

A man with red hair and a ribbed sweater stands in front of a wall with a large animal face. The man is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The wall behind him is dark and textured, with a large, stylized animal face (possibly a bear or wolf) visible on the left side. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

INFECTED

Prey

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Infected: Prey
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Book One

Infected

1**Welcome to the Jungle**

HE was on his third beer of the evening when he thought he heard a noise in the backyard.

Hank DeSilvo scowled and looked out the window over the kitchen sink full of dirty dishes. He could see nothing but darkness, and maybe a bit of reflected light from the television. This was probably a bad time to remember the back porch light had blown out two days ago, and he'd forgotten to replace it.

Not that it mattered. The only light currently in the house was coming from the television, and as long as he ignored it, he developed enough night vision to make out a shape moving in the back garden. Or was it the wind moving a shrub? Kind of hard to say.

He slammed his can down with an annoyed grunt. It was probably the Hindle's stupid ass dog again, shitting all over the place and tearing through his garbage. He hated that fucking thing, some ugly Rottweiler mix that they insisted was a "friendly" dog, and yet it always had a look in its flat, black eyes that was just this side of rabid. They never leashed the damn thing either, and apparently his yard destruction was "cute." He was just about out of this fucking place and that damn thing had to make a final appearance. And it was final all right; he was going to make damn sure of that.

He went back to the living room, glancing at the game as he walked past—it was a fucking damn boring game anyway—and got his shotgun from the cabinet. It was illegal as all hell, a sawed-off thirty ought six with the barrels cut so short you could have stowed it under a jacket, but the barrels had been filed down expertly; it wasn't just the rough work of a desperate amateur but the sign of a pro. Which was why, when they'd searched the drug mule's truck and he'd found it wedged under the front seat, he hid it in his trunk and didn't report finding it. It wouldn't have added that much to the mule's sentence; he already had enough rock in his

glove compartment to put him away for the rest of his pointless life, especially if it was his “third strike” (and it was, no surprise there), and he doubted the guy was so stupid that he’d actually ask why he wasn’t charged with owning an illegally modified weapon. Yeah, he was dumb; you had to be dumb if you were speeding and had a few thousand in rock in the car, as well as being obviously stoned yourself. But asking after that was a special kind of stupid, the kind only politicians and people on reality television ever seemed to crest.

He cracked open the gun and made sure he had some shells loaded in it before snapping it shut again with a sharp flick of his wrist. Man that felt good. This was a real man’s weapon, made him feel a foot taller and made of pure muscle, and he knew why that meth fuckhead was carrying it around with him. A weapon like this was a real god-killer; it made you feel invincible.

It was pure overkill, of course. The Hindle’s dog was fairly big, and yet one shot from this gun would rip it in half clean down the middle, as well as make a boom loud enough to set off every car alarm on the block. But what the fuck did he care? He was an ex-cop; he’d say the dog charged him, and on his property he could shoot the fucking thing if he wanted. He’d swap out the sawed-off for his Remington before they arrived. Ballistics wouldn’t match, but by the time they proved that, he’d be long gone. Good-bye shit-hole city, hello tropical paradise. It was just a shame that it took him this long to collect.

He stood at the back door for a moment, cradling the shotgun gently, and let his eyes get adjusted to the dark before going out onto the concrete patio. He had a mini Maglite with him with a red lens over the bulb, so if there was something he needed to see he could twist it on without losing his night vision. Not that he needed to make a direct hit; even if he just winged the dog, he’d probably rip half its face off, maybe a leg.

First step off the patio his foot squelched in something; it felt too liquid to be shit, but the smell that hit him was meaty, redolent of shit and offal and God knew what else. Had that fucking dog already strewn his garbage about? Goddamn it.

Holding the shotgun in one arm, he turned on the flashlight and looked down at what he’d stepped in.

At first it looked like a puddle, which didn’t make sense since it hadn’t rained in a week, and the thought that it was dog piss was

dismissed since it was dark, and dog piss wasn't usually black. Or was that red-black? Swinging the light outwards, he saw greasy, ropey strands that couldn't have come from his garbage can, and then a big hunk of raw, bloody meat like a lamb shank ... only it was too long and thin to be a shank, too dark, and ended in a paw.

It was a Rottweiler leg.

Someone—*something*—had dismembered the Hindle's psychotic dog and spread about a third of it all over his backyard. He saw the leg, which was the biggest piece, an assortment of internal organs, loops of intestines laid out like fallen party streamers, and lots of blood. But where was the other two thirds of the dog?

The hair stood up on the back of his neck, and he knew he had to get the fuck inside now. But as he turned, shotgun at the ready and braced against his hip, he saw the flash of white teeth in the dim moonlight, and his brain sent out the impulse to pull the trigger.

He didn't have time to wonder why it never happened as the teeth ripped open his throat.

ACCORDING to the movies and several TV shows of questionable reputation, being a private detective was a thrilling occupation, or at least a somewhat exotic one. Roan wondered if that was ever true.

Right now he was just awash in the exotic drama. He was seeing the sunrise coming up over the freeway as he fought off yet another yawn, and forced himself to gulp the horrible transmission fluid that the 7-Eleven laughingly called coffee in the hopes of staying awake long enough to get home. He hated living so far out in the middle of nowhere, but it was for the best for several reasons. He liked his privacy; in fact, he required it. So did Paris.

And he was coming back from his exotic case du jour, namely taking photos of a man meeting his mistress at a fleabag no-tell motel, getting enough pics of them in compromising positions (it was nice of them to go to a sleazy motel with few good photo angles and then fuck in the car) that his client was sure to have grounds for voiding their pre-nup. She'd clean up big-time in divorce court, and he'd still get nothing more than his measly hourly fee and applicable expenses. It was so much glamour he

could hardly stand it. Just add a breakfast burrito and a bad case of hemorrhoids, and boy howdy, there was the dream. Raymond Chandler, eat your heart out!

He supposed he shouldn't complain, because at least he got out in the field, even if it was in the side of town where burning cars on the side of the road had become a point of interest in the tourism brochures. Most of the work he did was background checks and credit checks, all easily done from his computer at home or in the office, and the occasional missing persons case or what Paris liked to call the "Springer cases" (cheating spouses/significant others/whatever the hell). Those Springer cases made you feel nice and sleazy, like you were a voyeur participating in the acts, but the worst thing as far as Roan was concerned was the reaction from some of those suspicious lovers/spouses when he told them their fuck buddy wasn't cheating on them. Most were relieved, which was fine, but the ones he abhorred, the ones that really made him hate the human race, were those who insisted that they *were* cheating. Either he hadn't looked hard enough or was working with the goddamn bitch/bastard. Rather than be glad, they were sure there was something wrong and that their partner couldn't be trusted.

His advice—for them to break up with their significant other and move on, because clearly they were unhappy and trying to pin the blame on their partner—was generally met with rage, snits, and threats of physical violence. He kind of hoped they would try something with him, but so far no one had.

He wondered if they knew he was one of the viral children; certainly the cops had for the very brief time he was on the force. He was pretty sure two years was more than enough time to make him anonymous again, but you could never really be certain. It didn't help that he had a freaky-ass name like Roan McKichan, an aggressively Scottish name that almost no one could pronounce properly. (For some reason, many people liked to pronounce Roan "Ro-Ann"—did he *look* like a woman?—and McKichan was usually pronounced "McKick-In" or "McKitchen." They seemed absolutely baffled that the "I" was pronounced like an "E", and it was McKee-Cann, which some people liked to tell him wasn't at all the way it was spelled.) At least he had teamed up with a man with a name even worse than his: Paris Lehane. Yes, they could easily pronounce it, but he always faced the question: "Like Paris Hilton?"

Roan liked to say yes, yes, exactly like Paris Hilton. Only he wasn't

a skanky blonde heiress with no discernible talent and a disturbing nose. Paris was a man who looked like the athlete he had been before he was infected and went a bit nuts, and he had some discernible talent. Perhaps he had the bit nuts thing in common with Hilton—she was probably so heavily medicated, you couldn't tell.

Finally Roan turned down the gravel drive leading to the house, yawning all the while, and parked behind the '68 GTO Paris had been attempting to restore in his free time. The body needed a lot of work still—there was quite a bit of rear-end damage, rust spots marring the fender, and the left side was dotted and splashed with primer—but there was no fear of anyone stealing it, because Paris had pulled out the engine to rebuild it, and it was currently spread out on a tarp on the floor of the garage. If someone wanted to steal his GTO, they'd need a tow truck.

Roan dumped out the sewer mud jokingly called coffee on the side of the driveway, then tossed the cup in his car garbage can as he grabbed the bag containing his laptop and digital camera, which were also known as the backbone of his business, and headed for the house.

He shouldered the bag as he dug out his keys, and wondered if he should bother to be quiet. It was Paris's time, more or less, right? They ran on different viral cycles, and sometimes when he got caught up in work, he'd forget. If it was his time, he'd be in the basement, so he didn't have to worry about being quiet—not for now at least. Later on Paris might be pissed at him, but he'd deal with that later, once he was rested and fully caffeinated.

But as soon as he was in the door, he knew something was wrong.

It was several things all at once. When he closed the door, a puff of wind seemed to move through the house, bringing with it a taste of fresh outside air. There was also another scent wafting after it, one of pain and the musky smell of a cat mixed inextricably with that of a human. Altogether it was like sour milk with a hint of flesh, iron, and fresh-cut grass. Not only weird, but immensely troubling. "Paris?" he asked, alarmed, putting his bag on the side table before venturing into the living room.

What awaited him there looked like the aftermath of an explosion. Half of the sliding glass door leading to the backyard had been shattered, broken glass sparkling like fractured diamonds on the slate gray outer deck, and the curtains were partially torn down, the fabric billowing in the

breeze like a collapsed sail. An armchair had been reduced to kindling with random clots of stuffing, and the coffee table was tipped over, its legs sticking up in the air like a dead insect. On the floor between the table and the couch, naked and curled up in fetal position, was Paris, semi-conscious and panting through the pain. He looked totally human, his skin slicked with sweat, but when his eyelids flickered open, Roan could see his eyes were still almost totally amber, the whites mere spots in the corner, his pupils still dark vertical slits. It was common that the eyes were the first to change and the last to go.

“I’m sorry,” Paris gasped. “I fell asleep upstairs, and when I woke up.... I tried to get downstairs, but....”

“It’s okay,” he lied. Considering Paris’s strain, him getting out was never a good thing. Not only was he quite noticeable, but the amount of damage he could do was extraordinary; they were lucky to have just lost some furniture and a sliding glass door. He hoped that was the extent of it all, but Roan was not a natural optimist. That’s why they lived out here, in the middle of nowhere, far from other people: less chance of collateral damage if everything went wrong. When you were a werecat, you always had to think about these things.

They had an emergency first aid kit in the downstairs bathroom, so he retrieved it, sorting through the contents on his way back. Most first aid kits were full of gauze, BAND-AIDs, and Neosporin, but this one was custom-made for them. That meant it was full of disposable hypodermics and lots of painkillers. After his transition, he ached, but it wasn’t too bad. Then again, he was a virus child, and they were different; the virus integrated into their DNA fully, rendering them slightly different than those who started out human and later became something else. He heard that, for them, the pain was excruciating, and often hastened their deaths. Paris seemed to be living proof of that.

He loaded up a needle with the fentanyl analogue he’d picked up last time he was in Canada. Not only was it cheaper and easier to get there, but they didn’t ask so many questions if you identified yourself as an infected. They just assumed you wouldn’t make such a thing up.

He knelt down beside Paris and stabbed the needle in his butt. He was in so much post-transition pain he didn’t even notice. He looked up at Roan, the amber receding but the pupils still slits, and said, “I’m so sorry....”

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured him. There was no point in worrying about it now; what’s done was done. He couldn’t turn back time and sling Paris in the cage in the basement.

Paris sighed and his whole body seemed to relax as the drug took effect. His muscles stopped spasming like they were trying to burst out of his skin like angry aliens, and he seemed to sag into the carpet bonelessly, not so much losing consciousness as slowly sliding out of it.

Roan grabbed the throw off the couch and spread it over him, deciding to get down on the floor and lie beside him, wrapping his arm around him for comfort. Paris leaned back into him, glad for the contact. “You don’t think I hurt anyone, do you?” he muttered, his voice fading away.

“We live in the middle of nowhere. Who could you hurt?” But even as he said it, he knew if Paris had been closer to consciousness, he would have heard the hesitation in his voice. Yes, they lived in the middle of nowhere, but it wasn’t really that far from people, and a little less than a mile away was one of those suburban housing projects that seemed to spring up like toadstools. Paris easily could have covered the distance, eaten an entire family of four, and still have had most of the night to kill. So to speak.

If only the strain reflected the character. Paris was the kind of man who wouldn’t hurt a soul, and yet he’d ended up with the fiercest strain of them all. Roan knew himself to be a darker, harder person, and yet Paris’s strain could kill his with little trouble.

Like he needed one more reminder life wasn’t fair.

2

A Western Home in the Rubble

THE ringing phone woke him out of a dreamless sleep, and the first thing that occurred to his muzzy mind was the question, why did he ache so fucking much? His arm was asleep, so it was pure dead meat, and there was a dull ache in both his shoulder and hip. Opening his eyes, he saw Paris's back, and remembered they were both on the floor of the living room. Oh, right. Had he meant to fall asleep?

The phone kept ringing, so he pushed himself up to his knees and used his one good arm to shove himself up to his feet as his asleep arm began to get that awful pins-and-needles sensation in it. He was just too old for shit like this.

Caller ID revealed the caller to be the last person he wanted to hear from right now, but the fact that he was calling was trouble itself. With a groan and a curse under his breath, he answered it. "What do you want, Sikorski?"

"Oh, and good morning to you to, Roan," Detective Gordon "Gordo" Sikorski replied with mock-cheerfulness. He was one of Roan's few friends from the police department who still talked to him, and sadly considered him an "expert" on anything relating to what was referred to as "kitty crimes." Being an ex-cop apparently made him more legitimate than anyone else, or maybe it was the fact that he was a kitty too. Possibly both. "Get up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"You could say that." He glanced back at Paris, who continued sleeping peacefully, the drugs and the exhaustion of the change keeping him so far down in unconsciousness you probably could have put a bullet in the floor by his head and he'd never have moved. Roan belatedly wondered why he hadn't given himself a shot too. "What do you want?"

He sighed. Sikorski liked to try and be friendly, liked to show how expansively liberal he was for a cop by being nice and interested in one of

Roan's kind, but Roan was too accustomed to scorn, suspicion, and outright hatred to ever trust anyone's well intentioned kindness. Paris would tell him he was far too cynical for his own good, but Roan thought he had just enough cynicism for his own good.

"We have what looks like a homicide via cat here, but there's some... oddities. I thought we could benefit from your expert opinion."

Roan closed his eyes and gently but firmly rapped his knuckles on his forehead. Yes, he was awake. "Isn't this illegal or something? Inadmissible?"

"You've been cleared by the courts. Remember, the Parvinder case? Anyways, I'm not asking for a deposition, just a... look around."

Sniff around is probably what he meant, but he wasn't about to admit it. Most of the infected had no cat skills when they weren't transformed; they were just people who had to deal with a really unfortunate problem five days a month. But as a virus child, Roan had some side effects that lingered no matter what his form, and as such he had a rather acute sense of smell and taste for a human—much too acute most of the time if you asked him, especially if he was near a men's room. "I'll contaminate your crime scene."

"It's already been locked down. And it's not that far from you either, it's on Pacific Court."

Something in his gut turned to ice, leaking liquid nitrogen into his bloodstream. "What?"

"815 Pacific Court South. That's only a couple miles down from you, right?"

He looked at Paris's sleeping form, huddled underneath the green and red plaid acrylic throw. Close enough that he could have done it last night; someone he could have killed. Although it was a stupid question, he had to ask, "Are you sure they were killed by a cat?"

Sikorski snorted derisively. "Neck torn out, nearly decapitated, gut ripped open by claws? Yeah, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say cat. You comin'?"

Roan covered the receiver as he sighed. Throat ripped out? Holy shit yes, it could have been Paris; in fact, that had just moved the victim into the most likely category. "Yeah, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

“Twenty minutes? But you’re—”

“I need my coffee,” he said, and immediately hung up.

He looked at Paris’s huddled form, aware that he didn’t look small even when he was curled up in fetal position. It was almost impossible for a guy who was six four and broad across the shoulders to ever look small. The courts sometimes made exceptions for crimes committed in cat form, simply because you were legally non compos mentis at the time, although lawmakers were always insisting that wasn’t true, and had passed a law adding legal culpability if you didn’t lock yourself up or voluntarily turn yourself over for detainment at your time of the month.

But when you became a cat, even if you were a virus child like Roan, you weren’t even remotely human anymore. The higher brain was gone—some said damaged, but he never felt brain-damaged in his human form—you couldn’t speak, couldn’t reason; you were simply instinct. And the problem was, those instincts were killer.

He knew he had to go to that crime scene now, if only to confirm or deny what Sikorski had said. If the man had been clawed in the gut first and then had his throat ripped out, he would know it wasn’t Paris who did it, and that knot in his gut could relax.

Because tigers always went for the throat first.

