper, please?"

"Why don't you bring Jo home for supper with you?" Emma asked.

Jay laughed. *Marie would love that*, he thought. "Well, there's an idea. Maybe another time. Will you tell Marie for me, please?"

"Yes, Daddy."

They exchanged "I-love-you's" and smooches, and Jay smiled as he returned the cell phone to his coat pocket. "Your daughter?" Jo asked from behind him.

He turned, caught off guard, and found her standing in the doorway, a bottle of wine in one hand, two glasses held by the stems in the other. She smiled at him, curious and inquisitive, and he smiled back. "Yeah. I just wanted to check in."

Her smile faltered somewhat. "Do you need to go?" she asked. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think about your family—"

"No, it's alright. It's fine, really." He reached for the wine bottle. "I'll open if you pour."

* * *

Two hours later, they had almost polished off the bottle of chardonnay, and had yet to order pizza. They sat together on the sofa, both of them loose-tongued and giddy from the wine, talking and laughing easily together.

"I'm glad you stayed," Jo said, downing the last of the wine in her glass. "Thank you for that, Jay. I know your brother said not to worry, but I...I still felt funny about walking into this house alone."

She reached over the back of the couch, parting two blades of the venetian blinds with her fingers so she could peek out toward the darkened street outside her window. She had been doing this periodically and unconsciously ever since she sat down. Jay caught her hand, closing his fingers gently against hers and drew her arm back down toward her lap. "Paul wouldn't say it if he didn't mean it," he said gently. "No one's out there. You're safe now."

She looked at him. She was so damn beautiful and so damn near, and the wine made Jay feel reckless and bold. He wanted to lean toward her, touch her face, brush her auburn hair back from her brow and kiss her. He forced himself to tear his eyes away from her, to look down into his wine glass and turn loose of her hand. *Lucy*, he thought, an image of his wife's face—wide-open smile, bright eyes and short-cropped hair—flashing through his mind, overriding the wine, smothering any desire that had arisen.

He still kept a bottle of her perfume in his bureau. Sometimes late at night, long after Emma was tucked into bed and Marie had left for the night, he would draw the

half-empty container up to his face, close his eyes and draw the simple, sweet fragrance of Lucy against his nose. The ache for her, his loneliness, his need would sometimes grow so immense, he couldn't breathe. *Lucy.*

"Have you always been able to do it?" Jo asked softly, hesitantly, drawing him from his thoughts. "What you did for me...?" He nodded and her brows lifted in gentle sympathy. "How many times has it happened?"

"Counting you? Four," he said. "But none of them have been like you." She looked puzzled, and he continued. "You're the only one I've ever been able to bring back all the way, the way you were before, like nothing had happened."

"What were the others like?" she asked.

Jay tilted his head back and polished off his wine. "They were horrible," he whispered. "They were better off dead."

He told her about Danny Thomas, his brother's childhood friend, the first person he'd ever resurrected. He told her about Eileen O'Connell, a high school friend who had accompanied him to the prom. He hadn't realized that she'd harbored a crush on him until the night of the dance, when she'd tried to kiss him and he'd rebuked her advances as gently as he had been able.

"But I hurt her," he said quietly, shaking his head. "There's no kind way to do that, and I should have just let her. She was a nice girl, and it wouldn't have hurt anything." He sighed, forking his fingers through his hair. "I hurt her, and she drank too much spiked punch. She got

drunk, and left the dance with some guy who just wanted to get in her pants. I guess she let him. He must have given her something, too. More alcohol and some kind of pills. I don't know. I tried to find her, but when I did..."

He remembered it so clearly: finding the hotel room ajar, the guy long since bolted and gone. Eileen's dress and crinoline were tossed in a heap on the floor, her panties and bra in a tangle just inside the doorway, her shoes by the bed. Eileen had been slumped on the floor of the bathroom, naked, her face hidden behind the toilet. She had vomited while unconscious and choked to death; a puddle of thin, frothy bile was pooled around her face and dried against her chin.

Jay had known Eileen since third grade. They had both made plans to go to college together in Missouri the following year. She had always been someone he'd taken for granted; he had looked at her ten-thousand times and never once had truly seen her. His heart had broken with shame and remorse as he'd stood in the doorway of the hotel bathroom. His hands had thrummed with unyielding command, and he'd wept as he'd touched her and then blacked out.

"When I woke up, she was alive again," he said to Jo. "But not like she'd been. It was just like with Danny. It wasn't her. It was like her body had returned, but her mind...her soul were still gone. And then the third time..."

He set his wine glass aside on a coffee table, his eyes closed, his brows furrowed. God Almighty, he didn't want

to think about the third time. He settled for simply shaking his head. "I can never bring them all of the way back," he said, and he looked up at Jo. "Not until you."

Jo touched his face. "I'm sorry, Jay," she said softly.

This time, he couldn't muster the resolve to turn away from her. He leaned toward her, slipping his hand against her cheek, canting his face to meet hers. She closed her eyes, the tip of her nose brushing his, her breath soft against his lips, and then he kissed her. Her lips parted and the tip of his tongue delved into her mouth. She whimpered softly, a wordless invitation, and Jay leaned her back against the couch, kissing her more deeply, cradling her face between his hands. Her fingers curled in his hair, drawing him near. Her breasts pressed against his chest, and the friction of her hips against him as she settled herself more comfortably stoked an immediate, urgent reaction within him.

Take me to bed, or lose me forever. Lucy's voice came unbidden to his mind. He remembered lying above her, much as he did now with Jo. She'd looked up at him, her large, dark eyes framed by a tousled headful of short, dark curls. She had a porcelain complexion, with bright spots of color that would bloom in her cheeks whenever she was excited, angry or aroused. He remembered Lucy wrapping her long, lean legs around his middle, her arms around his neck. Her fingers had twined in his hair and they had laughed together in between fervent kisses, nearly nose to nose. *Take me to bed, or lose me forever,* she'd said to him, and her lips had unfurled in a wide, mischievous smile.

He drew away from Jo abruptly, wide-eyed and breathless, and she blinked at him in surprise. "I...I can't do this," he said. "I'm sorry. I just...I can't..."

He stood, practically scrambling to his feet and reached for his coat. "I...I should go."

Jo blinked at him, her eyes bewildered and wounded, as he slipped his arm into his coat sleeve. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. Her voice sounded peculiar, somewhat raspy, as if she hovered on the verge of tears, and he turned to her, meeting her abashed gaze.

"It's not you," Jay said, hating how clumsy and insincere his excuse would sound to her—because it sounded exactly the same way to him. "It's me. I... I haven't been with a woman since my wife died."

She looked up at him, her brows lifted in sympathy. "Two years ago, in a car accident," he added, answering the inevitable question before she had to feel uncomfortable asking it. "I was in a coma afterwards for awhile. Lucy died at the scene. I had no idea."

Jo rose to her feet and went to his side. "I'm sorry, Jay," she whispered.

He smiled, helpless against her as he looked into her eyes. "Me, too," he said. When she smiled, something in him softened for the first time in two years. A part of his heart he'd nearly forgotten about warmed. *My God*, he thought. *I could fall in love with this woman.*

"Are you okay to drive home?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Probably not." *But it's going to be a whole lot safer than if I stay here for the night.* He struggled not to look at her too long—because if he did, he'd kiss her again, and then Christ only knew where things would end—and pretended to busy himself fishing his gloves out of his pockets. "But I should go anyway."

She opened the door for him. "Yes, Jay," she said, smiling somewhat forlornly. "You probably should."

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm sorry I missed supper tonight," Jay said softly, leaning over to brush his lips against his daughter's brow as he tucked her into bed. He had arrived home much later than he'd intended, and only minutes before Emma's bedtime. He'd murmured thanks to Marie as she'd shrugged on her overcoat and left for the evening, and hadn't missed the way she sniffed noticeably as he'd walked her to the foyer. Even though he'd downed at least half a box of mints on the way home, apparently Marie's keen nose still detected the wine on his breath. To judge by her disapproving frown, she also apparently knew exactly where he'd been while drinking the wine. Knowing Marie had almost certainly called Paul to report another "drinking binge" with "that trashy redhead," Jay mentally braced himself.

"It's alright, Daddy," Emma replied, snuggled in up to her chin beneath the ruffled edge of her pink gingham bedspread. They had just finished her bedtime story, Jay's ten-thousandth rendition of *Sleeping Beauty*. "Marie made peas. She put mushrooms in them, too." The wrinkle of Emma's nose clearly indicated this was a double-dose of disgust, in her opinion.