HE SHOWERED quickly, hardly able to stand the smell of himself, and opted for a bottle of cold Frappuccino rather than deal with the bother of brewing some. He actually hated the taste of these fucking coffee milkshakes, but the caffeine and sugar punch was powerful, and he was feeling far too wide awake and edgy by the time he drove to Morning Crest, the suburban housing enclave where Sikorski’s murder victim lived.

Pacific Court was a cul-de-sac, and 815 was the second house from the end, a small prefab that looked exactly like its neighbors in shape and design, as if someone had erected all these three-bedroom, two-bathroom dwellings with a large cookie cutter. Even the lawns, almost perfectly weed-free and cut so short they seemed scalped, looked the same. The only way to tell the houses apart, that he could see, was by the color, and 815 was painted an oddly pale, dull green, like the owner had been shooting for Army drab and ended up with a faintly pastel Martha Stewart

version of the color. In spite of the color differences, all the houses were painted in pale shades, as if bright colors were against the law.

Damn, he hated this place already, and he'd just got here.

There was a black and white in the driveway, and an ambulance that doubled as a discreet meat wagon behind it, but there was also a very plain silver-gray sedan that he knew to be an unmarked car. Probably Sikorski's, as he didn't like to be too obvious, although every slightly disreputable person on the planet knew an unmarked cop car when they saw it. Who did he think he was fooling?

Yellow crime scene tape cordoned off the backyard from the front, and a bored-looking beat cop stood near the back gate, and moved to intercept as he approached. He held out his ID to the kid, who was so young he still had a smattering of angry red acne on his left cheek. "I'm Roan McKichan, Detective Sikorski asked for me."

The boy—who couldn't have been more than twenty three—squinted at his identity card as if he expected a fraud. He was gangly, a string bean of a cop, with his hair cut so short it was as buzz-cut as the lawn he was standing on, making his head look oddly square. His almond-colored eyes were almost lost in the shadow of his prominent caveman brow. He smelled of cheap aftershave and gun oil. "Oh, you're the..." he petered off as he backed up a step.

Roan briefly considered yelling "*Boo!*" while mock-lunging at him, but he figured Barney Fife here would draw his gun and shoot him. So he settled for a withering stare that had the desired effect: the kid seemed to squirm in his police-issue shoes. He looked down at the ground as he held up the police tape, moving a few steps farther away from him. Roan sighed and shook his head as he ducked under the tape and proceeded through the gate to the backyard.

He paused as the scent of freshly shed blood hit him like a fist. Death rode its current, a sickly sweet smell like rot on top of shit, a disgusting aftertaste to the meaty, metallic tang of blood. It was hard to explain to people who had never smelled it before and didn't have his sensitive nose.

Breathing through his mouth—a terrible proposition, since he got to taste it even more vividly—he continued onward, into the backyard. It was a small, enclosed space, fenced on three sides with those thin slats of plywood that always looked like Popsicle sticks to him. Why did people get those? They could be kicked in by a toddler, so it couldn't be for

security purposes, and they were as ugly as sin, so it couldn't be for aesthetic purposes either. What was left?

There were a few shrubs, an overgrown juniper, a wild butterfly bush as large as a small tree, a birch in the corner with white, peeling bark, and a knocked-over green plastic garbage can, although the garbage had either been picked up or had remained inside it in spite of the upset. There was no obvious ingress: the cat had jumped the fence, or the victim had left the gate open or unlocked.

There was still some of the forensic team here; a short, stocky woman and a taller but equally stocky man in disposable white suits and latex gloves crouched on the poured concrete patio, doing something undoubtedly skin-crawling to the large stain of blood that had discolored the majority of the concrete.

Standing on the back lawn, amidst puddles of gore, was Sikorski, who waved him over. "Careful where you step," he said, with what seemed to be an inappropriate smile. He was a tall man, a little too solid to be called lanky, although much of his weight was starting to settle in his gut. His hair was now wire gray, with strands of his driftwood-colored hair lost among the silver. His face was open and avuncular, the crinkles in the corners of his pale blue eyes making them seem kindly, like you just knew that in a game of good cop/bad cop, he was always the good cop. He was in his late forties, although he could pass for older or younger depending on how much sleep he'd gotten and what kind of day he was having. He'd obviously had much sleep, and in spite of his day starting with a grisly homicide, it'd otherwise been dandy.

Avoiding the unmistakable puddles of blood on the ground, he noticed a change in the taste of the air. Glancing down, he asked, "It killed his dog?"

Sikorski chuckled, but it was humorless. "Damn, you're good. Only it wasn't his dog, Sherlock, it belonged to the neighbors. Its name was Amber, and it was a pretty sizable Rottweiler mix, according to the real owners. We only found about a quarter of it, mainly guts and a back leg. We're still looking for its head. The neighbors claimed they heard nothing, not even Amber barking."

"No one ever hears anything. I don't know why you bother asking." He turned toward the patio, now vacated by the last of the forensics team. The blood splash on it was enormous, a wine-dark stain that relegated the

true color of the concrete to the outer edges. “Took out the carotid and the jugular, huh?”

“In a single chomp, as far as we can tell. This sucker must have been a big one, ’cause Hank wasn’t a small guy.”

Roan glanced over his shoulder at Sikorski, studying him curiously, assiduously keeping the fear off his face. Paris was moving up continually on the suspect list. What was he going to do when reasonable doubt became a certainty? “You sound familiar with the victim.”

“I was. Well, I knew *of* him. His name was Hank DeSilvo, an ex-cop.”

“I never heard of him.”

Sikorski just shrugged, the shoulders of his slightly rumpled and wholly stereotypical trench coat barely moving. “He worked uptown patrol; you probably never ran into him. He retired out about two months ago.”

“He that old?”

“No, it was due to health issues. He’d been hospitalized twice for bleeding ulcers within the past six months, so he just hung up the badge.”

“Should guys with bleeding ulcers be drinking so much beer? I’m smelling alcohol in the blood, and somehow I doubt it was the dog.”

Again that humorless chuckle, one just north of a snicker. “That’s creepy how you do that. I don’t think it’s wise for a man with a bleeding ulcer to be drinking, but you’re right, he was; we found two empties and a third can, half full, on a coffee table inside the house. The TV was still on ESPN.”

Roan nodded, catching the splattered drops of reddish-black blood on the house’s siding. The blood’s spatter pattern seemed to indicate a quick, violent kill, a single throat bite severing several arteries at once—another possible check in the tiger column. “What’s the story, so far as you can tell?”

Sikorski cleared his throat, and his voice dropped into its “just the facts, ma’am” register. “Hank was watching the tube, having a few, when he heard or thought he saw something in his backyard. He decided to confront it, and pulled out an illegally sawed-off shotgun. He came out, but before he could fire a shot, he was pounced on and killed. That’s our

best guess at this point.”

“A pretty straightforward narrative. But even with a sawed-off, why would he come out here to confront a big cat, even if it was killing the neighbor’s dog?”

Sikorski shrugged with his hands, a helpless gesture that encompassed the crime scene. “You’ll have to file that one under the ‘I have no fucking idea’ category. If he’d only had three domestic beers, there’s no way he was too drunk to know better.”

“Maybe something else brought him out here?”

He snorted, his eyes twinkling with dark mirth. “With a sawed-off? How paranoid can one man be?”

Roan met his gaze flatly, wondering inwardly if he’d ever turn Paris in. If Paris found out about it, he’d probably turn himself in, but Roan couldn’t see handing him over to the authorities. Not for an ex-cop’s death especially; that was a good way to get to kitty heaven right quick. “I’m really not the one you should ask. And the cat wasn’t wounded and didn’t mark its territory; I smell nothing beyond blood, death, and dog here. Am I done?”

“Not quite.” Sikorski turned and motioned one of the forensics team over—the stocky woman in the disposable jumpsuit, whom he recognized, seeing her straight on. It was her dishwater-blond hair and penchant for tortoiseshell glasses that gave her away as Lise Slavin, the forensic tech everyone called “Slab.” That was apparently what passed for humor among the forensics people.

She brought over a plaster mold sealed inside a clear plastic bag, already marked and labeled as part of the evidence chain. It was a partial paw print, he could see it as Sikorski took it from Slab and handed it to him. “We got a partial print, left in bloody mud, but our so-called paw print expert left scratching his head. Do you recognize it?”

It was just a side of the main pad, and one and a half “toes”, but there was something odd about it. Maybe it was the simple distortion from stepping in mud, from the cast being made, or both, but the toe pads seemed almost thin, too close together, while the main pad seemed to indicate an almost heart-shaped curve. Not tiger, not if it was correct... but this was too partial, too inconclusive. He couldn’t say it wasn’t a tiger, not one hundred percent. He couldn’t say what it was.

He noticed Sikorski staring at his hand. “What?”

Sikorski seemed slightly startled to be caught staring. “I was just wondering what that tattoo was. Looks kinda weird.”

Roan had it on the underside of his right wrist. Done in thick black lines, Paris had described it as looking like a woman’s hairdo done in a flip—it was a sinuous curve, almost an inverted U shape, starting with a low curl at one end, the curve rising slightly, and ending in a less elaborate curl at the other end. “It’s the symbol for the astrological sign Leo,” he explained, studying the cast closer. He wanted so badly for genuine proof that cleared Paris, it seemed like a universal slap in the face that all he got was “maybes.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize you believed in that shit.”

“I don’t.” He handed him back the mold and repeated, slowly this time, “It’s the *symbol* for *Leo*.”

It took a moment, but the penny finally dropped. “*Oh!* That’s what you are, right, your strain? Lion? I get it now. Explains the hair, I suppose.”

Roan scowled, and considered punching him, but as a general rule he didn’t punch men who had the ability to arrest him unless they really asked for it. Whenever he mentioned it or someone figured out he was a lion, the jokes about his hair ensued. He had no idea if there was a correlation, but the hair on his head grew in thick and fast; a severely short haircut would last maybe two weeks, and then he’d be back to what he had now, a shoulder-length “mane” of reddish-brown hair. (For some reason the hair on his face didn’t grow in that fast, but he was glad, or he’d have to shave five times a day.) Roan couldn’t bring himself to tie it back in a ponytail, he didn’t want to look like a dick, so he just ended up hacking most of it off every two weeks or so like clockwork. It was always growing back thick and fast, like grass on a grave. “Your paw print expert had no guesses to the strain?”

Sikorski handed the mold back to Slab, who took it without comment, remaining grim-lipped throughout. “No. He thought maybe cougar, but I’ve never heard of a cougar quite as big as we’re speculating.”

“Neither have I.” There were five separate strains, in order of commonality: cougar, lion, leopard, panther, and tiger. Cougars were common, and while just as dangerous as every other cat, didn’t do much in

the way of collateral damage; on the other end, tigers were exceptionally rare, one in three thousand infected, basically, and mostly that was due to the fact that only one in ten tigers survived their first transformation. It seemed to be the hardest on the body, although there were some who thought it was some kind of built-in safety, since tigers were the strongest, most deadly, and caused the most collateral damage. (Whether you believed the “safety” theory or not depended on whether or not you believed that the virus was engineered, like the conspiracy theorists who first floated the idea.) A tiger could have easily eaten a Rottweiler, chewing its head like an ice cube. “Sorry Gordo, I don’t think I can help either. Let me know if something more telling turns up in forensics.”

He’d started walking away, casting furtive glances around the yard in hopes of catching something they had missed (something that screamed “not tiger”), when Sikorski said, in a deceptively casual way, “Where were you last night?”

He froze, then after a moment when he let the anger come and ebb away, he turned to face the older homicide detective. “On a case, actually. I was snapping pics of a cheating husband nailing his best friend’s secretary. They’re all digitally time stamped, if you’d like to check.”

Sikorski kept his expression easy and guileless, but Roan knew better than to trust it. “I doubt that’d be necessary, Roan. What about that... friend of yours?”

“Can’t say boyfriend? Lover? Fuck buddy?” he spat, with more rage than he anticipated. The lingering beat cop and the stragglers of the forensics team all looked back at him in varying degrees of surprise. He didn’t know if they were shocked he was gay, or shocked that he was so damn angry about it. But Sikorski’s expression remained placid, the smallest of insincere smiles curving his lips. “He was with me,” Roan lied, not sure what he was doing but still unable to stop himself. “He was following the secretary while I was tailing the husband.”

“Sounds like quite a case.” In spite of his pleasant expression, he caught a faint whiff of derision.

“It pays the bills,” he snapped, then turned on his heel and quickly left the crime scene.

That could have gone better. But if Sikorski actually bothered to do a follow-up, things were bound to get worse.

3

Your Own Private Idaho

HE DIDN'T want to go to the office—he wanted to go home, and figure out some way to get Paris the hell out of here before the shit came down—but Roan had an appointment, and it wasn't like he could write off the money. They were especially going to need it if they had to go country-hopping.

Which wasn't going to fucking work and he knew it. Paris would ask why, and while he could bullshit, the truth would come out eventually, and Paris wouldn't be able to live with himself. Why did he have to have one of those oh so “sensitive” boyfriends? Why couldn't he have someone as cynical and bitter as himself? Which was an idiotic thought, because he knew he'd kill someone as bitter as himself within two days.

The business was called MK Investigations, because he didn't want to hear people butcher his last name any more than was absolutely necessary, and Paris was his only other employee, his assistant, both as a detective and in the office (Paris had sworn he'd rip Roan's heart out of his chest and stomp on it if he ever called him “secretary”), because they barely made enough to clear the rent. It was in a small office park, an oasis of white and tan buildings in a sea of pavement, and MK stood out if only because it was the only office not related to medical, dental, or law practices. There was a chiropractor on one side of their office, and a certified public accountant on the other. The chiropractor was kind of an odd guy named Braunbeck, who looked not unlike Doctor Bunsen Honeydew from the old Muppet show, and occasionally wandered by the office to offer him or Paris a free exam and a handful of gorp that he made himself and carried in a Ziploc bag. The guy wore a gold wedding ring, but sometimes Roan wondered if the guy swung both ways—either that, or he was just incredibly and slightly inappropriately friendly.

The CPA agency was a female-owned firm, and sometimes one of them, Miranda “Randi” Kim, would come by to jokingly flirt with Paris

and gab during their lunch hour. She knew he was gay, but she was a self-proclaimed “fag hag,” and enjoyed having men she could talk to without having to worry about them hitting on her. She did do their taxes for free, in exchange for the occasional background check on men she dated, so it was pretty much a win-win relationship.

The office was small and stuffy, broken up into three separate rooms. The front room contained Paris’s metal desk, a loveseat and two metal-backed chairs for clients, and a small coffeemaker placed on the side table. A little side room on the left was the bathroom, while the larger room on the right was his private office. Roan turned on the air conditioner, and cringed as the AC shuddered and made a slight whistling noise before settling into its regulation hum. He supposed he’d need to have it serviced, but he really couldn’t afford it, not with them needing to buy a new sliding glass door now. Maybe Randi knew someone who could give them a discount; she had a lot of connections through work and family.

He turned on the coffeemaker to get a nice, homey smell in the office, and then ducked into the bathroom with a pair of scissors he’d plucked from Paris’s desk. He grabbed a handful of his hair, just above the nape of his neck, and cut off a large hank of it, reducing his hair to a shorter, more aerodynamic cut. He didn’t go for severe as he didn’t see the point, and besides, he’d have needed more than office scissors. He had learned to cut his own hair so well, like someone who actually knew what they were doing, that Paris liked to joke he could go into hairdressing as a fallback position. But that was so stereotypically gay Roan would’ve rather stabbed the scissors into his eye and pounded them back up into his brain first.

He was neat and presentable by the time the potential clients arrived. They were the Nakamuras, Toshiro and Sara, a professional couple who wore suits so expensive they could have bought him out by hocking their jackets alone. The man was rather bland, a guy with the type of face you’d instantly forget once you looked away from him, although he had the trim figure of a man who kept himself in good shape. He looked like he was in his mid-thirties, but was probably older. Sara was attractive, her black hair cut in a tidy if slightly dated bob, her face and body starting to fill out, the curves softening as age caught up with her, but she wore it well, and the trim skirt suit she wore looked like Prada or a fairly authentic knockoff. He guessed she was older than her husband, possibly by as much as ten years. As they introduced themselves and shook hands, he couldn’t help but notice they’d both recently had manicures.

They were here about their son, Daniel. It seemed he'd run away about a week ago, and while they'd reported it to the cops, they felt they weren't doing enough to find him, and weren't taking their insistence that he was probably in trouble seriously. He was a good boy, a straight-A student, bound for Harvard Business School as soon as he graduated high school next year (which sounded more like wishful thinking on their parts, but he wasn't about to tell them that), and his running away struck them as totally aberrant behavior. They told him Daniel—never Danny; that was telling—was not a troubled boy and seemed happy the night he supposedly ran away. They felt there was something more sinister going on, although the police claimed they found no sign of it.

Mr. Nakamura had brought a copy of Daniel's note, the one he left when he allegedly ran away, and they claimed it didn't sound like him at all as Roan scanned it.

Mom and Dad,

I'm sorry, but I can't be what you want me to be. This shallow materialism has left me feeling hollow, and I want to be something, be more than just a wage slave like the both of you. Spiritual fulfillment is out there, and when I find it, I'll call.

I'm sorry,

Danny

As runaway notes went, it was weird. He expected them to be melodramatic and possibly florid—teenagers—but this was very to the point. His parents were yuppies, they were pressuring him to be like them and he didn't want to be, a clear-cut motive for running away. But that “spiritual fulfillment” line... that was weird.

Further questioning revealed the Nakamuras to be practicing Christians, but not overly religious about it (ha). They said Danny (Daniel) had never expressed any reservations about it, never questioned their faith, but Roan figured he wouldn't. He probably went along with whatever his parents did without comment while quietly resenting it. He knew the type very well. They eventually snapped, in various ways, from the extreme end (violence) to the less extreme (estrangement). Not all “good kids” were good because they actually wanted to be, nor did they all turn out good. Look at him: he'd been a straight-A student, on the honor roll solid since kindergarten, and then one day, in high school, it suddenly occurred to him that it all meant shit. He wasn't going to suddenly have a family or

people who loved and accepted him because he did his fucking homework; he wasn't going to have a decent life and get the kids to stop treating him like Carrie after the prom because he was the only one who stayed awake in first period biology. It was all bullshit, and none of it mattered.

So Daniel was a good kid who did everything his parents told him to do, hoping for approval that was probably delivered in “helpful” criticism, because the Nakamuras were clearly concerned about the “success” of their son, and they wanted to help him “achieve his potential,” which was defined very much by their own desires for him. But Daniel felt lonely, perhaps neglected, and looked to someone—or something?—for some kind of emotional feedback. He got it. The question was from what or who?

The mention of “spiritual fulfillment” brought religion instantly to mind, but that was a broad category. Since Danny kept his concerns to himself, though, Roan couldn't guess where he might have looked. His parents said he had no girlfriend; he didn't “have time” for girls. Uh-huh.

Gay? That would add even more estrangement to the mix, especially if they frowned on homosexuals.

He made it clear to the Nakamuras that he was willing to look into the case, but he couldn't guarantee he could find Danny, for the simple fact that he was a runaway who had a week on him. Traveling with cash alone, he could be across the country by now. But he was willing to look into the evidence, see if there was something the cops had overlooked that was worthy of a deeper investigation. With that understood, the Nakamuras signed some papers and hired him, giving him his down payment. He arranged to drop by the Nakamura's home in a couple of hours, to get a look at Danny's room.

As soon as the Nakamuras had gone, Roan got on his computer, and searched MySpace for Danny Nakamura's name.

He was a modern teenager; he was going to have a MySpace page or a blog somewhere. A Google search turned it up, but there wasn't anything terribly illuminating about it. He was a good-looking kid, which the photo the Nakamuras left him had already told him. He had high cheekbones and expressive dark eyes, he took after his mother facially as opposed to his father (lucky kid). He seemed to write poetry—bad poetry, but hey, he was seventeen—really liked the Panic At The Disco album and recent Grand

Theft Auto game, and he had seventy-three people on his “friends” list, many of whom praised his poetry. The last poem he’d posted, which was last month, was a haiku titled “Dream”: *Glistening starlight/Leopard stalking at midnight/Waiting for you here.*

Well, that sucked.

But worse yet was the implication. He searched the page, searched the people who left comments, and found that a poster calling themselves “LadyLeopard” occasionally left cryptic comments such as “Have you read what I sent?” and “We can make it happen.” Could have been just a girl he was flirting with online, or a guy (posing as an alternate gender was so common online he didn’t know why people were occasionally stunned to find out the woman they’d been having an e-mail relationship with for years was actually an overweight thirty-eight-year-old man who lived in a basement and collected ceramic dragons). Or it could have been something else. LadyLeopard was signed up at MySpace, but had no page of her own, no blog.

He did have instincts. He couldn’t always trust them, mind you, because being an ex-cop or a virus child didn’t actually mean his hunches were more reliable than anyone else’s, but he did try and give them a shot when he had nothing else to follow. And right now, he had a really bad feeling about this.

That haiku, and several bad cat-themed poems before it, could be interpreted as waiting for a kitty lover; waiting for infection. And it all resonated with that “spiritual fulfillment” line in the note he left for his parents. There were people—idiotic, deranged people—who thought being infected was somehow a state of divinity. Either they believed you were blessed by God to change form or you were the next stage in evolution, while others claimed they were cursed by God or were related to Satan, and either way, groups of people who knew nothing about you reviled or worshiped you depending on their belief system.

Again, this was all bullshit; as far as Roan was concerned, faith itself was just another form of self-deluded bullshit. (In his mind, he could hear Paris saying: “You’re so warm and understanding—I can’t see why no one wants to invite you to their Christmas parties.”) He almost hated the people who worshiped him for an accident of birth even more than the people who loathed him for the same thing, because blind hatred he could almost understand. It was idiotic, ignorant, and yet almost forgivable, because people hated what they feared. But worshiping a person due to an

accident of birth? There wasn't a word for how weird that shit was. It made his skin crawl.

And that didn't even take into account that most of these "worshippers" went out looking to be infected, and there were people happy to infect them.

He faxed off Danny's picture to the bus and train stations, hoping someone there would remember selling a ticket to such a handsome kid, but so much time had passed he doubted he'd get a bite. He wanted to get home to Paris as soon as possible, and hoped that any news reports on the incident stuck to the bland "homicidal violence" (that was used a lot in suspected deaths by cat, because the truth could occasionally inflame certain people into ill-advised vigilantism), because it was a long drive to the good side of town. It probably would have been faster on his motorcycle, but there was no way he could have gone on a stakeout assignment on the bike, and he simply forgot to do the switch at home. (Well how much sleep had he had? A couple hours, tops....) So he was stuck with the Mustang, although to be fair it was hardly slow. Paris loved his muscle cars, and could rebuild their engines with his eyes closed.

The Nakamuras lived on a street he'd never been to, and in a house he couldn't have afforded. They had a large semicircular drive leading up to their home, and after walking up the slate path set neatly among the tastefully restrained front garden and golf-course-quality lawn, he came to wide double doors with etched lead glass insets depicting tulips. The doorbell played something that sounded like classical music, but he didn't recognize the piece.

Sara answered the door—he had almost expected a butler—and she had changed into a lilac silk blouse and a long navy skirt that reached below her knees. The outfit was less expensive, less ostentatious, and he had the sick feeling she'd changed to something more demure so he didn't feel so uncomfortable around their obvious wealth. Which made him feel very uncomfortable.

The smell of some orange-oil-infused cleanser nearly knocked him on his ass, suggesting he had just missed the maid. He sneezed, but was able to forge on, figuring if he could take death and blood, orange oil shouldn't stop him.

Sara led him across marble-tiled floors and up a sweeping staircase to Danny's room, which was almost as large as Roan's living room. Right

away, he noticed how strange Danny's room was. Namely, there was nothing on the walls at all, no pictures, no posters, nothing but sky blue paint. Teenagers usually hung things up; they usually started personalizing their space with a vengeance. But nothing marred the crisp walls, or the immaculately clean royal blue carpet, or the neatly made bed with its indigo duvet cover and plump pillows, or the tiny corner desk where his chair was neatly pulled in and his blue iMac miraculously free of dust. He also had an entertainment hutch directly across from his bed, where a TV, DVD, and stereo system all sat on their own shelves, and there were shelves beneath, containing DVDs and CDs in racks.

Christ... a snot-nosed kid had better shit than he did. He must have lived the wrong way. Or simply erred in not being born the scion of a wealthy family. He wondered why they'd hired him, but he supposed one of the cops recommended him to the family, just to annoy him.

He told Sara he'd just search around for a bit, but he wouldn't take anything without informing her first, and she seemed to accept that warily, but then he heard a phone ringing and that tore her away from him. He shut the door of Danny's room, just leaving it open the merest crack, and started booting up his computer. He also tried to think like a kid who had maids coming into his room, and perhaps overbearing parents. If he wanted to hide something, where would he hide it?

The closet was obvious, and a dead end, because along with hung-up clothes there were drawers of clothes—see-through drawers. He could see everything neatly folded and stacked inside, and Roan instantly felt bad for Danny. Where did he put his skin mags, or whatever passed for masturbatory material? What secrets could he have in a house of glass? No wonder he ran away.

He checked Danny's computer, but his bookmarks were relatively bland, and a search proved he had a system scrubber that cleaned out his history and his cookies. Could be just a tech-savvy teen... or proof that he was paranoid, afraid his parents might be checking his computer. So what was he hiding? Just the same porn shit everybody hid if they were smart? Or something else?

He checked out the kid's CD and DVD collection, and the CDs were a lot more wild than his DVDs, which were pretty much an assortment of the raunchy comedies, mindless action flicks, and inexplicably popular Adam Sandler films that you might find in any random person's DVD collection. Looking through them, he realized there was one thing that just

didn't fit the established pattern in both cases. For some reason, among all his emo and punk pop, he had a Motorhead CD, and among all of his DVDs, he had one called "Classic Albums—Queen: The Making of A Night At The Opera." Neither of these fit in the context of the collections, but they could have been oners, gifts by clueless relatives or friends trying to foist their tastes on him, perhaps sudden whimsies. Still, they were worth checking out.

Looking inside the Motorhead CD case, he found a compact disc that was quite clearly an unmarked CD-ROM. He inserted it in the iMac's CD drive, while he pulled out the DVD from the Queen case and put it in the DVD player. The DVD was one of a National Geographic special... on big cats. A beautiful Siberian tiger showed up on screen, its amber eyes staring at the camera in almost lazy disgust, and he knew how a person could find it rapturous to look at tigers; there was something magnificent about them, powerful. You just wanted to run your fingers through their fur... even though they'd take off your arm, and oh yeah, partially eat you and then bury the rest of you for later dining. They were pretty poison, and he knew that better than most, living with one (in a manner of speaking). But why would you hide a National Geographic special? How educational and innocuous. Unless it represented something else, something secret and shameful. The masturbatory material he was wondering about.

The CD-ROM confirmed it. It was Internet porn all right: what was called "trans-porn," showing the transformations of people into cat forms. It took a while, and the noises made during the process could make a person faint; it was not a pretty process, or a pain-free one. But many of these were cut in such a way that it looked quicker and cleaner than it was. It was disingenuous, but worse yet, dangerous: it made wannabes believe that changing into a cat form was almost painless, and had few consequences.

He turned off the set and replaced the DVD in its case, but when he ejected the CD-ROM, he instantly slipped the disc in his coat pocket, and put the Motorhead CD case back in its place, empty. The parents didn't need to find that accidentally or otherwise; what was bad enough was that it was probably too late.

Roan was sure he knew exactly what happened. Danny became fascinated by the kitty culture, and got sucked into it. And in an act of total rebellion, he ran away, although there were two possibilities. The best-case scenario, he ran off to join a cult of kitty worshipers. The worst-case

scenario, he ran off to join a cult of kitty worshipers, and was trying very hard to get infected.

Son of a bitch, why did these hard-luck cases always fall into his lap?

4

Hello, My Name Is ...

HE WENT downstairs to talk with Sara, mainly to pump her for expected information. It took her a while to think of the name of one of Danny's friends—again a very telling bit of information—but he wrote it down, a kid named Marley Hanson, whom Sara said lived in Crescent Heights. He thanked her and told her he'd be in touch, just as the phone rang again. She was a very busy person, it seemed.

Roan knew exactly where he had to go, but his stomach growled very loudly, objecting to all the coffee and bad feelings he'd had up to this point, and he decided to grab a bite to eat on the way back home.

Stopping at a fast-food place was such a risky proposition that he could only use the drive-through windows, if that. The smell was too much for him; there were just too many people in and out, too much rancid cooking grease, too much smell of processed foods and cleaning supplies. It made him vaguely nauseous and sometimes gave him a headache. Of course, reading "Fast Food Nation" had much the same effect, but that was just happy coincidence.

At the drive-through window, he decided to order extra food on the chance that Paris was up and about. Technically the drugs should have kept him down until next Thursday, but the change had pretty wacky effects on your metabolism. For instance, he felt as if doing so much desk work was making him soft and pudgy, but it'd be gone after his next change. You could be twenty-five pounds overweight, but after your time, you'd be ten pounds underweight. He was shocked that no one had advertised being infected as a weight loss plan... but come to think of it, someone probably already had. People were just so fucked up it was incredible.

He hated people who talked on their phones, did their hair, texted their friends, and ate a four-course meal while they were supposed to be driving, but he was so hungry he went ahead and ate his chicken sandwich

while driving home. He never took his eyes off the road, though, so he didn't feel like too much of a hypocrite. The landscape slid by in an almost featureless blur, slowly transforming from concrete gray to grass green as he moved out of the city and deeper into the surrounding countryside.

Everything seemed unchanged at home, the engineless GTO still parked in the drive, the lawn still slightly overgrown and weedy (they didn't use herbicides or pesticides, mainly because the smell killed him, no matter how minor the concentration), but as soon as he killed the engine, he heard a faint, rhythmic banging coming from around back. Roan was glad he'd got the extra food, but he was also unaccountably nervous, as he had to figure out how much Paris knew before deciding on how to lie to him. That was always the toughest part about bullshit—deciding what people were willing to buy. Everyone had a limit, a level that they could accept, but if it was crossed, you were screwed. There really wasn't much of a talent to lying; it was simply figuring out what people wanted to believe and giving it to them.

The front door was unlocked, so he walked in and wasn't surprised to see a large plank of plywood where the shattered sliding glass door had been. He waited for a break in the hammering before yelling, "Honey, I'm home."

Paris stuck his head around the plywood after moving it slightly. It seemed to be only nailed to one side of the doorframe at the moment. Paris had knocked any remaining jagged shards of glass out of the frame, and vacuumed up what had fallen on the carpet. Thank the hardware gods for Shop-Vacs. "Ooh, do I smell food?"

"Yeah yeah, come on, chowhound," Roan said, shaking his head.

Paris was dressed at least, in khaki cargo shorts (he had his hammer in one of the loops on the right side leg) and a plain blue T-shirt, looking remarkably bright-eyed and alert considering he'd been in a drug coma when Roan had left him.

Paris looked good; far better than should have been allowable without plastic surgery and extensive airbrushing. He had clear blue eyes in a face too finely featured to be rugged, but too masculine to be called pretty. His hair was deep black and seemingly always glossy, like a pelt, although when he'd first met him, Paris's hair was lank and dull, and his face mostly hidden by a scraggly beard. But even then Roan had found his eyes slightly mesmerizing, glowing with a bit more than simply madness.

He oozed charisma like some people oozed sweat, and sometimes he seemed so alive it was almost overpowering, almost frightening.

Since he was originally human and not born infected, not a virus child, there was no way the cat could have any influence on the person (or vice versa), but Roan sometimes wondered if tigers were different. Something about Paris seemed too powerful to be merely human. But maybe it was just his imagination.

Everyone found Paris attractive; he was a secret weapon in getting people to talk. People who would never talk to Roan would be relaxed around Paris, be charmed, and suddenly they'd start telling him things they wouldn't tell anyone else. While it was true women were best at ferreting out information like that—it was a psychological thing—apparently a handsome bisexual was the next best thing.

Paris was also five years younger than him, although sometimes he felt like he had twenty years on him. There was no way a guy like Paris would be with a guy like him if he hadn't met Paris when he was at a personal nadir; Roan didn't fool himself there. He also figured Paris would leave him eventually, find someone more good-looking (man or woman) and a bit less jaded, but Roan decided to enjoy things while he could.

Roan sat on a stool at the breakfast bar, and Paris came over and joined him, taking the stool beside him. Roan shoved two of the brown paper bags over toward him, because most of the food was for him. (The change gave you a huge appetite on either side of it; that was part of the metabolism wonkiness.) "So where've you been?" Paris wondered, pulling out wrapped cheeseburgers and noshing on a fry. "Was there an appointment I missed?"

"It was last minute," he lied. "Thanks for fixing the window."

"Oh shit, man, I did that. I should fix it." He ate a couple more fries, then said nervously, "While I was getting ready to go to the hardware store, I heard there was a... an incident a couple miles from here, and—"

"It was a cougar."

"What?" His tone of voice was split between disbelief and hope. This would be an easy sell.

"Sikorski called me in to see if I could help, but it didn't matter too much. The print guy got a pretty solid paw, and it was a cougar."

Paris sighed in obvious relief, his shoulders sagging as the tension fled. “Oh thank God. I thought I killed somebody.”

“Nope.”

Paris bit into his cheeseburger with gusto, even though Roan caught a faint scent of slightly overdone toast, and he saw the bottle of ginger pills on the counter near the toaster. Both the drugs and the change could leave you feeling nauseous, so he always had a bottle of ginger pills in the kitchen—it was a vital part of his (and Paris’s) recovery kit.

There used to be an acupuncturist with a clinic across the way from the office, and he had become good friends with the main practitioner, Mei Ling, who told him that ginger pills would cure nausea faster than anything on the market. He thought that was homeopathic bullshit, but he was actually desperate enough to try it once, and he was shocked to discover she was right; it worked better than Dramamine. Just because of that, he gave acupuncture a shot when his headaches came back, and it actually seemed to help. Mei Ling had to close up shop a couple months ago and move to San Francisco to take care of her aging aunt, which he was sorry about, as he liked her. Sure, her English was a bit broken, but she seemed extremely tolerant, and knew lots of obscure things. He liked people who knew weird things, just because it seemed to hint at some odd inner life.