"Hopefully, she made more than just that," Jay said, looking down at Emma's bright eyes and upturned face. Everyone always said she looked like him, but he saw more

of Lucy in her. Sometimes her resemblance to her mother was so apparent, it pained him.

Emma nodded as she drew her teddy bear, Mr. Cuddles, more closely beneath her chin. "She made chicken with gravy." Any of the varieties of gourmet sauces Marie enjoyed fixing qualified as no more than "gravy" to Emma's five-year-old sensibilities.

"She left you a plate in the fridge," Emma added, and Jay nodded.

"She told me, yes," he said. He rose to his feet and leaned over, just as Emma tilted up her face and puckered her lips, ready for a good-night kiss.

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you, too, lamb," he told her, switching off her bedside lamp. Darkness fell upon the room, broken only by the swath of golden light spilling through the opened doorway from the corridor beyond. He walked toward the door.

"Daddy?"

Emma's voice, small and uncharacteristically hesitant, gave him pause. He turned in the doorway. "Yes, Em?"

Her face was draped in shadows, but her eyes glistened with reflected light from the hall. "Will you leave the light on in the hall?" she asked.

He raised a curious brow, but shrugged. "Okay."

"And the door," she added quickly. "Don't close it tonight. Okay?"

Jay walked back toward the bed. "Since when are you afraid of the dark?" he asked, sitting on the edge of her mattress.

Emma shrugged, tugging another stuffed animal out of his way as he settled beside her. Now that Jay really looked, he realized she had a lot of stuffed animals in her bed, not just the usual two or three that were her favorites. From the looks of things, she'd cleaned out her shelves and brought every toy bear, rabbit, piglet and dog she possessed to bed with her.

"I had a bad dream last night," Emma said quietly. He had suspected as much; he'd awoken that morning to find her snuggled in bed beside him, something she seldom, if ever, did. She wasn't the sort to be frightened by a nightmare, much less admit aloud that she'd had one. Jay liked to joke that she was a thirty-year old woman trapped in a five-year-old's body, but all at once, she was pure little girl, all wide-eyed and apprehensive.

Jay brushed her hair back from her face. "Want to tell me about it?"

"I saw Grandma and Grandpa's farm," Emma said. "Grandma was there, in the yard. She was hanging wet clothes up on a string."

Emma had been only two years old, little more than a baby when Jay's mother had died. She often spoke about her, however, with a familiarity and fondness that Jay found admittedly disconcerting at times. "I thought you liked dreaming about Grandma and Grandpa's farm," he said.

"I do," Emma said. "But it was different this time. The wind was blowing really hard. The clothes were all flapping around and they kept covering Grandma up. I couldn't see her. And she was trying to say something, but I could hardly hear her because the wind was so loud."

She looked up at him, troubled. "She told me to get beneath the sink. There's a cupboard there, she said, where you and Uncle Paul used to read comics sometimes. She said to crawl in there and close the door and hide."

Jay blinked in surprise. Had he ever told her about the cabinet beneath the sink at his mother's Kansas farm house? He didn't remember doing so, but couldn't figure out how Emma would know otherwise. *She must have overheard me and Paul talking about it once, he thought. Or maybe I said something to Marie, and she heard me.*

"Why would Grandma tell you to hide there?" he asked, still puzzled as to how exactly this constituted a bad dream to Emma.

"So that he wouldn't find me," Emma said, her voice little more than a whisper. She tugged Mr. Cuddles against her face and spoke from behind his ear. "She told me to hide there so he wouldn't find me."

A strange little shiver slid down Jay's spine, raising the downy hairs along the nape of his neck. "So who wouldn't find you, lamb?"

Emma shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "But I could see him there in the yard, standing behind Grandma. I could see him when the clothes would flap, and then

they'd hide him again. He's coming closer, Grandma said. He's watching us."

* * *

"Are you sure there's nothing to worry about?" Jay asked Paul, cradling his cell phone between his shoulder and ear. He parted window blinds with his fingertips, 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 around a mouthful of lo mein. He was at his office, having a late, take-out dinner. He took a noisy slurp of soda and added, "There's no one in this city who knows this guy like I do. 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."

Jay let the blinds snap back closed and sighed wearily. He was being ridiculous, jumping at shadows. The wine at Jo's house had left him exhausted, and he was still recovering somewhat from having resurrected her only days ago. Emma's words

He's coming closer, Grandma said. He's watching us.

had left him unnerved at first, but now, with Paul's reassurances, he realized just how silly he was being. *Great, now I'm spooked by Emma's nightmare. Next, I'll be crawling into bed with her and all of her stuffed animals for the night.*

"Besides," Paul said, interrupting Jay's thoughts. "I'm not entirely convinced she was hit by my guy after all."

"What?" Jay blinked, startled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Jobeth Montgomery's husband," Paul said, his words hitting Jay like a heavy punch to his gut.

"What?" he asked somewhat breathlessly.

"She didn't tell you about him?" Paul asked, munching again. "Oh, yeah. I found a string of restraining orders she's taken out over the last three years against him. Her husband'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 arm up pretty bad."

Jay's breath escaped him in a long, slow sigh. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingertips, feeling the makings of a headache stirring there. "Jesus."

"Yeah," Paul said.

"You think it was him in the stairwell that night?"

"He has a history of coming after her, Jay. I've got it right here in front of me, in black and white." He paused for a moment. "You're not planning to make a habit of seeing her, are you?"

"No," Jay said, thinking of how much he had enjoyed kissing her—and how guilty and ashamed he felt because of it. "No, of course not. No." *Not now, anyway.*

"Good," Paul said, munching again. "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."

"Jo doesn't do meth, Paul," Jay said.

"You don't know that, Jay. You don't know her at all. She's got a high-stress job where she probably works a lot of crazy hours, and she's got easy access to it through her dearly beloved. She's a perfect candidate. I've seen it too many times not to know."

"She's not on meth, Paul," Jay said again, bristling more at the *dearly beloved* than any inference Paul had just offered.

"Well, whatever the case, she obviously wants to put what's happened behind her. She sure sounded that way to me. I say let her. Let it lie. Leave her alone."

"I am, Paul," Jay said, sighing.

* * *

The next morning, he again woke to find Emma snuggled in bed with him. There was still at least an hour before she had to get ready for kindergarten, so Jay 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 of coffee in him and read through the world news section before she arrived.

He had tossed and turned restlessly much of the night, his mind and heart 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. His hands felt strangely, an odd, tickling sensation in his fingertips, but he ignored it as he unlocked the deadbolt on the front door. *Why didn't she tell me she was married? Why did she invite me to her house last night? Is she separated? Divorced? Just screwing around?*

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 looked around quickly, but saw nothing unusual.

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 little 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, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow, 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 so weak from having resurrected Jo. The cat had been too much, too soon.

* * *

"Daddy?" 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 once more.

He slept again 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 blinked 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 clearly 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.

“Well, hi,” Jo said, canting her head slightly and smiling to meet his sleepy gaze.

He managed a smile. “Hi...yourself,” he whispered. She smiled back at him, gently, and 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 toward Emma. The girl stood nearby at the edge of the couch, still in her pajamas, with Mr. Cuddles clutched against her chest.

“Daddy, are you okay?” Emma asked, her voice warbling, on the verge of tears.

He nodded once, forcing a feeble smile. “I’m fine, lamb,” he said. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m sorry.”

“He’s been sick,” Emma said, ignoring his reassurances to the contrary and looking directly at Jo. “Ever since you came to visit last time. Uncle Paul and Marie said he was sick.”

“I’m fine,” Jay said again, his voice stronger now. The nausea passed— without, thank God, him vomiting in front of both his daughter and Jo—and the cobwebs that clouded

his mind were at last lifting. He reached out, stroking his hand against his daughter's disheveled curls. "You need to get ready for school, Em. Go brush your teeth and pick your clothes out, okay?"

"But, Daddy..." Emma began, clearly not convinced that he was recovered. Her eyes remained round and bright with worry, her small lips pinched in a frown of concern.

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 small brows increasing slightly with begrudging concession. "Yes, Daddy," she grumbled, turning on her heel and 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 arm up pretty bad.*

"You should sit down," Jo said.

He shook his head. "I'm alright."

"What happened?" she asked, reaching for him.

"Nothing," he said, shrugging away from her. "I just...I'm still weak, that's all. I'm alright." He forked his fingers through his disheveled hair and shoved 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 nearly groaned aloud thinking of how late to work he was likely to be.

He glanced at Jo. "What are you doing here?"