Before Paris could ask more about the dead man, Roan told him about the Nakamura case. Paris listened intently, although he never stopped eating, and at one point got up to get a soda from the fridge. Paris tossed him a can of decaf tea, and Roan wondered if the fact that he’d had too much caffeine was obvious.

As soon as he was done, Paris took his seat, cracked open his soda, and decided to play devil’s advocate. “This is all supposition, you know. Maybe he was a bit obsessed with infecteds, but ran off to join the Hare Krishnas.”

“Or the Jehovah’s Witnesses,” Roan replied, playing along.

“The Evangelicals.”

“The Mormons.”

“The Shakers,” Paris insisted, raising his eyebrows in a comic manner.

Oh no, he wasn't laughing now. "The Scientologists."

"Oh shit, you win. I can't top that."

Roan pumped his fist in sarcastic triumph. "Mock the sacred Xenu if you want, but you won't believe how much claiming you're a Scientologist gets you out of conversations."

Paris snorted a laugh in remembrance, and almost choked on a fry. "I remember when you told that guy that, as a Scientologist, you celebrated Christmas differently. I thought he was gonna have you arrested."

"Which one was this?"

"The one where you claimed to dance naked around a pyre where you burned the remains of a sacrificial chicken."

"Oh, right, and ate the still beating heart of a baby goat under a gibbous moon. Right. I thought I was particularly inspired that night."

Paris chuckled, shaking his head. "You just have contempt for everyone and everything, don't you?"

"Not *everything*," he protested. "I have no problem with Terry. Well, today."

Terry was the name of the toaster. All their appliances had "Hello, My Name Is" adhesive name tags slapped on them, with the appliance "names" scrawled in the boxes in Magic Marker. The toaster was Terry, the blender was Bob, the stove was Frank, the microwave Chiquita, the refrigerator Steve. This was all due to the fact that he loathed name tags.

Roan had a friend, Phil, who was in charge of a large detective/private security firm in Springfield, and a client had wanted Phil to provide security for a big software expo. But Phil didn't have as many people as he wanted to cover the floor, so he'd hired him and Paris as "floaters," incognito security that circulated with the crowd. All the crowd wore stupid-ass name tags, though, and as they were supposed to be just like everyone else, they wore tags. Roan hated it, and when he got a chance he pocketed a whole bunch of blank name tags, although to what end he wasn't sure. But one night, slightly drunk and insanely bored, he slapped them on their appliances. If people ever asked about it, they claimed that since they couldn't have pets (they might accidentally kill and eat them—there was no therapy to cover a trauma like that), they kept the appliances. Paris would often get in the spirit of it, baby talking to the

toaster and stroking it like a cat. “*Would Snookums like an English muffin?*” It was times like that that Roan worried he had warped Paris in some fundamental way, but a sense of humor was never a bad thing.

He idly wondered if Paris had kept any of the numbers he got at the software expo. Although he was working and not actively flirting, over the course of the two-day conference he’d ended up with eight phone numbers, mostly men. Paris could be dangerous if he aimed his charm square at you.

After a moment, Paris stopped laughing, and got strangely sober. Roan knew what was coming, and didn’t look forward to it. “If you think this kid really did run off to get infected, you know where you hafta go.”

Roan sighed, painfully aware of where and who he was referring to. “I know. I was trying to work up to it. You know I have the insatiable urge to beat that bastard’s face in with a tire iron; it takes me a while to rein in my homicidal impulses.”

“Ro, come on. I know you hate him—”

“Hate? That’s too mild a word. I despise the drunken episode that led to his goddamn conception, and I despise his brother for not bashing his head in with a fucking shovel when he had the chance.”

Paris sat back and stared at him, bemusement clearly visible in his expression. “And you don’t think that’s a bit... dramatic?”

He knew Paris was just trying to tease, but he wasn’t in the mood. “You’re not gonna tell me you can actually stand that fucker, are you?”

Paris frowned at him, like he should have known better. “Of course not. I’m not sure anyone sane likes Eli. I mean, how could you? He’s like a television evangelist without a show.”

He wasn’t sure he completely followed that metaphor, but okay. Eli was Elijah Prophet, aka Eli Winters, leader of the cult that called itself the “Church of the Divine Transformation,” the premiere kitty cult. (Roan thought that was a perfect name; it sounded great in the sentence “The FBI raided the Church of the Divine Transformation today....”)

It was well-known, and it was more blatant than any other kitty cult, mainly because Eli was an heir to the rather large Winters real estate development fortune, which he split with his more respectable and notably embarrassed brother Tom. Anyone who said there was no such thing as

class distinctions in America was living in a dream world, and Eli was living proof: not only were the rich different, they apparently had different laws applied to them. Eli had a taste for underage girls, everybody knew this, and his cult seemed to attract quite a few of them. But oddly enough, in spite of rumors and a police investigation, he'd never been charged with a damn thing. Roan had always wanted to nail that smug fucker with something—anything—but had never been able to do so.

Until now?

Paris slid off his stool and said, "Why don't I go change? I'll come with you."

"No, it's fine. I can handle this myself."

"I'm sure you can, but I think I'd better come along, if only to keep Rainbow distracted." He then leaned in close over Roan's shoulder and smiled, turning on the full wattage of his charm. This close it was almost palpable. "Besides, if it comes down to it, I can always say he threw the first punch." Paris then gave him a kiss on the forehead and walked away, so confident in his ability to sway him that he didn't even look back.

Roan sighed and shook his head at his own pathetic reaction. He should go by himself, but he already knew he wasn't going to. He idly wondered if things would have been any easier if he'd been heterosexual.

His cell phone buzzed impatiently in his pocket, and he dug it out and checked the number to decide if he should answer it or not. Son of a bitch: Sikorski.

Maybe it was good news; maybe forensics had turned up something that pointed definitively away from a tiger. And maybe Eli really was a divine messenger.

Christ, maybe he was too cynical for his own good.

5

Officer Unfriendly

HE KNEW he had to answer the phone, but part of him didn't want to. He wanted to bury the goddamn phone in the compost heap, go hide Paris in Vancouver, and then come back and answer the phone, but it wasn't going to work that way. Roan glanced back to make sure Paris was upstairs before answering his cell. "Yeah, Sikorski, what is it?"

He chuckled faintly. "You're such a blast of sunshine up the ass, Roan. That's why I miss you."

"You coming on to me?"

"Ha. I was wondering what you knew about the virus child mutations theory."

Roan found himself wondering where the hell that came from. "What? You mean that Weekly World News bullshit?"

"So you don't believe it's possible."

"That new strains of cat can arise from virus children? Fuck no. They've never proved it, and I don't see how it could be done anyways. Our DNA incorporates the virus, but no one's altered into some weird half-cat, half-human thing. How would that even be possible? Most virus children are lucky not to be deformed or developmentally disabled in some way." Their odds of being productive, functional citizens was even slimmer than surviving a tiger strain infection. Sikorski had to know this. "Why are you even asking?"

Sikorski sighed, and paused long enough that Roan knew he was considering whether or not to tell him. Ultimately, he did. "The coroner was able to recover a partial bite mark from the body, and it doesn't match any known cat teeth formation. Combined with the partial paw print—which also doesn't match with anything known—the conclusion seems obvious."

“Chupacabra.” Relief washed through him, with such intensity it was like he’d been holding his breath for hours. Paris was cleared; Paris hadn’t done this. But he was careful not to let it come out in his voice, because then Sikorski would have known he’d been hiding something. At least it wasn’t hard for him to compartmentalize his emotions—growing up as a ward of the state had given him very early training on how to do that.

“I can’t believe it. I think you’ve become more of a smart-ass since you left the force. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“No one has ever proven that alternate cat strains exist. All that anyone’s proven is there’s some cats out there with malformed teeth. Or worse yet, wannabes who pay dentists to grind their teeth into fangs.” Sadly there were many of those, more than he ever would have guessed.

Sikorski sighed impatiently. “But we know that no wannabe with budget fangs ripped out DeSilvo’s throat and ate the dog.”

“Granted. So why do you jump to mutant hell beast when the answer is more likely to be a cat with poor dental work?”

Roan could hear Sikorski’s chair creak as he shifted his weight, and as the silence dragged on, he could hear fingers clicking on a keyboard, people talking in the background (including a perp angrily and profanely denying some charges), and the normal hum of a busy police station. He didn’t miss it; honestly, he wasn’t even sure why he’d become a cop, except it pissed an awful lot of people off. Yes, he was apparently so angry he liked to piss other people off. He was sure a therapist would have a field day with him and all his issues, but he just didn’t have the time or the money to bitch to a professional. What else was a boyfriend for, anyways? Finally, Sikorski said, “This is all just so fucked up, Roan. And this was a cop. No matter his reputation, no one is happy about it.”

“His reputation?”

“Apparently there were some... issues before he retired. He and his partner were accused by a suspect of taking money from a crime scene, and IA never found anything substantial, but the perp was pretty insistent, as was his girlfriend. But hey, drug dealers—you gotta expect ’em to try shit like that now and again.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, but suddenly something nagged at him. What? Wait a minute... the sawed-off shotgun. While the “gangstas” and gangbangers preferred Glocks and other handguns, the methheads

generally liked things that were nastier, with more stopping power... like a sawed-off shotgun. "What about the gun?"

"What gun?"

"The sawed-off. Where had that come from?"

Sikorski scoffed. "Hell if I know. Hank had lots of guns."

"And not all of them registered? How illegal of him." Honestly, he had no idea why, but Roan felt this was important somehow. At the very least, it said something about DeSilvo as a man.

"Are you implying something?"

"No, of course not," he said, in a manner that would convince no one. "I just hate cases that turn out to be more complicated than they should be."

"Who doesn't?" Sikorski replied wearily. "Look, if you could just ask around... the community, see if there's someone who knows of any cats with especially odd teeth, or maybe a hybrid..."

"The community?" What a nice euphemism, especially since there really wasn't such a thing as a "kitty community" (except online), although a lot of normals erroneously believed there was. There were just bars and nightclubs where you could go, and they kept things low-key, much like gay culture in the very early days. "I'll see what I can find out," he said, and hung up.

The first thing you did in any murder investigation was look into the background of the victim. In some crimes, especially ones that appeared perfectly random, it was all you had to go on; the victim's life could lead you to the point where they intersected with their killer, and point the way to them. It didn't always work that way, of course, especially in the random murders done by strangers. There were too many intersections, too many places where they could have crossed paths with their killer and never even realized it; there was even a chance that the killer didn't encounter the victim at all until the second of the crime. Such was the case in drive-bys, where bullets were flying randomly, kitty killings (cats had no ability to premeditate), and the rare but shockingly popular sniper killings, where victims were picked simply by time, place, and circumstance.

What if there was more to this killing than random circumstance? A

retired cop with a perfectly illegal sawed-off shotgun and rumors of being crooked, killed by a cat who couldn't be identified in any standard way. Wasn't that a curious coincidence?

And that's all it could be—coincidence. So why didn't he think it was?

Paris came up behind him and put his arms around his chest. "Ooh, that was a heavy phone call, wasn't it?" He rested his chin on his shoulder, pressing his cheek up against his, letting Roan feel the scrape of his stubble against his skin.

Roan sighed, relaxing into his embrace, so goddamn happy he didn't have to keep lying to him he almost felt like laughing. "It was Sikorski," he admitted, seeing no harm in telling him now. "It seems the declaration of it being a cougar was premature—the teeth marks and paw print don't match any known cat. They're thinking hybrid."

"Hybrid? Has anyone proved they exist?"

"Not to my knowledge, no." This close, Paris's skin had an interesting smell, something like sand or bark, the hint of the exotic beneath the human. He could tell people were infected by smell, but he couldn't always tell their strain, although Paris seemed to be living proof that tigers smelled different. Maybe it had to do with the alterations done to a body that managed to survive the strain of a tiger transformation, he really didn't know for sure. But at least he was confident he'd know another tiger by smell alone.

"So they're looking for a mythological creature?"

"Of course not—this is the police we're talking about. They're probably just looking for someone to frame."

Paris sighed in an obviously amused way. "You're like the gay Mike Hammer, aren't you?"

"I preferred Sam Spade," he deadpanned, moving his shoulders just enough so that Paris knew to let him go. He did and stepped back, looking at him with that wonderfully endearing, lopsided half smile of his, the one that made everyone want to ruffle his hair before throwing him down and ripping his clothes off. Paris knew he was sexy, as he used to be quite a player back in his college days, but that's how he got himself infected (by a woman, actually—oh, the irony). He claimed he was arrogant about his looks then, but that wasn't true anymore; having a bit of a mental

breakdown seemed to bring humility with it, as well as monogamy. Well, so far, anyway.

Roan looked at him and raised his eyebrow, the question tacit. Paris had changed into worn, tight jeans and a sleeveless apple green T-shirt that was so tight it looked painted on; you could see every muscle in his chest, how flat his stomach was. He still kept himself in good shape, although he wasn't one of those grotesque gym rats who spent ten hours a day working out. He had regained some sense of vanity, but he hadn't gone crazy with it. (No pun intended.) "What? I said I was going along to distract Rainbow."

"Distract, not drive into a frenzy of lust."

That made Paris grin. "I think someone's projecting."

The fact that he was probably right didn't make it any more tolerable. "Get in the fucking car."

"Yes sir, Mister Crabby," he replied, with a sarcastic little smirk. On their way out the door, he added, "Paging Doctor Freud. Doctor Freud to the white courtesy telephone, please." Smart-ass.

The drive to the church was relatively quiet, with Paris simply fiddling with the radio, sometimes every three minutes. The drawback with these older muscle cars was, if you wanted a proper stereo, you had to sink a lot of money into it, and they had sunk enough money into rebuilding these cars as it was. The additional problem was that radio pretty much sucked.

Paris was being kind by giving him room and quiet to think, but after about ten minutes, he stared at the side of Roan's face, brow furrowing in concentration. "This Sikorski thing is really bugging you, isn't it?"

He shrugged, faintly shaking his head, trying to deny it to himself more than Paris. "I'm not a cop anymore, and I can't interfere in a police investigation. Whatever he wants to pursue he's free to do so. Why the fuck do I care?"

Paris reached across and lightly stroked the nape of his neck. Roan knew it was a weird erogenous zone to have, but Paris had found it immediately, and knew how to make him weak in the knees without even trying. He knew he was doing it right now to make him relax—and it was working—but he wished he wouldn't. He felt like being tense right now. "Because you think he's overlooking something. Maybe I didn't know you

back then, but I think you must have been one hell of a cop, Ro.”

“I wasn’t. I was the freak no one wanted to patrol with, and I got in trouble for cursing out a redneck idiot who couldn’t quite grasp the concept that you don’t hit your wife and kids with a coffee table, so I quit. I have no idea what I was thinking, joining the force. Me, dealing with the public? Can you imagine it?”

“You were—and still are—one of the best investigators I’ve ever seen. Okay, so your people skills are—”

“Shitty?”

“I was going to say lacking. But that’s what I’m here for, right?” He flashed him a smile that could have blinded the entire block, and in spite of himself, Roan smiled. Yes that was what he was here for: he had the ability to charm and schmooze, to flatter and network, skills that Roan had neither acquired nor cultivated. Paris could play the game, and the irony was Roan knew that he’d never been invited to play. Essentially, Paris was everything he wasn’t.

After a moment, Paris asked, “You just cursed him out?”

Reluctantly, he shrugged. “Guy was drunk. Kinda clumsy.”

Paris stopped massaging the back of his neck, and gave him a mock-stern look. “Clumsy how?”

“He may have walked into a wall while I was trying to handcuff him.”

“Just the once?”

“Repeatedly. But he honestly did fall down the stairs all by himself.”

“Repeatedly walking into walls can do that to a person.”

“So I hear.”

Well, he never claimed to be a saint, did he? He’d never been a crooked cop, but he’d be the first to admit he’d been a poor one. The more he thought about the DeSilvo case, the more he wondered if it did actually take one to know one.

The “church” was actually at the end of a residential block, as Eli had started it in a Victorian-style home he’d inherited from a great-aunt. This was a nice neighborhood, and people grew uneasy at sharing their space with a cult, so Eli generously bought up the surrounding houses and

tore them down so he could build additions to the church on the new land. You could see the ghost of the old Victorian house at the front of the church—the peaked roof, the wide porch with the ornate but useless pillars at either end—but now it was a sprawling affair covering three parcels of land where homes used to be, all of it painted a calming blue-gray color that Paris informed him was “slate.” Part of one parcel had been paved to become a parking lot, which was oddly full; in fact, there were cars parked all up and down the street, so much so that they had to park at the end of the opposite block and walk in. What was going on?

The closer they got to the church, the more they could hear the faint but obvious pounding of a bass line, music coming from the complex. An elderly woman with a nimbus of curly white hair and wearing a totally unseasonable turtleneck was walking a Pomeranian on a bright pink leash, and as they approached her, the dog started yipping and growling in a high-pitched, annoying way. “You know what’s going on?” Roan asked her, nodding his head toward the church. She smelled of bad perfume and talcum powder.

Her pale blue eyes took him and Paris in warily, then she glanced toward the church and sniffed, her expression hardening into disgust. “I never know what those freaks do.”

Although he agreed that those church people were freaky, he had a sense she was referring to cats, not just the cultists. The dog continued to snarl and yip, and finally Roan looked down at the pathetic little fur ball with a pink ribbon clipped to the top of its head and growled at it. It came from deep in his throat, and while it was unintentional, it wasn’t precisely a human noise. He could feel it in his throat, vibrating his vocal chords, and the dog’s ears rotated briefly in as much alarm as a dog could express, and then it whimpered and cringed, pissing on the sidewalk in submission.

The woman took a couple steps backward, eyes wide and horrified, and dragged her dog past them as she hurried off, the Pom more than happy to leave.

Paris looked at him, an eyebrow raised and the corner of his mouth quirked up in a half smile. “I love it when you get defensive.”

“I’m the king of the jungle. I’m not taking any shit from a living dust mop.” He glanced both ways down the otherwise quiet residential street before crossing it and approaching the weird church, scanning the cars parked in the lot up the way and the ones on the street, noting that many of

the cars had stickers for bands and local radio stations the likes of which Danny Nakamura probably listened to. These were kids' cars, or at least the cars of people young enough not to be as cynical as he was. They were headed down the stone path to the porch when he stopped in horror.

Paris had gone ahead a couple of steps, but paused and turned back. "Something wrong?"

Roan took a deep breath, parsing the scents, and his initial impression was correct. He was smelling normals all right, probably all those kids with all those cars, but he was also smelling infecteds mixed in with them... several of them. That tightness in his stomach, the one he'd felt when he discovered the kitty porn in Danny's room, came back, more savage than before. What the *fuck* was going on here? If it was what he thought it was, he might as well go back and get his tire iron now.

Paris came up to him, all the humor in his expression gone and replaced with concern. "Ro, you're growling again."

Was he? Amazingly enough, he really didn't give a shit.

6

Like Eating Glass

ROAN wanted to charge into the house, and since it did advertise itself as a church, there was no need for knocking, but Paris wasn't inclined to let him do that. At the base of the porch steps, Paris deliberately stepped in front of him and held up his hands to stop him. "Ro, don't."

He stopped and glared at him. "Don't what?"

"Go in there and beat the shit out of Eli. He shares lawyers with Microsoft. He can have you sued back to the Stone Age."

"I don't care. It'd be worth it if I put him in a body cast for six months."

"No it won't. I know you want to get this guy, but this isn't the way you do it."

He scowled at him, feeling the rage building up inside, desperately wanting out. And the horrible shame of it was he wasn't really angry at Paris, but Eli... and yet Paris was here, blocking his way, straight in the path of his pent-up rage. "There *isn't* a way to do it, Par. I can never get him—he has lawyers, power, and money on his side. I bet he could stab his girlfriend to death in front of a bus full of nuns, and I wouldn't be able to get him convicted. He's fucking bulletproof."

"No he's not. Even Ken Lay eventually got arrested."

"When it seemed like the public needed a sacrifice to take the heat off of bigger people. Eli's the top dog of his circle. I don't see him going down like that. Now would you get out of my fucking way?"

Paris crossed his arms over his chest, unconsciously flexing his impressive muscles, and looked down at him almost imperiously, which he could do easily since he had almost six inches on him. "No. I'm not going to let you throw away your career and your life because of this prick. We'll figure out something—"

“No we won’t. This fucker is gonna keep exploiting kids and hiding behind his wealth, and we’re all totally fucked until he screws with the kid of someone richer and more powerful than him. Now get out of my fucking way.”

Paris didn’t move, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. “What if I don’t? Are you willing to hurt me?”

Paris was certainly more fit than he was, more muscular, but Roan knew he had it on him in both experience and technique. Paris hadn’t been in many fights in his life—in fact, to Roan’s knowledge, he’d never been in one—because he never needed to be. He was always the attractive, popular jock, charming as hell, and no one would have dared challenge him about anything. But Roan had grown up the diseased freak, and he had learned to fight early and fight hard even before he joined the police force. He knew he could take down guys bigger and stronger than him, because he had before; hell, the redneck he’d roughed up was almost Paris’s size. Paris had to know that in a straight fight, Roan would have no trouble winning, no matter how much stronger he was.

And that was probably the point—he was trying to shock him out of it. It only partially worked; he knew what Paris was doing, so he wasn’t shocked. In fact, he was a bit resentful over the manipulation, but he wrestled the black beast of his anger back. He didn’t like being manipulated, but he would never consciously hurt anyone he didn’t feel deserved it, and Paris didn’t. (Eli still did; oh hell, yeah.) “How the hell can you ask that? Better yet, how can you not want to beat the shit out of him?”

“Because I don’t see violence as an answer. Now, what you said about the public needing a sacrifice... that has me intrigued. Maybe we can work that angle.”

Whatever residual anger was festering in his gut started draining away as he studied Paris in confusion. “What?” Paris might not have believed in physical violence, but he could be frighteningly cunning, enough so that Roan sometimes thought he’d missed his calling as a lawyer or a super-villain.

But before Paris could tell him, they both heard the front door open and turned toward the noise. “I thought I heard voices out here,” a woman’s voice said, and even though they couldn’t see her until she stepped out on the porch, Roan knew by the almost overwhelming

sandalwood scent that it was Rainbow.

As soon as she saw Paris, her cornflower eyes widened and she gasped. “Paris! It’s been so long! I thought you’d forgotten us!”

“Forget you? Never!” He replied, giving her a thousand-watt smile and cranking up the charm.

Witnessing Paris turn on his charm and its subsequent effects on people was a scary thing. Rainbow had already forgotten Roan was there; she was focused solely on Paris as he came up the steps, his voice light but pitched low and vaguely mesmerizing, and he took her hand as soon as possible, pretty much cementing her captive status. Sometimes it was like watching a cobra hypnotize a bird.

Rainbow was Rainbow Grunwalt (yes, her actual name, the poor thing), a woman in her mid-thirties who was the oldest and most senior among the church’s female residents. She was a plain woman with the soft, slightly empty eyes of a rabbit, her chin almost absent and her cheeks puffed out to make up for it. Her hair was long and curly, so much so that if it was short she’d have had a natural perm, but as it was, she kept it so long it fell to the center of her back, and she usually kept it in a long ponytail held together by an ornate clip or ribbon. (Today it was a rhinestone butterfly clip that glimmered like fool’s gold in the curly dun-brown waves of her hair.) She wore an ankle-length, gauzy skirt striped like the colors of the rainbow (this somehow reinforced her status as a sad human being—dressing to fit her name), and a tie-dyed peasant blouse that was mostly pink, white, and blue. She looked a bit like a hippie, and often acted like one too, but when it came down to it, she was simply a pathetic true believer: she honestly believed all the religious shit she spouted, with all her heart. Eli was mostly a con artist, spouting shit to ream other people, but Rainbow was one of those who honestly believed this all somehow made sense. Roan actually felt bad for her, and he hated feeling bad for anyone involved in this shit, but Rainbow was as much an innocent as the kids Eli was suckering. She was one of those who would willingly drink the Kool-Aid.

Paris continued to schmooze Rainbow, and she looked at him with slightly glassy eyes, head cocked to one side like a parakeet, and Roan wondered if he could step on the porch without stepping in the brains that must have oozed out of Rainbow’s ears. Did everyone Paris charmed look that goofy? Did *he* ever look that goofy? If he did, he hoped there were no witnesses.

He waited for a pause in the conversation, and then held up the photo of Danny that he'd gotten from his parents. "Rainbow, it's vital that we find this boy. Do you recognize him?"

She didn't immediately look at the photo, even though he was holding it up into her line of sight. (Paris's charisma was a potentially lethal drug; it was shit like this that convinced him of that.) Finally her eyes tracked over to the photo, and she studied it for a moment, her brow furrowing and making her look very much her age. "I... don't think so, no."

"You don't know?" Roan repeated flatly. He didn't think she was lying—she was a bit of a ditz—he just didn't like how tentative she sounded.

She smiled faintly, although it collapsed into a grimace. "I'm not very good with faces."

"You remember me," Paris offered, smiling.

She gave him a playful slap on the shoulder. "Well, of course I remember you! Who wouldn't?"

Indeed; Paris was one of those super memorable types, but then again, people generally remembered people they were attracted to, their desires given form and faces. At least it spoke well of Rainbow that she wasn't into kids.

Paris caught her attention again, hypnotizing her with his flashing eyes and sexy voice, and she paid no attention to Roan as he slipped behind her and entered the church.

The interior was just a bland corridor, a house like any and all others, with blond wood paneling and the occasional knickknack on small side tables. The differences began to kick in once you passed through the "waiting area" (living room), where framed art depicting various cats—all big; no domestic housecats here—hung on all the stucco walls, over velvet sofas and a fireplace too clean to have ever in its life been used. Someone was burning incense, a cloying, perfumey dirt scent, like patchouli, and he couldn't help but sneeze. The bass of the music throbbed through his feet, made him feel like an open wound, and he knew he could track it by vibrations alone.

"I don't recall inviting any fags," a familiar male voice said archly, trying hard to offend and wound.

When he was done sneezing (the incense totally fucked up his sense of smell, and somehow he didn't think it was coincidence), he wiped his nose on the back of his hand, and looked at the man with a nasty little grin. "Hello, Smithers. I see the surgery to dislodge your lips from Eli's ass went well."

Stovak just stared at him, confused by Roan calling him Smithers. Guy Stovak was an odious little man, a whippet-thin, almost sepulchral human being with gaunt, pasty flesh stretched over a skeleton a little too close to the surface, like it was trying to burst through his skin and run away. Everything about him seemed narrow and excessively angular, from his thinning sandy blond hair to his knife blade of a face to the pipe cleaners that other people might call legs. His eyes seemed porcine, too small and too close, glittering like wet glass beneath the shadow of his brows. He was the church's main lawyer, Eli's faithful "lieutenant," and a fairly rancid homophobe who seemed to have a special hatred for him, although Roan had never figured out why. Paris had suggested "Maybe he's secretly attracted to you," which was a thought so nauseating it could make him wake up in a cold, dry heaving sweat.

Finally the Smithers reference clicked—Roan saw it behind his tiny little eyes—and he sneered, his thin upper lip curling enough that Roan thought for one crazy moment he was about to bust out an Elvis impersonation. "Very funny. What the hell are you doing here, McKitchen?" A deliberate mispronunciation of his last name, delivered with such catty venom Roan briefly felt like responding, as camp as possible, "Girlfriend, pul-lease!" He was not a flaming gay stereotype; he was not feminine, nor did he lisp. But something about Stovak's obvious revulsion to Roan having the temerity to be gay made him want to camp it up, becoming a flaming stereotype nightmare, just so he'd run screaming from the room.

But for the moment Roan managed to squelch the urge, and showed Stovak the picture of Danny. "I have reason to believe this minor may be on the premises. I don't need to tell you what a shit-storm of trouble your boss could be in if he's sheltering runaway minors. Or worse."

Stovak barely even glanced at the picture, his face seemingly puckering in his distaste. He had one of those kinds of faces that looked like he was always smelling something bad anyway, so now he looked really disgusted. "I don't like your implication, *detective*. We are law-abiding citizens, and as a place of worship, we are open to all, regardless

of age.”

Slimy little uptight weasel. But at least he’d said something Roan could use. “You’re right. Excuse me while I go worship.” He spun on his heels and went deeper inside the “church,” following the thudding bass down a couple of hallways, until it lead to the double doors leading into the “auditorium.” Really it was just a large room with a high roof, but hey, close enough.

Stovak followed him all the way, blustering and spluttering, saying something about “invasion of privacy,” but if he wanted to try and sue him for something, he was free to. After all, what the fuck did he have? A toaster named Terry, an obsolete computer, and a house with a shattered back door. Fuck yeah, he was rolling in shit! Eli would certainly want it.

He shoved open the auditorium doors, and found himself looking at a seething mass of dancing kids, as gel lights swirled and gothic-industrial dance music pounded and thrummed from an undeniably expensive sound system he couldn’t see in this unevenly lit, cavernous room. It didn’t matter that raves were passé; this was probably very close to one, and it had an almost full capacity.

And while the participants were mostly young, some were older than you’d think a crowd like this would attract.

“What the fuck is this?” he growled at Stovak, turning to face him so sharply that the skeletal lawyer actually backed up a couple steps. What, was he afraid of getting some gay on his Prada suit? “Some kind of infected mixer?”

Skeletor’s look was equal parts scolding and arrogant. “I have no idea what you’re implying—”

“Yes, you do. You can light all the fucking incense you want, but I smelled infecteds on my way in here, and I still smell them all over this crowd. If one kid gets infected in this pedophile mash-up of yours—”

“That’s slander!” Stovak snapped, recovering his tattered dignity in indignation. Roan had been aware that Paris had been standing in the auditorium doorway for the last thirty seconds, not so much watching the crowd as watching them. Stovak was unaware of him, or he would have freaked out at having been roughly between two gay men. “And if you persist in bad-mouthing my client, you will find yourself served with a restraining order—”

“Yeah, bring this to court, asshole! I can’t wait to talk to a judge about this place.”

Paris suddenly let out an exuberant whoop on his way to the dance floor, grabbing the arm of a pretty girl standing near the wall and pulling her out with him onto the floor. Stovak jumped slightly, in spite of the fact that Front Line Assembly had almost completely drowned Paris out. And in spite of the generally crowded floor, Paris was an instant star within less than a minute.

Paris wasn’t the world’s best dancer, but he was graceful, physical, and fearless—in other words, he made up for what he lacked in actual technique with raw passion, and that was more than enough. A small circle of women began forming around him, with him as the eye of the hurricane, and some of the less confident or gifted dancers started to drift off to the sidelines, including men who had been abandoned in favor of Paris. Many teenage boys suddenly remembered to be totally self-conscious.

Stovak sneered at the spectacle. “Your... friend’s the equal opportunity whore, isn’t he?”

One girl snaked her arms under Paris’s shirt as she grabbed him tight enough to mimic his moves as he made them, and he didn’t automatically discourage her. Roan felt the slightest twinge of jealousy, and remembered what they said about the pheromone load being at its peak when the virus was in its transitional phase: the virus wanted so badly to propagate itself it made you more sexually appealing than ever.

And then the genius of what Paris was doing suddenly dawned on him. Paris had come to distract, and that was what he was doing... and there were loads of teenage boys now off the dance floor, looking on from the sidelines in a wide swath of emotions ranging from relief to open, seething hate as Paris danced with and captivated their girlfriends. Roan smiled, almost laughing. He had to remember to give Paris a big kiss for this later.

Roan faced Stovak, and said, with just a hint of a lisp, “He’s just flamboyant. You know how we are.” Stovak recoiled in disgust, and this time Roan did allow himself to laugh at this petty little man.

Leaving a horrified Stovak behind, he headed for the crowd now ringing the side walls, searching for Danny.

7

Black Swan

IT WOULD have been too easy, and he knew it, but it didn't keep him from hoping that he'd find Danny here. On his search, he came across an obviously infected man (no amount of Axe body spray could hide it), a man in his early twenties who was clearly trying to pass for sixteen. He leaned in close so the man could hear him over the pounding music, and said, "Get out of here before I arrest you for whatever charges I care to make up, and don't come back."

The man stared at him, eyes narrowing in hatred. "You can't do that."

"Yeah, I can. You know how much cops like us infected too." He held up his hand, and pointed out the Leo tattoo on his wrist as the man opened his mouth to protest. Although his eyes locked on it, it seemed to take him a moment to put two and two together. "Now scat before I get nasty."

He continued to glare molten death at him, but he must have figured that this was a battle he couldn't win, so he turned and flipped him the bird as he walked out of the auditorium. One down, probably about forty to go. He was just too old for this shit.

Roan gave up on finding Danny here, and decided to start showing the kids his picture and asking if they'd seen him. He'd made up a fairy story about him being a private detective hired by the Nakamura family lawyer to find Danny, as he'd just come into a large inheritance from an aunt. If he said he was looking for him because his parents wanted him home, the kids wouldn't help, but money was the magic word. It was a good thing, and there was a possibility that Danny would be grateful to them for ratting him out. It was a very slim possibility, but hope sprung eternal when it came to easy money—how else did you explain lottery ticket sales? No one ever went broke betting on people's greed, laziness, selfishness, or stupidity; Paris would call him jaded, but it was true. Those

were the easiest bets in the whole goddamn world.

Eventually he hit pay dirt in the form of a pimply fifteen-year-old with pink, spiky hair and a nose ring, making Roan wonder what kind of idiot parent let a kid this young get a nose ring. “I think I’ve seen that kid, like, hangin’ around Tweaks.”

“Tweaks?”

The kid scratched his face and looked around, as if making sure no one was seeing him talk to the narc. Light glinted off gold nose ring, and Roan had to suppress the urge to just rip it out of his nose. “Yeah, he’s like this guy who lives near the, um, tracks, y’know, down in the East End. Like everybody crashes at Tweaks’s when they’ve got no place else to go.”

Oh, so he was one of those... a guy with a crap house where he let teens he didn’t know stay over. Obviously a druggie—tweak indicated a “tweaker,” someone into the meth or Ecstasy scene—who was trying to fit in with a crowd he had either outgrown or simply wanted to take advantage of. Either way, he probably had a sheet of minor crimes as long as his forearm; not a major-league bad guy, just a loser that teenagers would think was “cool” for about three years, then they’d wake up and see the crabs and smell the spilled bong water.

“Can you give me something more to go on? Address, phone number, guy’s real name?”