"I work first shift today," she said. "Seven to three. I thought I'd come by on my way in. I remembered the way from...before." She looked away momentarily, her gaze dropping almost shyly toward the floor. It might have been a trick of the lights, but he could swear that she blushed. "I wanted to talk to you about what happened then...and what happened last night, too."

"You mean, you want to tell me about your husband," he said. "Now, about..." He glanced at his watch. "...twelve hours too late."

Jo blinked at him, visibly startled. "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 see a good time to bring that up during the course of our conversation last night."

"Do you still see him?" Jay asked, and the furrow between her brows crimped more deeply. Her entire body had grown rigid with sudden, nearly tremulous, tension.

"No, I don't still see him," she snapped. "We're divorced. He's a drug addict. And he's in—"

"Paul told me he used to beat you," Jay said, and the color drained from her face, leaving only twin patches of angry, humiliated color ablaze in her cheeks. "He said he attacked you once with a knife."

His point suddenly occurred to her, and her eyes flashed hotly. "And now you both think it was Rich who stabbed me at the mall?"

Jay sighed. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know what to think right now, Jo. But I've got a daughter, and I just...I can't take a chance on something happening that might affect her or get her hurt somehow." He met her gaze. "I think 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.

Enlightenment
CHAPTER SIX

Jo promised herself she wouldn't cry, and to her credit, she almost made it to the beginning of her rounds. She had sat quietly in the staff lounge, stiff-backed and stoic, pretending to listen as the third-shift nurse gave her a report on her patients for the day. 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. 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 and, without an excuse or word of apology, darted out of the room.

She made it to the linen room and sat down on the floor, surrounded by wheeled carts stacked with freshly laundered bed sheets. 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.

That bastard! That rotten son of a bitch! How dare he bring up Rich! How dare they think Rich somehow did this to me! Now they don't believe me anymore. Hell, they probably think I'm strung out on meth, too—and now they won't protect me if that guy comes back again.

To her dismay, these thoughts didn't bring her the most pain. Jo had learned a long time ago that she couldn't depend on anyone else to be her proverbial knight in shining armor. There was no such thing. It had been sometime since she'd had to live her life on constant guard, but not so long ago that she'd forgotten how to do it. She could take care of herself, no matter how great her fear.

The thought that troubled her most was that Jay didn't believe her anymore. She didn't know why or how that could distress her as it did. *I don't even know him, for Christ's sake!* And yet that, more than anything else, broke her heart. *I'll probably never see him again. He won't want anything to do with me now. I've lost him, and I...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. She sniffled mightily and cleared her throat, just as one of the nursing assistants stepped into view.

"Hi, Jo," he said hesitantly, his expression somewhat puzzled. He was a young man, in his early twenties at most, a heavysset, pimple-faced kid named Nathan Gambit. He'd worked on Jo's ward for the last year, and beyond that, she

knew little about him. He seldom spoke to anyone and seemed satisfied to do his work, log his progress on patient charts, punch his time card and retreat to whatever place he called home. She was honestly surprised that he knew her name. To the best of her recollection, they'd never even exchanged cordialities before.

"Hi, Nathan," Jo said, with a slight cough and another sniff. She stood, swatting her palms against the seat of her slacks.

"Are you alright?" he asked after an awkward moment. He stood rooted in place and seemed visibly torn between ducking out of the room, or grabbing a linen cart as if nothing in the world was amiss.

"Yeah," she said, nodding with overemphasis and forcing a broad, bright smile. "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 to get out of her way. Inadvertently, they both moved in the same direction and, when they tried once more, they again stepped into each other's paths.

"I'm sorry," Nathan said, his normally pasty complexion blazing with sudden color. He scrambled back and to his left, leaving her a clear path to the door. He stumbled into a laundry cart in the process, tripped over his own feet and crashed to the floor with a startled yelp.

"Are you okay?" Jo asked, trying not to laugh. She offered her hand, but he outweighed her by a good sixty

pounds. She contributed little more than leverage as he crawled clumsily to his feet.

"I'm fine," he said. As he stood in front of her, Jo noticed for the first time how tall he was, nearly half a head again above her.

For a moment, she had a flashback to the night in the mall garage stairwell, the man with the knife towering above her. It felt vividly real; she could almost smell the stink of spilled oil and stale exhaust from the garage and feel the icy chill of winter seeping through the cinderblocks and concrete floor beneath her.

He was tall and thick, she had told Paul and Jay. Taller than either of you, and heavier set. But it wasn't muscle, even though he was strong. He was sort of fat.

"...at the mall?" Nathan was saying, the word *mall* snapping Jo out of her reverie.

"What?" she asked, startled. 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. She knew that smell. It was *his* smell, the smell of 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 Toomis called, knocking loudly against the door before opening it and poking his head through. He smiled brightly. "There you are. You disappeared and Carla said she..." His voice faded as he noticed Jo's ashen expression. "What is it?" His brows narrowed, and he glowered at Nathan. "What's going on?"

Charles had once been an amateur bodybuilder, fifteen years earlier, he'd once told Jo, when he'd been in college. 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 toward his feet. "Nothing," he mumbled, scuttling 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, and Charles stepped toward her. "Jo?" he 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."

* * *

She dug Paul Frances' card out of her purse and ducked into the ladies' room with her cell phone.

"Metro Homicide, Detective Frances," he said, answering his line midway through the first ring.

"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 Hospital. He's an aide here on the ward where I work. His name is Nathan Gambit."

"Spell that for me," he said, and she did. "You're sure about this? 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."

* * *

"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 break together, each of them playing with untouched cups of coffee.

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 like your ass was on fire? 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."

"That guy I saw you with in the parking lot yesterday?"

Jo blinked in surprise. "You saw us?"

"Yeah, when I was pulling out of the garage, I saw you hugging some guy. Tall, dark-haired, long, black coat. Was that him?"

"Yes," Jo said. "His name is Jay Frances. I met him Friday night. He...helped me out with some trouble."

And, oh, God, she was not going to get into that with Charles. When he started to speak, she knew he was going to ask what kind of trouble, and she interrupted to nip it in the bud. "It was nothing, Charles, just...just some car trouble

while I was shopping at the mall, getting Laney a gift for the Secret Santa thing. Jay gave me a jump."

I guess you could say that, she thought, and she had to bite down on her tongue hard enough to stop herself from snorting aloud with sudden, bitter laughter. In more ways than one.

"I must have dropped my ID badge in the garage, because he brought it back to me yesterday," she said to Charles. "We went out together afterwards, and I...I don't know. I really liked him. I really felt a connection to him...for the first time 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...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. Jay must have mentioned me to him and he 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."

Her eyes teared up, 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 or this readily since she'd been a preschooler.

"I thought he would understand," she said quietly, pained. "He told me his wife had died, and 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. But 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. You want me to go and break 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. "You know, sometimes you're just too sweet to be single, Charles. Why hasn't some nice girl snatched you up yet?"

He raised a speculative brow. "Just lucky, I guess."

* * *

"Jay? Aren't you going into work today?"

Jay glanced at his housekeeper, Marie, startled from his distracted thoughts. He had poured himself a cup of coffee, and now sat at the breakfast bar in his kitchen with it

steaming before him, completely untouched. He had managed to find his way to the shower, and had brushed his teeth and shaved, as well. He was dressed for work, but couldn't seem to make it out of the house that morning. He kept thinking about Jo, and how things had ended so abruptly and badly between them. *I came at her like a jealous boyfriend, right out of high school*, he thought, dismayed. *Jesus, what's wrong with me?*

"Yeah," he said, feeling sheepish. Marie stood in the kitchen doorway, her expression uncertain and somewhat confused. Usually, they passed each other briefly and briskly in the mornings, jostling shoulders at the front stoop as she made her way inside the brownstone and he headed toward his car. "I thought I'd drive Emma to school this morning."

She still looked unconvinced, but nodded as she walked toward the kitchen sink. "You visited with that girl again last night," she remarked, turning on the hot tap and collecting Emma's breakfast dishes.

"Her name's Jo, Marie," Jay reminded gently. "And yes, I visited with her last night. She came by this morning, too. She left a little while ago." No sense in Marie picking that up through a second-hand account, namely Emma.

Marie looked over her shoulder, her brow raised slightly. "That hardly sounds proper," she said, the corners of her mouth turning down. "When I was your age, people had plenty to say about an unmarried girl paying call all alone on a man."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Jay said, rising from his stool. "I don't think she'll be back around anymore. I guess I've seen to that."

He set his coffee cup on the counter beside the sink and headed for the kitchen door. "You sound disappointed," Marie remarked, giving him pause.

"I am," he said quietly. "I know what you thought of her, Marie, but you're wrong. She's a good woman." *I think she might have been good for me*, he wanted to add, but pressed his lips together instead.