Nose Ring just shrugged, looking past him as if he was already bored with the conversation. “I dunno, never really thought about it. It’s like at the end of Noble and Westerly.”

He was vaguely certain of the location. The East End was actually relatively rural, and the only Westerly Road he knew of was a couple miles down from his place, so that would have put Tweak at the butt end of the East End, closer to him than to the church. But that part of the East End was—no shock—a haven for meth houses. “Like, thanks,” he said, with a sarcasm that seemed to miss Nose Ring entirely. If he had said “like” one more time, Roan would have punched that kid in the stomach.

Paris was still hogging the dance floor with his harem of admirers, but Roan shoved his way into the inner circle and simply stood there, enduring death looks from teen girls in too much lip gloss, until he finally caught Paris’s eye. He simply jerked his head toward the door, then turned and fought his way through the crowd, leaving the auditorium. Roan went

out a side door, so he didn't have to run into Rainbow or Smithers again. He realized he hadn't gone to see Eli, but fuck it; he could always come back and kick his ass later.

He was out in the car, using his laptop to figure out exactly where Noble and Westerly met (there were so many people using Wi-Fi connections in their own homes, you could just borrow anyone's connection for Web surfing), when Paris finally got out to the car, slipping into the passenger seat, panting and breathless. "Damn," he gasped, lifting up the hem of his T-shirt and using it to wipe his sweaty face. "I forgot what a workout that is. Got a lead?"

"Yeah, a kid thought he recognized Danny as one of the kids hanging around a crash pad owned by a burn-out named Tweaks. I'm just confirming the address." After a moment, and a peek at Paris's wonderfully flat stomach out of the corner of his eye as he continued to use his T-shirt to mop up sweat, Roan asked, "You didn't brush off your jeans, did you?"

He pulled his shirt down, and looked at him curiously. "No, why? Should I have?"

"Yeah. That girl who grabbed your ass left glitter all over the back of your pants."

Paris tried to raise up enough in his seat to look at the back of his jeans, but couldn't quite manage. Once he'd settled back down, he looked over at him with the slyest of smiles. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

He sighed and shut the laptop. "No, I just don't like trying to get glitter out of leather seats."

Paris's wry look didn't go away; in fact, it was starting to get really annoying. "It's kind of cute, you know. To know you actually have some kind of insecurity somewhere."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He tossed the laptop in the backseat, and suddenly regretted asking. "No, forget it, we have to—"

Paris reached over and grabbed his chin, turning Roan's face toward his. He scooted closer on the seat too—boy, these Mustangs had more seat room than you'd think. "You are so funny. You do know I love you more than I've ever loved anyone, right? Well, admittedly, I never really loved anyone before, but saying that blunts the impact. I know you've got the whole hard-boiled detective thing going on, but I know what you're really

like. I know that under all that armor you're the most decent man I've ever met. You're my hero."

He slid Paris's hand off his face, and looked out the windshield. All this "relationship talk" made him feel deeply uncomfortable. Showing emotion was a weakness, and he really didn't like showing it in any place that might be considered public. It was hard enough in private. "Why don't we talk about this later, okay?"

Paris sighed, but was still smiling. "Your way of avoiding it. But it's true, you know. Everybody in the world had given up on me, myself included, and who comes along and gives a damn? A complete stranger: you. And I know the game, you know. People want something from me, I want something from them, it's a fair exchange. So when you didn't want anything from me, I couldn't figure it out. You know how hard it was for me to believe you didn't have an angle? God, you weren't even trying to get into my pants—I had to make the first move. For all your misanthropic bluster, you just want to help people, to keep them from getting hurt. You're the bravest, sweetest man I've ever known. And you're cute when you blush."

"I am not blushing," he protested, but before he could get really mad, Paris kissed him. Paris was a born manipulator—and he didn't mean that in a bad way, he just was; to some people, it came as easily as breathing—and this was probably more of that, but he was one of the greatest kissers he'd ever encountered. His lips were soft, and he tasted of those wintergreen mints he popped constantly, even though they were strong enough to make Roan's eyes water.

Roan tangled his hand in Paris's downy hair, and became aware that he didn't want to stop. His mind was sliding off toward realms that had nothing to do with the case at hand—either case—and that was bad because he was still on the clock. It was Paris's increased pheromone load, or at least that's what he wanted to believe. Normally he wasn't this unprofessional.

He pushed Paris away gently and caught his breath. "We have a case here," he said, by way of explanation.

Paris gave him a sensuous smile, full of promise, and quirked an eyebrow. "You know what they say: all work and no play..."

"Pays the bills." He dry-washed his face, and tried to fight down his own desire. What was an immediate turnoff? He imagined Stovak, and

that did it; he was better than a shower in liquid nitrogen. “God, did I just sound like someone’s dad there?”

Paris sat back in the passenger seat, apparently conceding his point. “A bit, yeah. Throw in a ‘You goddamn kids, get offa my lawn!’ and you’d sound like my grandpa.”

He mock-shuddered. “Shit. I need to get a life before I start pulling my pants up to my armpits.”

“What I’m looking forward to is seeing you in black socks and sandals.”

“If I *ever* do that, you have my permission to shoot me in the head.”

Paris saluted, grinning brightly. “Aye aye.”

Roan started the car and drove off, heading to the side of town that wasn’t so much bad as just pathetic. But since Danny was a rich kid from one of the best neighborhoods, the East End would probably seem exotic, like walking into a Diane Arbus photo. (If he even knew what that was.)

Paris turned on the radio, fiddling with it until he settled on a Franz Ferdinand song, and Roan found himself glancing at him out of the corner of his eye, watching the sun make his hair shine.

He was envious of Paris’s innate brazenness at times; he honestly didn’t give a shit what anyone thought about him. Once they’d started dating, Paris had told him the whole sordid details of his life, which would have made a fabulous memoir. He was a good kid with good parents, growing up in a wholesome suburb of Vancouver, and a star player on the football team as a teenager, dating the hottest girl in school—Darcy, a cheerleader (of course). Publicly. Privately, he was also dating his best friend’s older brother, a closeted homosexual named Brent, who was the lead singer and guitar player of a garage band that honestly thought he liked girls. He juggled Darcy and Brent for two years—from sixteen to eighteen—and no one ever found out; no one even had an inkling, including Brent’s younger brother, Paris’s best friend. (Paris said they made an excuse for him being at their house so much by claiming Brent was giving him “guitar lessons,” and Paris actually did learn a chord or two, but inadvertently.) In his senior year he switched from football to basketball, because all the football players were using steroids and he refused to use anything that “shrunk his junk,” but he was good enough at it that he got a scholarship to college based on his athletic prowess. In the

meantime, he said the sex was much hotter with Brent, but then again, he was a musician (Paris seemed to think that made a difference, but Roan wasn't sure why). He was pretty sure that they were both in love with him, but Paris said he never loved either of them, and he really didn't know why.

He broke up with both of them by the time he got to college, and he continued his juggling ways, going out openly with women, fooling around privately with men. It wasn't that he was ashamed of it—or so he claimed—he just felt it wasn't his place to break a perfectly good womanizing athlete stereotype. Of course, when his loose ways caught up with him—when he was deliberately infected by a woman with the tiger strain and a grudge against slightly whorish men (one of whom apparently infected her)—his “perfect” life completely fell apart. But since he went “a bit nuts,” he never did discover what the actual fallout was; he dropped out of college and out of life, and hadn't spoken to his family since his infection. That was Paris's one weakness, the thing that made him balk, become inexplicably afraid: his parents. Roan had tried to get him to call them, drop them a letter or an e-mail, let them know he was okay, but he wouldn't. He'd never got Paris to tell him why he wouldn't; he claimed he had a happy childhood, that his parents and his sisters were not the type to be cruel, but he just “wasn't ready” to talk to them. Roan got the sense that he was afraid of facing their scorn and shame, that they'd kick him out officially, and Paris wasn't ready to face it. But if they were as kind as Paris claimed, they wouldn't do that. So was Paris needlessly afraid, or was he lying about his relationship with his parents?

Roan knew precious little about family relationships. His mother died shortly after his birth, he had no idea who his father was, and he had spent his life in and out of state homes and foster homes, although the latter were rare: who wanted to raise some freak child, even temporarily? Those that did take him in briefly were only in it for the money, and were usually pretty nasty toward him. One couple reinforced a broom closet as a type of jail cell and kept him in it all the time, even when it wasn't his time of the month. They had also once burned him with an iron; he still had the ghost of a scar on the back of his right hand, a two and a half inch diagonal line thicker than your average scar. He couldn't remember what he had supposedly done to deserve that.

What a pair to draw to they were, huh? Neither of them really had a template for a healthy relationship, so how they'd managed so far was a bit of a mystery. Part of him expected something to go wrong eventually,

but he tried not to concentrate on it for some stupid, superstitious fear of causing it to happen. After all, look what happened to him and Connor.

It was a twenty-five minute drive to the East End, and you could see the transition from afar, as buildings became fewer and farther between, broken up by weedy vacant lots, trailer parks with names like “Ponderosa Glen,” and sad little strip malls, all of which looked like they’d been covered with a thin layer of yellowish grime from the nearby factories. Even the sky began to take on an odd, faintly yellow tinge, like an old urine stain on a discarded mattress, and Roan wanted to just turn the car around now. No good could come from a place like this; this was a Bruce Springsteen song kind of place, the kind of place you ran from and never looked back at.

Eventually he found the house that must have been Tweaks’s, and Nose Ring hadn’t been kidding about it being just beyond the railroad tracks; they were so close to the house they might as well have been in his front yard. Tweaks’s house was the type of prefab single level that was popular twenty-five years ago, and whatever color it used to be, it was now the grim color of curdled cream. The paint was peeling, the windows so dirty they could have been soaped, and in the wide, dusty patch of dirt that made up the front yard was a very battered-looking Toyota Corolla, and a Mazda with a busted-out windshield and a missing left rear tire. The house sat alone on an acre of weedy, overgrown meadow, separated from a paper processing plant by a scraggly copse of pines about two acres to the northwest. Getting out of the car, Roan thought he could smell dioxin on the wind.

“Wow, this place looks fucking depressing,” Paris said, getting out of the car and joining him in gazing at the house. “I want to slit my wrists right now.”

“Crash pads rarely make *Architectural Digest*,” he said, walking up to the water-stained front door.

He was about five feet from it when he smelled the blood.

Roan stopped and held out his arm to stop Paris.

“What is it?” Paris asked.

“Call 911,” he told him, resuming his approach to the house. He was taking deep breaths, parsing the smells, and beyond the heat-baked earth and smells of mildew, the smell of leaking motor oil, there was the sickly

sweet, unbearably meaty scent of rotting flesh.

Paris stiffened, all humor gone from his expression and his voice. “What? Why? What do I tell them?”

Roan had to make a decision, and do it now. Possibly taint physical evidence by busting in and searching for possible survivors, or wait for the meat wagon when someone could be inside, alive but barely hanging on? There really wasn’t much of a choice. “Tell them we have a possible homicide here, and maybe some injured as well. Do it now—the cops always take their fucking time coming to this part of town.”

“What do you smell?”

“Blood. Death.”

“Death?”

“Don’t ask, just do it,” he ordered, then backed up and ran at the front door, turning his shoulder toward it before he hit. If the door was unlocked, he’d feel like a right asshole.

As it was, it wasn’t. There was a crack of wood as he hit the door, as the jamb inside splintered and gave way, the door swinging open with some reluctance. As soon as he was inside the messy house, he was almost overwhelmed with the smell of blood, rot, and shit, and heard a loud, constant buzz. Roan tried not to touch anything with his fingers as he wandered through the house, tasting death in the back of his throat. He found the first body in the hall, halfway inside the bathroom doorway, the lower half severed messily from the top half, although it was hard to tell beneath the undulating blanket of black flies covering the body, the source of the loud hum. The body looked like that of a young Caucasian female, and her visible flesh was discolored enough that he knew she’d been dead for some time.

The next bodies were in what was probably a bedroom, although there was no bed per se, just sleeping bags spread over a floor peppered with crumpled fast-food wrappers. One of the bodies was that of a lanky black teen, his guts spilling out like someone had turned him into a human piñata, and the second body was that of a young Asian female, her head connected to her body by only the slenderest ribbon of sinew. Her blood was splattered all over the walls and the boarded-up window, dried to a dark, dung colored brown. Flies swarmed on them as well, ignoring him as they feasted on this banquet of flesh. If he was correct about the body

positions, the boy had tried to protect the girl, and both had died anyway.

The fourth body was in the kitchen, propped up in a sitting position against the refrigerator, a fallen gallon jug of milk adding a sour stink to the general miasma of death. This was an older Caucasian man with brittle, thinning hair the color and texture of wire; most of his throat and the top of his chest reduced to bloody shreds of meat currently covered by flies and a couple of wasps. As he walked past what must have been the body of Tweaks, he saw a wasp crawl over one of his milky, open eyes.

The kitchen window was broken out, which was how all the flies and the wasps got in. But Roan looked out to confirm a suspicion, and he got it. There was no broken glass in the house at all; it sparkled in the overgrown grass of the backyard like ice.

Whatever had killed them had been locked inside with them, and had gotten out the only way it could, by breaking through the window. And he was afraid of just who it might have been. But he couldn't think that; he had no proof.

Just because Danny was tentatively identified as being here didn't mean he ever was, it didn't mean he'd been infected and already transformed. It could just be a terrible coincidence.

But Roan had never trusted coincidences, and the more there were, the harder they were to believe.

8

Object Definition

ROAN sat against the hood of the Mustang in the blazing hot sun, then took his jacket off and threw it inside the car, wondering if he'd ever get the smell of death out of his clothes. Probably not; he might as well take them home and burn them. They wouldn't be the first clothes he'd had to torch.

The cops had been here for ten minutes, along with the meat wagon and a useless ambulance, and finally the man he was waiting for came out of the house, looking slightly dazed. "How do you find them?" Sikorski wondered, coming up to him. "That's one of the worst kitty crime scenes I've seen in a long time."

"Me too. They've been in there what, about a day?"

Sikorski shrugged, squinting as he looked back at the house. "I think so. It'll be up to forensics to give us the final verdict, though."

Paris had given him one of his ultra-strong mints, the kind that made Roan's eyes water and his nasal passages sting, but it only covered up the taste of rot in his mouth, and hardly did anything about the smell clogging his nose. He was seriously considering inhaling Scope when he got home to see if it could burn the smell out of his sinuses. "I hope the maggots didn't eat away too much of the evidence."

"Doesn't matter much now, does it? The way the bodies were torn up, I think we'll be lucky to get a partial bite imprint." When he turned his gaze back on him, Sikorski was dead serious. "I mean it, Roan. How did you find this?"

The broiling sun was making it feel like the sweat was being forcibly expressed through his pores; the sunlight felt as heavy as a burden. He rolled up the sleeves of his white dress shirt, one of the handful of shirts he always wore when meeting new clients. He'd probably have to burn this one too. "I told Officer Stanhope—"

“The whole story, down to approximate times,” Sikorski interrupted. “You’re a cop’s wet dream; if only all our witnesses were so accurate and attentive to detail. But I don’t want the official report, Roan, I just want to know how the fuck you ended up here.”

That almost sounded like a rhetorical question, like what was the meaning of life, or why did people over sixty always leave their left-turn signal on. He sighed, not really wanting to go over this again. “I was following a lead on a case, like I said.”

“Parents who want you to find their runaway kid. How often do you look for runaway kids?”

“They’re rich and desperate. They think there’s something fishy about his disappearance.”

“Is there?”

Roan shook his head, wishing he’d brought sunglasses since the glare was making his eyes water. “He was a pressured kid, perfect, he probably couldn’t take it anymore. The problem is, it seems he got fascinated with kitties at some point. His parents don’t know that, though.”

Sikorski groaned and briefly closed his eyes, as if in pain. “Shit. How can smart kids be so stupid?”

“Stupidity comes along with puberty. Even the smartest can’t escape it.”

“Even you?”

Roan weighed whether to answer that question or not. Instead, he answered with sarcasm. “You wouldn’t have to ask that if you were ever a teenager, Gordo. But your people are grown in pods, right?”

“Ha.” He paused briefly. “Was he in there?”

“The kid? No. He’s a seventeen-year-old Asian male, and that type of victim was missing from the murder demographic.”

“Could he have done this?”

The billion-dollar question, the one Roan kept asking himself. “The time frame doesn’t match.” Which was kind of a lie. Although it was extraordinarily rare, there were one or two cases where people had transformed as little as five days after infection, but it was even rarer than surviving the tiger strain. Still, if Danny had run away and got himself

infected that very same day... it wasn't completely impossible.

Sikorski glanced back at the house as some of the forensic techs came out to confer with the coroner. Paris was still talking with a cop named Ferlinghetti by his patrol car, but Paris had never set foot inside the house, so there really was no need for him to talk to him this long. Was he flirting with him? Jesus, he just couldn't turn it off, could he? Roan shifted his attention back to Sikorski before he noticed he was watching Paris.

"What did you touch inside the house?"

Ah, back to formal police questions. "Nothing. I visually confirmed the victims as dead"—well, visually and nasally, but they never ask about that, do they?"—"saw the egress point, and came out to wait for the patrol cars, the first of which arrived approximately seven minutes later. I did break down the door, but I had to confirm that there was no one still alive on the premises. If the chief wants to slap my hand about it, fine; I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Civilian safety is paramount in situations like this."