He hadn't turned to face Marie, and could feel her focused gaze upon him from the sink. "It sounds as though you like her," she said at length.

He smiled sadly, again without turning. "Yes, I do."

She was quiet again, and he listened to the soft sounds of water splashing as she wiped Emma's cereal bowl clean. "You know, when my husband, Wallace, died, I felt like a part of me had died with him," she said finally. Jay turned in surprise. He knew Marie was a widow, but she'd never spoken at any length about her husband. She continued washing dishes, keeping her eyes on the sink. "We were married for thirty-five years, you know. We never had any children. We tried, of course, but I guess it wasn't meant to be. He was my whole world, and when he was gone, it felt like everything had stopped. I remember feeling like I couldn't breathe. I felt like there wasn't enough air in the world to fill the spaces inside of me that Wallace left behind."

Jay remembered when Paul had come to him in the intensive care unit and told him about Lucy. Jay had known, of course; on some visceral, primitive level. He'd understood almost from the moment he'd regained consciousness that Lucy was gone. The pain of the admittance had been crippling and he had gasped for breath. It had felt like an enormous slab of granite dropped across his chest, crushing the wind from him.

"I wanted to die," Marie said, and Jay understood, because he had wanted that himself. God, so desperately, he had wished to die, to be with Lucy. Nothing had made sense without her. He had been unable to fathom how anything ever again would have purpose or reason or joy.

"It's a terrible thing to be that lonely," Marie said. She turned to Jay, taking a towel in hand and wiping soapsuds from her fingertips. "And I lived like that for a long time. I still go home to the house Wallace and I shared, and I still sit up at night sometimes and think about him. I know I'll see him again someday, and I'm looking forward to it. But two years ago, I met you and Emma, and you have come to fill a lot of those spaces inside that used to belong to Wallace."

She smiled, walking toward Jay. "I would never wish that kind of loneliness on anyone," she said, pressing her cool, damp hand against his face. "It's the kind of thing that eats you up inside like cancer. I know you feel that pain, Jay. I know you've felt it ever since you lost Lucy, and I wish with all of my heart, I could give back to you one ounce of the hope and joy you and Em have given to me."

“Marie,” Jay said quietly, touched. “I don’t—”

She pressed her fingertips against his mouth, 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.”

He blinked at her, struck mute by her earnest sincerity. She patted his cheek and then turned, walking away again. “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.” She opened the freezer 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 foil-wrapped package. She spared a glance over her shoulder toward him as she set it on the countertop. “I won’t keep it warm waiting up for you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I was an ass this morning," Jay said, standing on Jo's front stoop 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 been home from work for an hour or so, and had changed from her uniform into a pair of sweats and an old, rumpled T-shirt. Her auburn curls had frizzed from the rain during her dashes from the hospital to her car and then into her house. She'd spent a good twenty minutes rubbing her hair dry with a towel and now it framed 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 brought you these," Jay said, holding out a soaked bouquet of roses, enveloped in soggy green tissue paper. He tried to smile, even as rain trailed into his eyes, and his lips began to tremble from the chill. "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 let him stand out there all night. And he'd be right.*

She looked at his pitiful, sodden 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."

* * *

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 inwards 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 of lean muscles and finely etched lines stoked an immediate, unexpected and powerful reaction in her, snapping her mind back to her deathscape, and the pleasure he brought repeatedly, wondrously to her there.

"You know, you have a leak in your sink faucet here," he called to her, unaware of her watching him.

She jerked in abashed surprise, and hurried into the living room, her face ablaze with color. "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. Seeing him there, comfortably dressed and posed, as if he belonged in her home, her doorway, her heart, left Jo momentarily breathless.

"It's probably just a worn washer," he said. "If you want, I can run out to the hardware store tomorrow after work and get you another one."

"That would be nice," Jo said, nodding. They stood there, looking at one another in mutual, awkward silence for a moment and she knew she needed to say something. She needed to tell him about Rich. She needed him to understand. "Rich is in prison."

He blinked. "What?"

"My ex-husband, Rich. He's in prison, serving six years on a felony drug possession charge. Your brother didn't tell you that, did he?"

He shook his head, visibly dismayed. "No."

She smiled sadly. "It's alright. Don't be angry with him. He was looking out for you and your daughter. It's not the first time someone has judged me by Rich's sins."

She sat down on the couch and folded her hands in her lap. "He never hit me before the drugs," she said. "It used to be good between us. Then he started using, and he turned into someone completely different. Someone I didn't know—someone who frightened me." She glanced up at Jay. "But he couldn't have attacked me that night. He isn't even eligible for parole until next summer."

Jay went to her, dropping to his knees and slipped her hands between his own. "Jo, I'm sorry," he said, his brows lifted. "I didn't know. I was an ass this morning. All the things I said to you. I didn't—"

"It's alright," she said softly, as something in her heart softened sweetly to see the genuine implore in his eyes, the earnest remorse. Rich had always come to her full of apologies after he'd hit her, but she'd never been able to see it fully in his eyes. She'd seen instead the glittering, manic energy of a seasoned drug addict; a hollow shell of the man she'd once loved. She pressed her hand against Jay's face. "It's alright," she said again.

He leaned toward her, tilting his face, letting his mouth settle gently against hers. She kissed him back, letting her lips part, the tip of her tongue brushing against his. He cradled her face between his hands, drawing her toward him, kissing her more deeply as he uttered a soft, murmuring sound of pleasure against her mouth.

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, tangling her fingers in his hair as he slipped his hand beneath the hem of her t-shirt and quickly, deftly unsnapped the front fastening of her bra. His hand was warm against her breasts, and her nipples hardened with the deliberate, wondrous friction as his fingertips played against them each in turn.

"We...we should stop," he whispered, his voice hoarse and breathless with longing, as he nuzzled her ear. She nodded in agreement, even as one hand moved, sliding against her belly, and slipped beneath the waistband of her sweatpants.

"Yes," she murmured, shifting her weight, lifting her hips so he could reach beneath her panties, drawing between her thighs, parting her, brushing against her warmth. She tightened her grip on his hair as his fingertips delved against her, exploring. "Yes, we should..."

He kissed her, muffling her voice. He moved his hand, his fingers slipping inside of her, and she moaned, pulling him closer, nearly desperate with need. She jerked at his t-shirt, pulling it up toward his neck, and felt the warmth of his skin, his belly against her.

Their hands tangled between them as 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. She tugged at his pants and shoved them down from his hips, leaving nothing between them but a brief margin of open air.

He drew away from her, poised both to kiss her again and to plunge himself deeply into her as she lay beneath him, her breath fluttering, her body trembling with eager anticipation.

He's right. We shouldn't do this, Jo thought. It's too soon. It can't be right yet, no matter how it feels. It can't—

Jo caught his face in her hands, pulling him down toward her, pressing his mouth against hers, abandoning her reservations. She wanted this—wanted him. She had wanted him from the moment she'd turned and seen him in the parking lot at the hospital.

He slid into her easily, and she arched her back, moaning against his mouth as she drew him in further. He 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; she matched his every move, writhing beneath him, her breath coming in urgent, quickening gasps.

She had no idea how long they made love. She was aware of the clatter of falling objects, breaking glass as they moved about on the couch and knocked 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 him to a tremendous climax that left him crying out, his head thrown back with pleasure. When she found simultaneous release, her entire body tightened against him, within and without.

She slumped against him, trembling, as Jay held her near, stroking his hand against her hair. She looked back over her shoulder and saw magazines knocked off the coffee table to the floor. A glass vase that held a scented pillar candle and decorative gravel had tumbled, spilled and broken. Throw pillows were tossed off the sofa and scattered about. Their clothes lay draped and thrown haphazardly in every direction.

She giggled, covering her mouth with her hand to stifle a snort. "Wow!"

He glanced around them, his face glossed with a light sweat, and snickered. "Jesus," he said, and Jo laughed aloud. "I'll buy you another one of those candle things."

He turned, the tip of his nose brushing hers, and when he smiled, she felt any defenses she had left completely crumble. "You forgive me, then?" he whispered. "My apology is accepted?"

She touched his face, pulling him toward her. "I'm working on it," she said, and kissed him.

* * *

By the time Jay returned to his brownstone, it was just 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—and he's in prison. 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. The brownstone had a spare bedroom that Marie was welcome to use as her own, but she always refused his offers to become their live-in housekeeper. She said she still couldn't bear to part with the house that she and Wallace shared, and preferred to spend her nights there, in the bed she'd known for more than thirty years.

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. She had a fear of the dark rooted in her early childhood, she'd once told Jay. Even when she was asleep, she kept lamps lit at home.

Under normal circumstances, Marie might have brought Emma to Paul's house, if she had plans, until Jay was able to pick her up. A note to this effect would be on the

kitchen countertop, along with a gentle but firm admonishment for not calling to let her know of his delay.

But tonight, Marie not only knew he'd be late—she'd condoned it. *Then 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, and snatched 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 slipped and stumbled into something on the floor. He crashed to his knees, and his thrumming hands hit the polished wood floor. It was as if twin spears of molten heat seared upward through his arms, shuddering through his shoulders.

God, please, he thought, gasping for breath and shoving the heels of his hands against his eyes as if to contain the monstrous force shuddering through him. *Please help me!*

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 still and prone 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. He could see now that he had slipped in blood. It was pooled on the floor, standing out starkly against the pale planks of wood. Marie’s skirt was jerked up and bunched around her waist, and her underpants lay in a pale tumble beside her. She had been stabbed so many times, the front of her light-colored blouse was stained dark.

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 cheeks. He gasped sharply as pain seized his chest, tightening throughout him, crushing the breath and voice from him. His head snapped back as his eyes turned up toward the ceiling. Briefly, he caught a glimpse of someone in the adjacent dining room; the shadowy figure of a man sitting in a chair, waiting for Jay, 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 EIGHT

Jay came to with a start, his eyes flying wide, his breath caught in bewildered surprise as he blinked 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 IV 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 felt 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 fluttered 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, making her wince. "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 in soft anguish.

"What have I done?" he gasped. 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, shaking the entire bed, 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..."

* * *

"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 in the wonderful world of municipal bureaucracy, such things took time. 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. It was an older Ford Taurus with tires matching the type that had left prints at Veronica Leyton's waterfront crime scene, but that was of little comfort or consequence without the suspect to go with them. Gambit wasn't due to work again until the following morning, and although 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. With only Jo's testimony to collaborate, Gambit wasn't officially a suspect yet. For the time being, he was simply a "person of interest" in the case, a fact Paul's fellow task force member, Detective Dan Pierson, kept unnecessarily pointing out to him.

"I just don't see why we're wasting time and manpower here, surveying the hospital, when we've got nothing on him to begin with," Pierson said, his voice over the phone grating on Paul's already-frayed nerves like fingernails squealing on a chalkboard. They were both vying for Detective Sergeant promotions, and Paul knew it burned

Pierson's ass that Paul's position as the head of the task force likely meant he'd get the nod first.

"We're here because I say we're here, Pierson," Paul replied. "And we're staying here until I damn well say otherwise." He snapped his phone closed with a swift, angry gesture and shoved it forcefully into his blazer pocket.

Pierson had been making trouble for him, and Paul knew it. He'd repeatedly been called into his lieutenant's office since his appointment to the task force and asked about certain expenditures and requests he'd filed. These were actions well within the parameters of his authority, but Paul had to explain himself anyway. He knew that Pierson had been the one to put such bugs in the lieutenant's ear. *Anything to make me look like a dumbass.* He'd probably be getting a call about the hospital surveillance operation, too. *Terrific.*

He paced 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. They hadn't needed to for three days. 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 one of his neighbors, and they had called the police. They 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 psychiatric ward, under close observation. The doctors said it was shock, a sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome, that kept her from speaking. She was aware of the world around her, but no longer seemed interested in it.

It's all my fault.

They were at a loss to explain the massive amounts of Marie's blood on the floor because, by the time the police arrived, she was alive again and unharmed. Her doctors surmised that she must have had a bleed-out from whatever had caused her irreversible and catastrophic brain injury.

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.

* * *

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 toward him and opening his eyes slowly. He blinked 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 a cruel, unresponsive and sadistic 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 fluttering open again. "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," Jay groaned, his brows furrowed. "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 Hospital. Marie was attacked. You—"

"I know what happened," Jay said, the furrow between his brows deepening. "I...I remember. He was there, at my house, waiting for me. You...you let him get in my house."

Paul drew back from the bed, his eyes widening. "What?"

"You said it was Rich," Jay murmured. "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 him. "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."

* * *

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, I think we're going to go," Vicki said. She and the girls 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 there's no change with Marie or Emma. We've got my sister coming in for Christmas Eve dinner tomorrow night, and I..."

"Go on," Paul said, shaking his head. "What the hell. You've spent your obligatory...what... hour here this morning?"

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, and twin, angry patches of color suddenly bloomed in her cheeks.

"Nice, Paul," she said dryly. "Really tactful." She slipped a hand against each of her daughters' elbows and steered them out, marching them past him.

He could have gone after them and tried to salvage things, but he knew that would only open a can of worms best left closed. Things had not been good between him and Vicki for some time now, although he couldn't necessarily pinpoint when their relationship had begun its slow but steady deterioration. There were hard feelings and bitter resentments unspoken between them since way before he'd started working on the Watcher task force. Keeping so many long hours at work didn't help either. It wouldn't take much, a minor disagreement or inconsequential argument, to unleash the frustrations they kept repressed. The hospital

corridor, with their daughters as an unwitting audience, was probably not the best forum for confrontation.

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 a couple more years, 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 against 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 Daddy. 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. "You know how you always ask if I've caught the bad guy?" he asked quietly, pained. "Sometimes it's not that easy, kiddo. I wish it was. I really do."

Paul sighed wearily, hanging his head. "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 policeman, 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, Emma," he whispered. "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.

He blinked at her in surprise, his tears spilling down his cheeks. "I..." he began. 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 so 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 to Grandma."

Paul blinked again, startled anew. "Grandma?"

She nodded. "She talks to me sometimes in my dreams. And sometimes, she just talks to me inside of my mind. She tells me things. That's how I knew to hide under the sink, like you and Daddy used to at the farm. She told

me the bad man wouldn't find me there. And that's how I knew to stay there, that he hadn't left the house yet, even when Daddy came home."

Paul stared at her in stunned disbelief. "He stayed in the house?"

She nodded again, her eyes round. "He was waiting for Daddy. Grandma told me so. And she told me you're wrong, Uncle Paul. She said it's not your fault. You're just looking in the wrong place."

* * *

"He's not Santa Claus."

That's the message his mother had given Paul, through Emma. "Grandma said he's not Santa Claus," the little girl had said, looking up at him with wide, earnest eyes. Paul reminded himself that Emma was just a little girl, due to turn six on the day after Christmas. She was a traumatized child who dreamed that her grandmother spoke to her. He shook his head, astounded that he'd given the message credence even for a fleeting moment.

"I'll keep that in mind, kiddo," he told Emma, leaning over and pressing his lips against her brow. "You want me to have them bring you a snack? Something to drink?"

"Some apple juice, please," Emma replied, and she wrapped her arms around Paul's neck, kissing his cheek. "I love you, Uncle Paul."

I'm glad someone does, Paul thought, as he waited for the elevator. 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 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.

* * *

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've got to be on shift 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," she said. "We have company."

He glanced to his left and realized with surprise that Emma lay curled 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 whispered, his voice choked.

"You're welcome," Jo said, walking toward the adjacent bathroom.

He listened as water began running in the shower. He stroked Emma's hair and canted his face, leaning forward to kiss her. She murmured, wriggling beside him somewhat, and opened her eyes sleepily, blinking at him. "Hi, Daddy," she whispered.

Jay smiled. "Hi, lamb."

"Are you all better now?" she asked.

"I'm working on it," he replied, dropping her a wink.

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 off again himself, and he started at her soft voice, opening his eyes. "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. The bad man killed him, too."

For a moment, Jay thought he was dreaming, the conversation sounded so absurd. And then he remembered, and he blinked, his breath drawing sharply still, as if he'd just been doused with ice water. "How do you know about that?" he whispered.

"Grandma told me," she said. "She told me about Skittles, and about Danny Thomas. Eileen O'Connell, too—and the other time, at the funeral home."

He couldn't breathe. He felt his stomach wrench in a sudden, painful knot, and he gasped softly, pained. "Emma," he said, stunned and aghast. He sat up, cradling her face between his hands. "How do you know about that? Did...did your Uncle Paul tell you?"

How could he do this? he thought, distraught. *Jesus Christ, Paul, she's just a kid! A little girl! How could you tell her about all of that—about me?*

"It wasn't Uncle Paul," Emma said. "I told you—it was Grandma. I had a dream I was at the farm and she told me. She said that's why I could talk to her, because of what

happened. Because at the funeral home, after she'd died, you touched—"

"Stop it!" Jay gasped, his hand darting out, pressing against Emma's mouth. He was so horrified, he was shaking. He thought he might vomit. *She was just a baby, only two years old when that happened! She can't remember that! She can't!*

"Emma, I...I don't want you to talk about it, okay? It...it was a long time ago. No more."