Gordo smirked slightly. "You packing?"

"My HK is in the car, holstered under the driver's seat." Although he doubted there'd be much call for guns in his line of work—private detectives only needed weapons when they spun off into personal security; the movie and novel shit was just that, shit—he did have two to his name, and he usually carried one in his car (or on his person if he was using his motorcycle) on jobs, just in case the improbable happened. His favorite was his .40-caliber Heckler & Koch P2000 SK: compact, lightweight, low maintenance and low trouble (which was also how he liked his men, so it was a bit of a mystery how he ended up with Paris). He was carrying a Taser too, but there were no regulations about or licensing for those. Well, not yet.

Gordo nodded, but he was still smirking. "You know, when I tell people one of the toughest cops I've ever known is a gay infected man, they never believe me."

"Then leave out the gay part. Look, any physical evidence you find tying me to the scene will be minimal; maybe a stray hair. I avoided stepping in the blood and spilt milk too. I know how not to taint a scene."

"Oh, I know. But you are aware you're technically a civilian now, yeah?"

"I'm an infected, Gordon. I never feel like a civilian."

He clearly didn't know what to say to that, so Sikorski looked obscurely grateful when one of the forensic techs summoned him over for a talk. Roan just wiped the sweat from his brow and wondered when it would be considered kosher to go. He really wanted to go burn his clothes.

Paris finally came back, and proffered a bottle of water. "It's warm, but it's what he had in his patrol car."

He took it with a grateful nod, but as he twisted the cap off, he asked, somewhat sarcastically, "Are you always this manipulative?"

Paris gave him a brilliant smile as he leaned against the hood. "Hey, I can't help it if I play people like a cheap Casio. They just make it too easy."

"You missed your calling as a criminal mastermind."

"Who said I did?" He winked at him, then added, "C'mon, I'm your femme fatale... only, not femme."

"Well, I'd hope not. I'd never get it up then."

Paris made a strange noise as he snorted a laugh and then desperately tried to hide it, as laughing at a hideous crime scene really wasn't a very good thing to do. Roan had to swallow his own smirk, but having the water to drink helped a great deal. It was inappropriate to make jokes right now, but actually, many cops and techs who worked violent crime scenes did; it was gallows humor, laughing so you didn't cry or scream. There was only so much horror a person could take; you had to have some kind of outlet.

Sikorski went inside the house again, and the other cops seemed to be ignoring them, so Roan figured it was as good as any time to go. Certainly Sikorski had his number if they had any follow-up questions. They got in the Mustang, which was as hot as a toaster oven, and drove off, with no one apparently caring.

They headed back home in silence, Paris using the radio to fill the void (oh, Roan would have given his left arm for a decent punk station, or at least something different—canned pop made him irritable and depressed), until Roan voiced what was bothering him. "I'm missing something."

Paris, who had been leaning against the passenger door, letting the wind from the open window cool the sweat on his face, looked at him with

surprise. “What? Did you drop your wallet or something?”

“No, I mean about the case. I get the feeling there’s something staring me in the face, but I just can’t see it for some reason.” He slammed his palm on the steering wheel. “Son of a bitch, I hate feelings like this.”

“Maybe you just need to get your mind off it, distance yourself,” Paris suggested. “You know if you try and force it you can never get it, and then you just get more frustrated and crabby.”

“I *do not* get crabby,” he snapped, aware that sounded crabby. Fuck.

He was right and he knew it, but it irritated him to know he was missing something, and not have his mind instantly acquiesce and churn it up. Damn thing. “Fine,” he said reluctantly. “How do you suggest I get my mind off things? Oh, wait—did I really ask that?”

Paris leaned over and squeezed his thigh, giving him a sly smile. “You really are distracted, aren’t you?”

Yes, apparently he was. But not for much longer.

THERE was nothing like sex to make you hungry and tired, even if you’d seen something that you thought would keep you awake and keep you from eating anything forever. If only it could cure diseases instead of spread them, it’d be damn close to a panacea.

Once they got out of the shower, Roan dozed off, but he jolted awake when he thought he heard the buzzing of a thousand flies.

It was just a noise on the television, and not even a hum; nothing even close to the buzz of hundreds of blood-craving flies. Well, okay, a bit close—an American Idol winner.

He grabbed the remote off the nightstand and hit the mute button. He’d have thrown the remote at Paris—he had to turn the TV on?—but he wasn’t here. Listening hard, he heard him downstairs talking to someone. The pizza guy; Paris had talked about ordering a pizza before he nodded off.

He glanced at the alarm clock on his side of the bed, and figured he’d been asleep for about a half hour. Perhaps it should have helped, but he just felt logy and more tired than before. This was pretty

unprofessional; he was supposed to be working ... but on what? His clues had dead-ended, in the most sadly literal way imaginable. Danny might not even be in this state; he could be in Canada, Mexico—hell, he could be in Australia. A runaway rich kid with cash, who had a week on all of them. He could be almost anywhere.

For some reason, that sparked a thought.

It was too obscure to be helpful, and his brain was still fogged, but he got up and walked over to the computer he had set up in the corner on a small desk—an informal “work area” since he still had to repair the floor in what was essentially his study—and booted it up. While it came online, he pulled on a pair of boxer shorts, and turned down the air conditioner.

He had a vague idea, and he followed it. Entering the address of Tweaks’s place, he compared it to the address of DeSilvo’s place: according to MapQuest, they were separated by two point seven miles. A cat could have easily covered the distance in a night. But that was insane! There were lots of places between point A and point B, and there’s no way a cat as seemingly bloodthirsty as this one would avoid so many targets in between.

“Oh dear,” Paris said, coming in the room. He held a pizza box in one hand, and in the other the four-pack of the far-too-expensive microbrew that Roan found to be the only beer he could tolerate. It was a pale ale, surprisingly light, and it didn’t smell or taste like piss, which is what most beer tasted like to him. “Working again? You do stop at some point, don’t you?”

“I was just trying to make sense of something.” He went to the online White Pages and typed in the name “Marley Hanson,” the name of Danny’s friend. He got a phone number, and rather than wait much longer, he got up and grabbed the portable phone, punching up the number. He motioned to Paris to be quiet as the phone rang, and a rather young-sounding woman picked up. “Yeah?”

Charming. “Hello, I was wondering if Marley Hanson was there?”

“Who’s this?”

“My name’s Roan McKichan, I’m a private detective hired by the Nakamuras to find Daniel. I was hoping to talk to Marley about him.”

“Oh.” The girl paused thickly, and he thought he heard a stereo playing in the background. Coldplay—the most innocuous band since Al

Stewart. It wasn't bad music, it was just so aggressively vanilla that blandness was the only objection you could make about it: music as plain, boiled oatmeal. It probably kept you regular. "Well, um, Danny's not in trouble, is he?"

This was Marley? He was expecting a boy, but okay—why not a girl? Marley was kind of an odd name, but then again, he was named Roan. He had absolutely no room to talk. "No. His parents are simply worried about him, and I have reason to believe they should be."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Are you Marley?" He only asked for official confirmation.

She sighed, in that special way of teenage girls—you could just hear the implied eye roll in it—and admitted, "Yeah."

"I think Danny may be in danger."

"Why?"

"I can't talk about this over the phone. Perhaps we can speak in person?" A gamble—she might not take the bait. But he preferred face-to-face interviews, as it was easier to tell when people were lying, when they were hedging or fudging the truth a little. Only a sociopath or a psychopath didn't have some kind of tell, some little tic that gave them away.

After a very long pause, she said, "Umm, I dunno. I gotta work tonight... I guess if you stop by Poison I can talk to ya for a few minutes."

"Poison?"

"Y'know, in the mall? My shift starts at six. If you wanna show up around seven-thirty or so, it's kinda slow."

"Sure, I'll see you there." Once he hung up, he asked Paris, "Is there a place at the mall called Poison?"

Paris was sitting cross-legged on the bed, the open pizza box beside him, a slice in his hand (pepperoni and olive). He took a swig of beer to rinse down the bite he'd just taken, then said, "Uh-huh, it's one of those trendy young adult emo gear stores. Why? You need a nipple ring?"

"That's where Marley works." He sat down on the bed beside him, and grabbed a slice of pizza from the box. Paris handed him a beer, and while he almost refused it, Roan figured, fuck it. One of these beers wasn't

going to affect him, and frankly, after that scene at Tweaks's place, he could use a beer.

Paris gave him a lopsided grin. His hair was still damp, still clung to his face in a way that had to be deliberate; it made him look like a model in some kind of pretentious perfume ad. "Oh joy. You'll love it there."

"You think I don't know sarcasm when I hear it?"

"When we leaving?"

"She said after seven-thirty would be good, so—" Suddenly he realized that that was around sunset. "—um, I guess I'm going solo."

Paris's humorous smile collapsed like a soufflé in an opera house kitchen. It was so sudden it was like he'd never been smiling at all, and he got a slightly distant look in his eye. "Oh... yeah... good luck with that." He tore into his pizza slice like it was a hunk of crusty bread.

Paris only had a couple hours until his transformation. Roan wasn't going to leave him this time; he was going to make sure he got down to the basement in time and was safely contained. There'd be no chances of an accidental release this time; he'd make sure he was safe.

Roan reached over and touched Paris's face gently, brushing his fingertips over his cheek; Paris closed his eyes and leaned against Roan's hand, just for a moment.

"I always miss you when you're not with me." The frightening thing—well, frightening as far as Roan was concerned—was that was almost always true. It was like his world had been monochrome before this vibrant, Technicolor man had come into it. Paris was everything he wasn't, and filled a void he hadn't realized he had. Of course he drove him absolutely crazy sometimes, not in a good way, but that was the really weird thing about love. What attracted you could eventually irritate you, and vice versa. He wished things were a bit more orderly and logical, but they never were.

Paris glanced at him, lips curving in the slightest hint of a smile, and he teased, "Why detective, that sounded almost sappy."

"Don't push your luck," he warned with mock-sternness.

The phone rang then, totally ruining the mood. The mood was killed even more when he glanced at the caller ID: Sikorski again. He gulped down half his beer in two swallows—he just knew he was going to need

the alcohol—and only after he was ready answered the phone. “Did you put out an APB on me?” Roan was only half joking; he was an infected at a crime scene. It didn’t matter that no transformation happened that fast; he’d be a natural suspect.

“I think you’re in the clear,” he replied, but all the lightness was missing from Gordo’s tone. Roan knew that was a major warning sign. “We got a partial bite mark from one of the bodies, and it didn’t match any... except one. One we got very recently.”

Roan felt his stomach fall, turn to stone. Oh God, his first suspicion was right, wasn’t it? “You don’t mean....”

“I do.” Sikorski sighed heavily. “The same cat that killed DeSilvo killed these people. We have a kitty serial killer on our hands.”

9

The Humanity Underneath

“THAT’S impossible,” Roan pointed out, rubbing his forehead. He could just feel a headache gathering there, somewhere deep within the confines of his skull. “Cats don’t have intent. Serial killers do.”

“Fine, but most people will think you’re splitting hairs, “ Sikorski argued. “This is a cat who, in its first noted instance of appearance, is known to have killed five people in two different locations. You have to at least agree it’s a mass murderer.”

Roan groaned and rubbed his eyes, pushing in on his eyelids so he could see the pretty patterns of spots dancing over his corneas. He wanted to say mass killer was more appropriate, since murder essentially implied intent, but he knew that would sound like he was parsing semantics, being a “kitty sympathizer.” (He was in one sense, but not in another.) “Have you checked the areas between Tweaks’s and DeSilvo’s?”

Sikorski scoffed. “We’re looking to see if there were any notes of trouble in the surrounding areas, but that’s a hell of a large area. Unless someone calls something in, we ain’t combing the area by foot. We are going to increase patrols tonight.”

“In prowlers? You know most cats stay away from road traffic.”

“Like we got the budget for foot patrols. If you’re worried about it, Roan, maybe you should get out there yourself.”

“Yeah, right, I’ll do that,” he grumbled, hanging up.

Paris touched his shoulder, rubbing it slightly. “Same cat?” It was hardly a question.

Roan nodded, leaning back against his touch. He gave himself a second to enjoy it before reality came crashing in, and killed any fun he could have possibly had. “Exact same. God, what’s the pattern?”

“Pattern? I thought only people with malice and forethought had

patterns.”

He stared back at him. “Malice and forethought? Have you been watching *Law and Order* again?”

“I try not to, but it has a thousand spin-offs playing on a hundred different channels. Even when you don’t want to watch it, you kinda do anyways. It’s going to be the law eventually, you know—watch *Law and Order* or be executed.”

He shook his head, and settled against Paris, wondering if he could bear to eat another slice of pizza. Recalling the crime scene had killed his appetite. “I know, but... there was something wrong with the scene.” The more he thought about it, the more he realized it. The milk on the floor, the girl surprised coming out of the bathroom. “The kids were killed quick. A couple of brutal swipes or lunges, and that was it—evisceration, decapitation. But Tweaks... he was different.”

Paris tossed the remainder of his slice in the box, and closed the lid, giving him an evil scowl. “Jeeze, thanks.”

“Sorry, I’m trying to figure it out. Tweaks was... well, he was a chew toy, as far as I could tell. The cat must have killed him first, gnawed on him for a while, then heard the other humans and went after them. But that doesn’t make sense. Why would it kill the other humans when it could just leave? The window was right there in the kitchen where Tweaks was killed.”

Paris put his arm around him and shuddered. “Hon, I love you, but if you don’t shut the fuck up about this, I’m gonna break your jaw.”

Roan rolled his eyes. Paris could take gore as long as it was the phony Hollywood kind, or just graphics in a video game; the real kind turned him into a quivering mass of Jell-O. “Fine. It just didn’t look right. Something in the scenario was off.”

“Well, that’s what the cops are for, to figure out things like that. And you’re not a cop anymore, Ro.”

“You’re telling me to back off.”

“I’m telling you to let go. I know you can’t help playing hero, but there’s a limit. Let the cops do the job they’re paid for, and concentrate on the job you were paid for. Okay?”

“Now you’re telling me to follow the money.”

“Of course I am. I’m a gold digger.”

After they both took swigs of their beers (Roan finished his off, trying not to want a second one), he asked, “Why’d you turn the TV on?”

“We both missed *The Daily Show* last night. Figured we could catch a repeat.”

“Oh, okay.”

“We really need a TiVo.”

“You buy it, gold digger.” He tried very hard not to think about the scene at Tweaks’s house, because Paris had been right. Danny’s parents were paying him to find out something about their son’s whereabouts, if he could, not to get involved in a police investigation. No matter that it was kitty-related and made no sense; unless Sikorski asked him to get involved, he couldn’t.

It was surprising how hard that was for him to accept.

AFTER *The Daily Show*, they cleaned the beer bottles and pizza box out of the bedroom, piling everything in the appropriate bags in the kitchen. While recycling had cut their garbage output and bill by a good segment, sometimes keeping track of all the fucking bags was a pain and a half, but what could you do?

Paris took it on himself to chatter happily about trivialities to try and distract him, talking about some new colors of paint he’d seen at the hardware store and how he thought maybe he could paint the living room and touch up his study in warmer, richer colors; Paris was as much a handyman as he was a mechanic, and very good at both. But then again, he’d worked at his uncle’s garage on and off through high school, which was where he got his love of muscle cars. He’d briefly worked as a house painter one summer, which turned him off of exterior house painting for all time, but he didn’t mind interior painting. Apparently it was all a matter of degrees. But Roan couldn’t help but object. “I really don’t want a study colored ‘autumn spice’.”

“Oh, ignore the gay name—no offense. It’s this great, warm, dark orange color, very regal, it’d look perfect with—oh shit.”

He turned away from the sink to see Paris leaning against the counter, bent over with an arm around his stomach and panting as if he'd just taken a shot to the gut. "It's starting early."

Son of a bitch. That did happen sometimes, usually when you weren't ready for it.

There was usually a rhyme and reason to a transformation cycle, but it varied from person to person. It was based on the virus's own cycles rather than anything else, although most infected did transform around sunset, which led some to link the virus to the lunar schedule. (It was bullshit, but people were desperate to make sense of something as senseless as this.) Roan could smell it now, the change in Paris's body chemistry: it made him smell more like a tiger than a human.

Roan helped him to the basement as the spasms wracked Paris, his muscles jumping and seizing beneath his skin, and his pupils were already blown wider than a junkie's pupils, his irises reduced to a hair-thin line. The eyes were the first to change and the last to go back.

Their basement was a typical one, containing the water heater, the circuit breakers, boxes and boxes of stored crap they had no room for upstairs, washer and dryer, and one thing that made it a bit different: a cage. A cube of steel bars, nine feet by nine, there was barely enough room for a large cat to pace circles in it, and there was a key lock on it, simple and old fashioned, with the key hanging just beyond the lock itself. A person locked in the cage could get out quite easily, but an animal without an opposable thumb would be stuck. Which was exactly the point.

He helped Paris inside the cage and then locked the door, hanging the key back on its hook. The basement had nothing but a poured concrete floor, but the cold surface was usually soothing during the opening salvo of the change, when it felt like you were on fire beneath your skin. Roan sat on the basement stairs and just talked, as they both found it comforting to try and fill this awful space with noise. Paris probably lost consciousness about two minutes after he was in the cage, but Roan was talking for himself as much as for him.