Emma blinked at him, looking puzzled as he drew his hand back. He was still trembling, and shoved his fingers through his hair in a vain effort to disguise that fact. "It scares you, doesn't it?" she whispered. "What you can do."

"Emma, that's enough," Jay said. He swung his legs around and crawled slowly, feebly out of bed. His legs felt impossibly weak, and he struggled to keep his balance, leaning heavily against the chair Jo had slept in.

"It's not your fault, Daddy," Emma said. "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 bad man who hurt Jo and Marie. He was still there. He heard you coming up the stairs and he hid. He wasn't finished yet. He hadn't gotten her pants off."

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 watching her anymore."

Jay pressed his hand against his mouth. He couldn't repress the vile, bitter taste that had risen from the back of his throat.

"He's going to keep doing it, Daddy," Emma whispered, her eyes wide with fear. "He's not going to stop. Now he wants to watch you."

Jay grabbed the washbasin from his bedside table and jerked it beneath his chin just as his stomach wrenched and he vomited violently. He crumpled from the chair to his knees, and leaned over, heaving the frothy contents of his empty gut.

* * *

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.

"Goddammit," 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.

"Goddammit," he hissed, 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.

"Daddy? Is Mom with you?"

He blinked. "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 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 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 badly, 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 not there with you?"

"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 flavor 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, Daddy. She said she wouldn't be gone long, only a couple of hours or so."

Paul had poured himself a styrofoam 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 cup 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."

"Shit!" Paul hissed, darting 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.

"Daddy?" Bethany asked, sounding alarmed now.

"Bethany, I want you to listen to me," Paul said, opening his desk drawer and pulling out the leather shoulder harness for his sidearm. "I want you to make sure all of the doors are locked, and then you and M.K. just sit tight. Don't go outside for anything—not even to get the mail, do you understand? And don't open the door for anyone unless you talk to me first and I tell you it's okay."

"Daddy, what's going on? Is Mom okay?" Bethany's voice warbled with tears, and Paul paused, softening at the sound of her fear.

"Mom's fine, sweetheart," he said gently. "I'm going to the hospital right now. I bet she's just fallen asleep there with Emma. I just...one lost Frances woman is all I can handle at a time, okay? That's why I need you and M.K. to just stay put."

"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 daughters. He cursed under his breath as he hurried outside for his truck.

CHAPTER NINE

Jo darted out of the bathroom when she heard Jay retching. She'd just finished her shower and changed into her white uniform scrub pants and tunic. She was barefooted, and skittered against the wet linoleum of the hospital room floor, finding Jay on his hands and knees beside his bed, a wash basin beneath his face. He'd finished vomiting, but his arms were trembling; his entire body was wracked with shudders.

"Jay, oh, my God!" she exclaimed, kneeling beside him. "What happened? Why are you out of bed?"

She looked up at Emma, who sat cross-legged on the bed, 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," she said, touching his shoulders. "You shouldn't be out of bed yet. You're still too weak. What happened?"

He shook his head and spat one last mouthful of spittle into the basin. "Nothing," he whispered, his voice feeble and hoarse. "I just felt sick to my stomach, that's all. I got out of bed to reach the pan."

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. "Stay here," she said, and she turned, reaching

for his bedside table and grabbing a pair of latex gloves from a box. She slipped her hands into the gloves and then picked up the wash basin. There wasn't much inside; Jay hadn't had any solid food in days. She carried the pan into the bathroom and rinsed it out in the toilet.

When she returned, she found Emma still watching her with that odd, creepy expression, her gaze fixed on Jo. She glanced at Jay, hoping he'd notice his daughter's attention and say something to make it stop, but he had his eyes closed, his hand pressed against his forehead.

"He was wearing all white, too," Emma said suddenly, still studying Jo. "And he had gloves on like those."

Jay opened his eyes, at last following her gaze.

"Who?" Jo asked.

"The man," Emma said. "The bad man, the one 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. She looked to Jay for rescue and this time, he caught her cue.

"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 Gambit, 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 pulling her hair back into a ponytail. She was ready to get to the floor and begin working; to lose herself in her duties. It was the only escape she'd ever found or enjoyed, and all of a sudden, she needed it desperately.

She stepped out of the bathroom again, fresh-faced and pulled together again. She wasn't due on the ward for another half an hour, at least, but she didn't care. She would 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?"

"Thanks for staying with me, Jo," Jay said quietly, sounding weary. He reached out and caught her

momentarily by the fingertips, giving her arm an affectionate shake.

She smiled at him. "You're welcome, Jay."

* * *

She was surprised to meet Charles Toomis in the corridor. She'd been on her way to the elevator; he'd apparently just stepped off of it. "Hey, you," she said, surprised and somewhat bewildered. "I was just on my way up to the floor."

"Hey, you," he replied, looking equally puzzled. "You're going now?" He glanced at his watch. "It's not even quarter 'til yet. Besides, they sent me to find you. The police, I mean; I ran into them downstairs. Some bald guy with a detective's badge asked if I knew you. I told him yeah, I'd track you down. I'd seen your car outside and figured you'd be up here."

"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 purse upside down, emptying its 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, idly and helplessly, like some damsel in distress while the police went after Gambit.

"He wants to see you. He's downstairs waiting. I told him I'd walk you down there."

"Alright," she said, with a shrug.

"He said it was urgent," Charles said. "He looked pretty upset, Jo."

She hadn't said a word to Charles about what was going on, and felt badly about it. He knew something was up; she could tell by the expectant way he kept looking at her, as if he was waiting for her to let him in on the whole story.

"You're not in any trouble, are you?" he asked, as they stepped onto the elevator together. There were several other people already aboard, and they moved to the rear of the car.

"No," Jo said, managing a laugh. "Don't be silly, Charles. He and Jay had a quarrel yesterday, that's all. He probably just wants to find out how Jay's doing without losing face with him. You know how guys are."

This seemed to satisfy Charles, because he laughed. "Yeah, we're all a bunch of pissing-contest contenders," he remarked, and the guy standing next to him overhead and chuckled. "You know, I haven't seen anything of Nathan Gambit since the other day." Charles glanced at Jo. "How about you? Is he steering clear?"

Jo thought of Paul and the police officers currently positioned about Metro Hospital. *God, I hope not*, she thought.

* * *

“Well, hey, nice of you to join us, Frances,” Detective 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? I know I, for one, would have liked a little extra shut-eye, too, this—”

“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 psychiatric 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 had spent the night on the third floor with her father at her doctor’s permission.

“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 a quarter ’til eleven. 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 frame. 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 dutch with the old lady, 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 white, 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 burly nurse together in mid-stride. The height was right; the build was, too. Nathan Gambit was a big kid, Jo had said. 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 Bishop 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'm going straight to Captain Brady, you son of a bitch, and I'll see to that."

"Yeah, get bent," 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, brawny 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 at the bus stop and damn near bumped into him, he says."

Paul couldn't help but smile slightly, pleased. He'd suspected possible car troubles when Gambit's car had been found abandoned in the lot. He'd been keeping an officer on watch at the nearest bus stop at Greere Street, just in case Gambit decided to take public transit in to work. It was a decision that Pierson had deemed an unnecessary expenditure.

He 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. If Paul confronted him, he doubted Gambit would admit to doing anything to Vicki, and he'd have nothing to even bring him

in for questioning about, much less arrest him. 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!"

* * *

“Daddy?”

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. Dark shadows framed his eyes, and his hair was dull, dirty and disheveled. Water ran in thin rivulets down the length of his forehead, following the lines of his brow and nose toward the taper of his chin.

“Daddy?” 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, lamb,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I was—”

“Daddy, *shhhh!*” Emma hissed, grabbing him by the hand. He blinked down at her, startled, and realized she was ashen with fright, her large, dark eyes threatening to swallow her entire face.

“What is it?” he whispered, genuflecting before her. He pressed his hands to her cheeks. “Emma, what’s wrong?”

“Listen,” Emma said, cutting her eyes toward the door. Jay turned, cocking his head, straining to hear whatever had distressed her so terribly. He could hear voices outside in the corridor, Jo speaking with a man.

At this realization, the tension that had suddenly seized him loosened, and he sighed. "Emma, it's just Jo," he said, rising to his feet again. He leaned heavily against the doorframe in the process, still feeling impossibly weak and weary. "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 breath and voice caught in his throat, 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 jerking her against him. He embraced her fiercely, and scuttled backwards, kicking with his feet, pushing himself into the bathroom.

"Daddy...!" Emma whimpered.

"Shhh!" 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 when he moved his hand away, her voice small and filled with fright. She met

his gaze, her eyes enormous and glistening with tears.

"Daddy, it's him—the bad man, the one who hurt Marie."

He nodded. "I know," he whispered. *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.

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. He saw two people dressed in white stepping onto an awaiting car—Jo, unmistakable with her long, auburn curls caught back in a ponytail, and a large, brawny man he'd never seen before. Jo seemed completely unafraid to be in the man's company, and as the elevator doors closed, he saw Jo laugh and slap the man 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? He had her so shaken up the other day, she was jumping at shadows. 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 TEN

"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, man! 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?" he gasped. "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 whacked on crack!"

"I am the cops, Gambit," Paul said, leaning over, nose-to-nose with the younger man. "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 pissed his pants.

"Oh, Jesus, what are you doing?" Gambit whimpered. "I don't know anything about your wife, man. 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 pistols and thumbed off their safeties. Seven steady pistol barrels pointed at Gambit.

"Jesus!" he whimpered.

"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 the young man pull a plastic inhaler out of his pocket. He took a long, loud gust from it and 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 nursing aid. 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 on Tuesday. 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 Jo 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. He held it up cautiously. "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."

"What's your interest in her?" Pierson asked, and Gambit's eyes widened.

"I'm not interested in her!" he exclaimed. "Jesus, 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, his swift stride quickly 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."

"Listen, Jay," 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 building, 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-doored 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 downward, 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. Abruptly, a man dressed in nurse’s whites, thick, heavysset, and mustached, pulled her roughly backward, keeping one hand clamped around her arm.

Paul shoved forward, calling out, “Someone hold that elevator!” In that second, he met Jo’s eyes and the confusion in her gaze yielded to alarm as the doors slid shut. She was gone.

* * *

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.

He passed the laundry on the way to the basement 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 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 toward the upper floors. 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!* "Jobeth 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 the Watcher 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; 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. 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, darting for her. He fell to his knees before her, touching her face. "I'm here," he whispered, his eyes flooding with tears. "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—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 white leaning over, picking up Paul's fallen pistol, the gun Paul had taken away from Pierson.

"Why, thank you kindly, Detective Frances," the man in white 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.

* * *

"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. They had been soaked with Marie's blood, and had probably either been taken as evidence or destroyed. He 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 take Mr. Cuddles and 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, clutching the phone in one hand and Mr. Cuddles in the other. Her eyes still gleamed with frightened tears. "Where are you going, Daddy?"

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 the bad man is down there," Emma whispered.

"I know," Jay said. "I can't let him hurt Jo or Uncle Paul, lamb."

"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. He didn't understand how she could know the things she knew. She still insisted his mother told her somehow from beyond the grave. At first, he'd found the idea preposterous. And yet, he found himself at a loss to explain it otherwise — and more and more desperate to understand. "Emma, how does Grandma talk to you?"

"In my dreams sometimes," she replied. "And sometimes, just in my head, I can hear her voice, or she shows me things."

"Can she show you where Uncle Paul is?" Jay said. "Can you ask her that, Emma?"

Jesus Christ, I can't believe I'm asking my daughter to talk to my dead mother, he thought. If it hadn't been for what Emma said earlier that morning...

Grandma said that's why I could talk to her, because of what happened. Because at the funeral home, after she'd died, you touched —

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 with Mom. Paul wouldn't have told her—I know he wouldn't. That only leaves Mom...only Mom would have known.

"Grandma said 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. She showed me inside my head. I saw Uncle Paul there, walking around, looking at a little paper clock. I saw Aunt Vicki, too, sitting in a chair."

"Vicki?" Jay asked, blinking.

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*, he thought. *Some rescue I'm going to be.*

"Daddy...!" Emma whimpered, frightened by his stumbling.

"I'm alright, lamb," he said, forcing a smile for her. "I'm 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 belly. "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 ELEVEN

Jay stepped off the elevator in the hospital basement and looked around, trying to get his bearings. His hands weren't thrumming yet, and he took that as a good sign, however feeble. *At least no one's dead yet. There's still hope, then. There's got to be!*

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, blinking at 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 as the room spun. "A tall guy, thinning hair, blue eyes?"

Both women shook their heads. Again, the larger one 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 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, and lost his footing. He stumbled and fell, his fragile equilibrium disturbed. He crumpled to his knees, smashing them against the concrete floor, and he grimaced.

"Hello, Jay Frances," the man said, and Jay looked up to see him standing before him, the man 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. He was large, tall and brawny, but the swell of his paunch above the waistband of his white nursing pants hinted that his build wasn't all muscle. He had sandy brown hair, large eyes and a mustache that followed the contour of his upper lip in an

upturn as he smiled at Jay. "My name is Charles Toomis. It's nice to meet you at last. Jo's told me so much about you."

Charles had Jo, one large hand closed in a fist in her hair, forcing her head back toward his shoulder. 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, pleading with him. She mewled around her gag, twisting her hands vainly, desperately against the tape.

"Let her go," Jay said, staggering to his feet. 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 the Watcher's. "Let her go, you son of a bitch."

"No," the man, Charles, replied. The distinctive click of a gun safety being thumbled off drew Jay's attention, and brought his clumsy stride to an immediate halt. Charles 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 quietly, holding out his hands. "Please

don't hurt her. Don't hurt any of them. The police are coming. They're on their way."

Charles spared a quick, dubious glance around him and then nodded once. "Well, then, we'd better hurry."

He moved so quickly, Jay didn't have time to react. Charles shoved Jo forward, knocking her forcefully to the floor. She cried out, her voice cut off abruptly as the side of her face smacked against the concrete, stunning her into silence. Charles 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 Charles swung the pistol up and out, directing the barrel at him. "Don't hurt her," Jay said. "Please. I'll do whatever you want. Whatever you want."

"What I want is to watch," Charles 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.

"You don't understand," Jay whispered, holding his hands out in supplication. "What happened before with Jo...it doesn't happen like that. It's never happened like that. I can't bring them all of the way back."

"Then why do you do it?" Charles asked. He spoke quietly, calmly, almost as if asking Jay why he preferred one

brand of coffee to another, and with the sort of soothing cadence best reserved for a good bedside manner.

Jay shook his head helplessly. "I can't stop it," he said. "It just happens. I can't control it. Please don't do this."

Charles' brows lifted sympathetically. "I wish I didn't have to," he said. "But I can't stop, either. I can't control myself. You and I, we're like brothers in arms, both of us playing God. I knew that the first time I saw you, the things you can do. It's like we're a coin—heads and tails, darkness and light, life and death. Both of us helpless to stop."

He pressed the pistol to Jo's head again, and she squirmed against his weight. "No!" Jay cried. "God, no—stop! You don't understand! 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!" Charles shouted, the calm, soothing manner vanishing abruptly. His brows furrowed and his face flushed, twisting with bright, sudden fury. "It's what I do, and it's what you do, too! I've practiced until perfection, but you—you pathetic son of a bitch—you cringe and cower from it." He sneered, his voice rising in shrill, mocking octaves. "Please don't do this. Oh, you don't understand. I can't bring them all of the way back. It's worse than death!"

He glared at Jay, his eyes blazing with outrage, his brows knotted. "You'd better learn, like I did, Jay Frances," he seethed. "Because when I'm finished, I'm going to make you choose—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 toward

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*

"Maybe you can raise them all. Maybe only one, maybe two." Charles shrugged. "We'll soon see. But that won't be the end of it. Practice makes perfect, Jay, and the world is a big place. I'm going to watch you do it again and again. Because that's what I do, Jay. Like I said, we're brothers."

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 from his face, blinking in bewilderment. He smelled the acrid stink of fresh gunpowder in the air; his eyes smarted from its sting. He saw Jo laying blinking at

him, her face ashen. She squirmed slightly, her voice escaping around her gag in a garbled tangle of sounds.

"Jo!" Jay gasped, scrambling to get his feet beneath him. He saw Charles lying sprawled behind her, nearly spread-eagle across the floor. The front of his white uniform shirt had a growing stain of dark scarlet 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.

Paul stumbled to his feet, reeling unsteadily. "Are you alright?" Jay asked, and Paul shook his head dismissively.

"He kicked me," he said. "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 Charles' prone form, keeping the gun trained on him. "Stay back, Jay," he said, as Jay started toward Jo. By now, she was trying to get away from Charles, and struggling desperately against her bonds. "Let me get his gun first."

He stood beside Charles' body and moved to kick the pistol out of Charles' hand and across the corridor. When

Charles' 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, shaking his head. "Oh...oh, God, no...!"

A glance over his shoulder told him why his hands were thrumming so urgently. Charles Toomis was dead, the floor behind and beneath him splattered with the spongy

remnants of his brain, and a widening pool of his blood. Jay felt himself being pulled toward Charles' fallen body; his hands ached to go to him, settle against him.

"Paul...!" he whimpered helplessly, staring 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 Charles Toomis. *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 Charles, 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 Charles' face and his head snapped back, his eyes turning up toward the ceiling.

He saw Charles' deathscape, a vivid and violent montage of images flashing through his mind. He saw Charles' 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, bulbous, nearly grotesque 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 Charles Toomis 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 Charles 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 Charles standing beneath one bulb, his thick, 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," Charles 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 Charles' climax subsided, so, too, did its death throes as it strangled. It slumped to a limp, lifeless pile on the floor.

"You...you sick son of a bitch," Jay whispered, backpedaling.

Charles nodded. "Yes, I am," he said, still smiling. "And you're going to bring me back."

"No," Jay gasped, shaking his head. He stumbled 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 Charles laughed at him.

"Yes, you are, Jay. You can't control it. You can't stop yourself. It's what you do." Charles 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. Charles was right; this was what he did. It was beyond his control.

"I told you, Jay," Charles 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 Charles' blood-smeared hand pressed against his own, and his brows furrowed. He looked up, meeting Charles' gaze, seeing the hateful, sadistic triumph that gleamed in his dark eyes. The corner of Charles' mouth lifted in a crooked, victorious little smile, and a new heat — fury — stoked within Jay.

"Fuck you, Charles," he seethed, planting his free hand against Charles' chest and shoving mightily, sending the larger man back a surprised, stumbling step. He wrenched his hand free of Charles' grasp and balled his hands into fists. "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, and 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. He crumpled 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 slowly. The hideous deathscape of blood and violence was gone, and he found himself in the hospital basement again, crouched near Charles' dead body. "Jesus!" he gasped, scuttling back, shoving Charles 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 Charles, 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 fluttered, drooping closed, and as his breath escaped him 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 lay still, his chest falling motionless. As his life waned, Jay felt the energy within his hands stoke a thousandfold, and he wept, leaning toward his brother's face, speaking against Paul's ear as he died. "I'm with you," he gasped. "I'm right behind you, Paul. Please don't be scared. I'm right behind you. I can do—"

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.

* * *

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, and basked 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 always found her 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. Charles Toomis', 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 four inches 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 canted his face back. He watched smoke curl in soft, spiraling tendrils from the farmhouse's chimney. The air was bitterly cold, stinging his face, and he blinked 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 squall 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.

Jay opened the front door and walked into his house. Warmth immediately pressed against his face; 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.

It had been three years since Dolores Frances had died, and yet she stood there washing dishes, as youthful and alive as she'd ever been. Her greying blond 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, an unwilling marionette powerless against the command of a cruel puppeteer. 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!" he gasped against her sleeve. "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 towards 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," he said.

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 blinked at him, 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 softened with sorrow, that he clearly recalled now. After a moment, the sorrow 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," Paul replied. "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 Thomas or Eileen O'Connell," Paul said quietly, 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," Paul said.

"I can," Jay insisted. "I wouldn't let it make me raise Charles Toomis 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," he said. "I can do this. I know I can. Take my hand. Come back with me."

CHAPTER TWELVE

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 wanting to tremble; his eyes kept 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, touching his shoulders and he looked up at her, trembling and miserable.

"Jay, I'm sorry," she breathed, pressing her hand against the back of his head and drawing him against her shoulder. She kissed his ear as he wept, and stroked his hair, murmuring soft, comforting sounds.

"Daddy, I found this in one of our boxes," Emma said, coming into the room. She didn't have anything black to wear, but Jo had found a pretty red velvet dress, and helped her braid her long, dark hair into twin plaits adorned with bows to match. 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 four 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 brushed the cuff of his hand against her cheek and smiled. "I think she'd like it very much, Emma."

* * *

Marie had died eleven days after Charles Toomis — the Watcher — 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 was discontinued. She lingered less than seventy-two hours before passing once again. This time, Jay had taken no

chances. He 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.

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 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 toward 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. She thought cigarettes were stinky.

Uncle Paul had quit more than a year ago, and she thought he'd smelled much better ever since. "They make your clothes smell awful, Uncle Paul," she told him pointedly. "Your breath, too. And Marie told me once they give people cancer."

She'd dropped her voice and whispered the word *cancer* just the way Marie had used to, as if cancer was something contagious just from the mere mention. Paul smiled at her, amused and charmed.

"I'll quit again," he said.

"When?" Emma asked.

"Soon," he promised, and when she didn't avert her stern, disapproving gaze, he laughed. "Jesus, tomorrow, then. Okay? I'll quit tomorrow."

Emma smiled at him. "Okay."

Paul draped his arm across her shoulders and pulled her close in a brief but fond embrace. "It's cold out here, kiddo," he said. "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 he felt that way. She could see it in his face. And her grandmother had told her.

She slipped her hand against Paul's, twining her fingers through his. She knew this was only the start of things to come for him. Her grandmother had told her that, too. *He's going to need you, Emma*, Grandma had said. *He doesn't realize it yet, but he will. He'll need us both — 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, her grandma's voice echoing softly in her mind. *He'll need us both — and soon.*

"I know you are, Uncle Paul," she said. "You're the toughest man I know."

* * *

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 smoking," Jay remarked.

Paul glanced at him, the corner of his mouth lifting wryly. "It's either this or divorce," he said, waggling the cigarette demonstratively. He drew it to his mouth and took a long, deep drag. "And right now, this is cheaper."

Things with Vicki had almost been good again, at least for the first twelve hours after the shooting. She hadn't asked for the truth about what had happened, about Jay resurrecting Paul, and Paul hadn't 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 between them. They had enjoyed some heated lovemaking in the first day following the shooting, the sort of reckless, passionate sex they hadn't shared in at least a decade. But then, reality settled in, and with it had come a whole new set of baggage to weigh them down. Toomis hadn't raped Vicki, but he had terrorized her deeply during the hours he'd held her captive. She'd watched him shoot her husband right in front of her — and no matter what Paul or Jay said, she knew she'd seen Paul die. It would probably take years of therapy — if even then — before she would be able to sleep a night through without waking up soaked in sweat and crying out in terror.

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 the front page of *USA Today*. 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 knew it, too. Neither one of them had mentioned divorce specifically yet, but it was probably certain. They had taken separate cars to the funeral that day. Paul's change of clothes were hanging on a hook in his new office, not in his closet at 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 glanced at him. "How are you doing?"

"Alright," Jay said, and it wasn't a complete lie. 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. Even now, he felt easily exhausted; even the most mundane of activities left him weary and winded.

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," he breathed.

The back door opened suddenly, startling them, and Paul's daughter, Bethany came out onto the deck. "Daddy," she said. "M.K. took one of your cigarettes out of the pack in your coat pocket, and she's going to go smoke it on the front porch with Marie's nephew."

"Where's your mother?" Paul asked.

"In the bathroom," Bethany replied. "Daddy, he's seventeen. I just saw him put his hand on her butt."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Paul muttered, rolling his eyes. He followed his daughter back toward the door, 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."

* * *

Later that evening, long after everyone else had gone home, and Emma had been snuggled into bed for the night, 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 sometimes kept the nightmares awaydreams in which she felt Charles' hand close against her arm, or the gun shoved against her head as his finger curled around the trigger.

Sometimes she wondered if she would ever trust anyone again. She'd thought the greatest, deepest betrayal she'd ever know had come from her ex-husband, Rich, when she'd learned the truth about his drug addiction, and when he'd first begun to beat her. She'd thought that would surely be the worst of things to come for her, but then Charles had eclipsed that in horrifying, brutal measure. She was afraid to trust again, to find any sense of security or comfort. Who knew when someone else would come along and destroy it in an even crueler fashion?

"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 she didn't regret it for a moment. But still, there was that portion of her that

remained fearful of growing too close to him, of trusting him — or anybody else — that much again.

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. Darkness still terrified her — and Emma, too. They left lights burning all over the house, day and night, and the soft, warm glow from the nearby dining room crept through the bedroom doorway and glistened in Jay’s eyes. He smiled and her heart softened, that frightened, anxious place inside of her finding sudden, unexpected ease. 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 whispered, touching his face, making his smile widen. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

He leaned over and kissed her, his lips settling against hers, 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."