Despite what the movies claimed, or edited trans-porn showed, the actual transformation process could take from forty-five minutes to over an hour, with his kind, the virus children, usually taking the least amount of time. He talked about the case, his problem with the crime scene, but was unable to completely block out the noise of bones snapping, crackling

like twigs underfoot, meshing and resetting themselves, becoming something else, as Paris's spasming heels beat out a tattoo on the floor. He didn't look at him because he couldn't, he couldn't bear watching it happen to someone he cared about. He knew if he looked he'd see Paris's flawless skin bubbling as if boiling, stretching and reforming, looking like it was melting as short, fine hairs pushed through his malleable epidermis. The shape of his face would change, the jaw breaking as it pushed out, distended, his mandibles widening and mouth bleeding as new teeth shoved their way through tender gums, and then his pelvis would break and reshape itself into something more accommodating to the legs of a cat. The closest that fiction had ever gotten to showing the painful and physically devastating process was *An American Werewolf In London*, but even then it happened way too fast, as if by time-lapse photography. This process was agonizing, long, and pure torture to watch if it happened to someone you loved. The only saving grace was that the process was so painful and traumatic that the changers lost consciousness as soon as it began.

After a while, Roan didn't even know what he was saying; he was simply rambling, looking down at his own hands as he twisted them, his joints aching in sympathy for what was happening to Paris. Soon the sound of bones breaking under intense muscular strain gave way to the low, watery growl of a cat in pain, and he glanced up at the fully transmogrified Paris.

He was beautiful as a human, and beautiful as a cat, but then again, was there such a thing as an ugly tiger? He was over six feet long, which was kind of "short" for a proper tiger, but since he was three feet high at the shoulder and around two hundred pounds, still broad across the chest, no one would ever call him small in this form either. His fur was orange and white with black stripes, but oddly enough, it was the same sleek, glossy black that Paris's hair was, giving him an indelible mark. Amber eyes as fathomless and empty as an abyss glared at him from a broad feline face, and as the tiger got shakily to its feet, its growl became far more menacing. No, Paris had no apparent consciousness in this form, no memories, and all the cat knew was that it hurt, it was penned up, and there was a man here who smelled like a rival cat. It would blame him for its circumstances, want to hurt him for the perceived pain and captivity. "I guess I'll get ready to hit Poison," he said, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. He had no idea when he'd started crying, but he wasn't really surprised. He stood up with the help of the safety rail. "I'll

let you know how it goes.”

The tiger roared and threw itself against the bars of the cage, wanting badly to get to him, to get to the thing that it thought had hurt it, and its ivory fangs gleamed under the dim light from the naked overhead bulb. A cat as big as Paris could bite a man in half, rip his head off like it was nothing more than a fruit from the vine. And staring at the big, beautiful, enraged cat behind the bars, his lover transformed into mindless beast, he realized that was another problem too: no small cat would have been able to cut a person in half easily. But no big cat would have left a passage so unmarked; the overgrown grass in the backyard outside the window would have been broken in its path. There would be a trail, a visible passage, something showing where it had gone.

So what kind of beast were they actually dealing with here?

ROAN didn't know why he didn't like shopping malls. He wished he could say it was a big lefty thing, like he was opposed to the corporate murder of small businesses, but it really wasn't that (although he was convinced big corporations would destroy the world a buzzword at a time). He just found most malls joyless places, claustrophobic and unappealing, generally full of crap he couldn't imagine needing. Did someone actually get up one day and really look forward to shopping at the Gap? He couldn't imagine.

He was trying to remain focused on his disdain, because it kept him from thinking about Paris, and about the murder scene at Tweaks's. He was suddenly wondering what they had overlooked at the DeSilvo scene, and if all the people in the house at Tweaks's were actually killed by a cat, or if only Tweaks was, and the rest mutilated after death to look like they were killed by a cat. But that was nuts. And anyway, the coroner would soon prove that if it was true. He saw no evidence at the scene indicating the deaths were anything but killing by cat... and yet, the pieces still didn't fit. Maybe they would never fit.

But he had to stop thinking about it. It wasn't his case. And Sikorski was really just an acquaintance, not a genuine friend. He thought it was amusing to know such a macho queer who was also a kitty and had a “super-smelling” ability; it was a lark to him, something funny to tell the wife over dinner, but he never got the sense Sikorski actually liked him as

a person. He liked him as an oddity, a circus freak. He respected him as an investigator, though, and that was the only reason Roan tolerated him. He wondered if Gordo realized how lucky he was.

Poison was in the rough center of the mall, across from a gaming store and between a Claire's and an f.y.e., and the music was so loud it sounded like Poison and the record store were having a contest. He wasn't sure who was winning—Poison was blasting My Chemical Romance and f.y.e. was responding with Kanye West—but Roan figured everyone's eardrums and nerves were losing.

The inside of the store was actually fairly dark, lit with a neon scheme, showing off “rock” clothes that tended toward leather and goth, with some emo duds on the side. There was a counter in the center of the store for jewelry—hey, Par wasn't being sarcastic; you *could* get piercings here—as well as makeup that would make a Cure fan swoon. There was a small rack of CDs against the far wall, and there were some in wire baskets on the glass-topped counter that all seemed to be compilations of various sorts. (Ooh, did that one say “queercore”? He didn't have that CD....)

There were two women behind the counter, one in her mid-twenties with a chain connecting her eyebrow ring to one of her earrings, and a teenage girl with magenta hair cut in a kind of retro bob, wearing black lipstick and possessing eyes so smeared with black eyeliner that she looked vaguely like a ghoul from a low-budget movie. “Marley?” he asked her, and showed her his ID. “I'm Roan McKichan, we talked on the phone.”

She looked at his ID carefully, blue eyes narrowing like she didn't have her contacts in. She was a little plump in the face, not unattractive, but she had squeezed herself into an outfit that was too tight and definitely not flattering. The top was some kind of black lace corset-like affair, paired with a laughably short black miniskirt over plaid-patterned tights. She wore a lot of chunky jewelry, mostly silver colored, including an Egyptian ankh dangling from her neck and several different charm bracelets that jingled when she moved her hands. Was she being retro or goth or retro-goth? He couldn't decide. “Oh, yeah,” she said, chewing loudly on gum that smelled like apples. “I guess I can talk.”

He almost said “Over this noise?” but thought better of it. “Do you know where Danny might have run off to?”

She shrugged, shaking her head, looking at a guy over near the rack of CDs. "Naw. I mean, I know he wasn't all that happy at home, but I didn't think he'd just bail."

The deliberate glance away was the tell: she was lying. She wouldn't meet his eyes. "Why wasn't he happy at home?"

Again the uncomfortable shoulder shrug, the glance away, but this time she looked back at him. "Y'know, his parents were just... on his case. He had to be perfect, y'know. He couldn't get a B, he couldn't let his grade point drop, he had to get into Harvard or Yale or some other place like that. He just wanted to hang out, y'know, go to a concert, but they wouldn't let him."

He nodded, doing his best not to sneeze. She was wearing a perfume that tickled his nasal passages, and was sharp enough that it felt like inhaling shredded glass. Was she into kitties too? He glanced at her jewelry, and saw she was wearing a necklace with a small silver jaguar on it, and one of her charm bracelets was full of cat figurines. "I'm not bad-mouthin' 'em," she continued, chewing her gum like cud. "I mean, they were cool to me an' all, they weren't mean, they never beat him or nothin', they were just very... y'know...."

"Bourgeois?"

She stared at him blankly. "What?"

He could have given her the official definition, but he decided he didn't want to be condescending or a dick. Marley was helping him more than she realized, and would help him even more, whether she knew it or not. "Uptight; conservative."

That made her half-shrug, half-shake her head again. "Yeah, I guess."

He pretended he'd just noticed one of the CDs in the wire basket, and picked it up and looked at it while keeping his arm flat on the counter, his wrist turned up so his Leo tattoo was plainly visible. "Your boss is giving me the stink eye," he muttered. "Pretend I'm buying something."

She glanced over at her manager, who was currently at the second cash register ringing up a purchase, and then turned back toward him. "Well, maybe you should go. I don't—" Marley did the slightest double take upon seeing his tattoo, and tilted her head to the side, as if making sure she was seeing what she thought she saw. She then leaned toward

him, eyes as large and bright as new silver dollars, and asked in a hushed tone, “Is that a mark?”

Some kitties did go and “mark” themselves, literally advertising their affliction on their sleeve. That wasn’t why he had a tattoo, but it didn’t matter right now. He nodded, giving her a sly look as he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’m a cat, yeah. I’m a virus child.”

“Really?” Her eyes were shining now. He was another boring adult when he walked in, but now he was suddenly exotic and appealing. “Cool.”

He thought of Paris’s breaking bones, and wanted to backhand her across the face. Not cool, not sexy, not exotic; painful, heartbreaking, agonizing. But if he was going to play this right, he couldn’t let his true feelings show. Instead he smiled in a slightly lecherous manner. “You..?”

“Oh no, I’m not. But it’s kinda... I mean, it must be cool to just become something else.”

“You can’t imagine.” No, she couldn’t; none of these kitty wannabes could. “Do you ever go to the, um...” He looked around, as if making sure they were alone, and felt like a fool. He must not have looked like one, though, because she seemed to be buying it. “The church? Divine Transformation?”

A grin bloomed across her face, as sudden and stark as a bullet wound. There was such joy in it, such raw need, that it genuinely frightened him. No one should be so unhappy with themselves. “Are you kidding? We go all the time.”

There it was—we. Not she; *we*. As in her and Danny.

Bingo.

10

Touch Me. I'm Sick

PRETENDING to be an infected sex predator on the prowl was one of the few deceptions that could make Roan physically ill.

Normally he had little trouble bullshitting about anything—he liked to think that was part of the job of being a detective—but those people he hated in a reflexive, belligerent sort of way, kind of like Fox News commentators or televangelists (who were often sex predators, so maybe that was a chicken and egg sort of thing). Any predator was bad enough, but the ones who preyed on kids were the ones he wanted to flay alive and nail to barn doors with an industrial staple gun. He was sure some psychiatrist would have a field day with that, say it was related to his miserable childhood (and was there something he wasn't mentioning?), but at the end of the day he could give a shit. People who preyed on those weaker than them—and why would anyone prey on someone stronger than them?—needed an ass-kicking of galactic proportions.

This was when he really missed Paris. Paris was an award-winning actor that the Academy would never notice. He could pretend to be whatever he needed to be to get the job done. He said he'd been training all his life, pretending to be a perfectly straight lady's man and something else entirely at other times; he could shift identities as he slid between worlds, so much so that it became second nature for him to put on a mask. Being honest was difficult as a result; Paris said that even now, when he was generally too exhausted to pretend to be anyone else for long, he fought the impulse to lie when he didn't have to, to adapt to whatever people wanted from him. Roan found it astounding, as Paris made lying an art, made deception a beautiful dance. Him? It felt like he was pulling his own teeth out with ice tongs, and everybody knew it; he felt like people could see through him so easily that they only went along with the charade to humor him.

Still, Marley was clearly buying him as a scumbag (now that was an

ego blow). He mentioned the rave thing that was going on right now, and she admitted she never got out there during the weekdays because of work and school. She mainly went on the weekends. She implied that there were some great parties at the church, and “they” met a lot of friends there. Some schoolmates even, people they didn’t even know were into the whole “kitty thing.” He wanted to ask her for names, but her trust was fragile, and he didn’t know how to do it without breaking the spell. Besides, it didn’t matter; that wasn’t what he was actually after.

He asked if Danny ever went during the weekdays, which reminded her that he was also a detective looking for her best friend (whom she surely knew was running away; she had probably helped, probably knew where he was), and she cooled off a bit, becoming deliberately vague. Her boss finally did come over and reminded her this was work, not a coffee shop. Roan looked at her directly and said, “Sorry, ma’am,” secretly enjoying the way her eyes grew hard at being called “ma’am”—no one with a nose ring ever expected to be called that. Marley enjoyed it too; she turned away, smirking, so her boss didn’t catch her.

He bought the queercore CD, and they discussed seeing each other at the church sometime. Apparently she must have thought a straight man would enjoy a CD such as this. Well, it was possible—he enjoyed straight people’s music from time to time too.

Roan wandered down toward the mall exit, which cut through the food court, and he passed an A&W stand. They still existed? Wow. Was there anything more sickly sweet and disgusting than root beer? He was hard-pressed to think of anything. So he went and bought a root beer, then sat down at a table in an empty corner of the food court. (Wasn’t hard to find, since the food court was rather empty at this time of night). He took out his cell and called Sikorski.

It rang three times before a female voice answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, Connie, it’s Roan.”

“Roan!” Oddly enough, she sounded happy to hear from him. “How are you?”

He had to kill a minute with small talk. Connie was Gordo’s wife, whom he’d met at a funeral for another police officer. She was a rather matronly woman, slightly plump in that soft, older-middle-aged way, crow’s-feet starting to make a crease of her lead-colored eyes, her straw-blond hair showing streaks of gray and framing her apple-pie face like a

designer scarf. She looked like she smelled of lavender and baby powder and made her own oatmeal raisin cookies (which were both true). She seemed like she was too good for Gordo, and too delicate to be a cop's wife, but he suspected that only the latter was false.

After some pointless chatter where he lied and said everything was just hunky-dory, she put Sikorski on the phone. "This isn't a social call, is it?" he asked sarcastically.

"I just wanted to make sure you rode the coroner hard, make sure he doesn't just superficially glance at the bodies of the kids."

Sikorski groaned. "And why would you think he'd be so unprofessional, Roan?"

"That crime scene was fucked-up. You know that, right?"

"Of course it was. We had four bodies."

"No, I mean beyond badly mangled people. It's fucked-up. How could the kids be killed in that way while Tweaks was chewed on like an old bone? Why did it chew on Tweaks but kill the others quickly? How was one segment of the house unaware of what was going on in another segment?"

"Huh?"

"The milk on the floor. Tweaks was surprised getting milk from the fridge. One kid was in the bathroom and two were in a bedroom, and this is a single level. Someone being killed would have screamed, would have alerted the others, but it looks like they were all surprised. How did that work?"

"Roan—"

"And the grass outside the window. You saw how overgrown the backyard was, right? So how come there's no path in it? A big cat would have broken the grass, it would have left a trail. There wasn't one. How does that make sense?"

"Roan!" Sikorski snapped. "You aren't on the force anymore. This isn't your investigation. You weren't even supposed to be at the scene."

"No, but I was, and I'm telling you this stinks to high heaven."

Sikorski sighed heavily, and started to lecture him on this being his case and Roan technically being a civilian now. Roan had heard it before,

so he didn't really listen, he just sipped his too-sweet soda and read the back of his CD. No Pansy Division?! Sacrilege. But why he cared when he had all their CDs he had no idea. Maybe it was the principle of the thing.

Finally, when he could get a word in edgewise, he said, "Just promise me you'll look into it, Gordo, that's all I ask. Don't let this get dismissed as a routine kitty kill."

"There's nothing routine about a cat kill, and you know it."

"Tell that to the boys downtown," he replied, and then his phone obliged his little snit by losing the connection just then. Fine. He could have called him back but he just didn't feel like it.

If Paris was here he'd probably be lecturing him too—not your case, not your case—but he began to wonder what possible connection there could be between Tweaks and DeSilvo, if any. Seemed like the sort of thing worth investigating.

But that was for later. He finished his sickly sweet root beer and tossed the cup in the trash. He needed to get to the church, he needed to confront Eli.

And without Paris trying to hold him back, he might be able to beat something useful out of him.

BY THE time he arrived, he could actually find a place on the street to park. There were still too many cars there, and he thought he could hear the strains of AFI leaking from the area near the auditorium as he approached the church. In the dark, with the wan light from streetlamps and porch lights, and the homey glow of yellow lights bleeding from curtained windows, this place looked harmless, almost welcoming, a harbor in the darkness. Maybe that's why it was so attractive to kids.

The path to the porch was dim, but the house itself was fairly well lit on the inside. By the time he reached the porch, he was torn on whether he should just storm in or knock. It was technically a church, but right now it seemed like a house. Luckily they had some closed circuit cameras watching the front, and Rainbow opened the door as he neared it. "Roan, you're back." She pasted on a weak, phony smile that seemed to strain her in some mysterious fashion. She didn't seem that happy to see him.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," he told her, pushing the door open gently and forcing his way inside as she looked over his shoulder, searching for Paris. "I've just confirmed that Danny, the boy I'm looking for, was here on several occasions, including quite recently. "

She backed up into the foyer, her innocent little doe eyes looking blurry and confused. "We don't do anything illegal."

"I'm not saying you have. But you know there are some members who are more inclined to help kids who may be in trouble, may be unhappy at home... especially if they're young boys."

She started shaking her head halfway through his sentence. "We don't—"

"He could be in serious danger," he interrupted, fixing her with a stern look that had made a few weak-willed suspects fold in its time. "Look, we all know I don't like Eli and he doesn't like me, but I have no interest in nailing the church with anything right now, no matter what Guy thinks. I just want to find Danny before he turns up dead."

The use of the word "dead" visibly shocked her. "Dead? What are you implying?"

"Have you heard what happened at Tweaks's? Did that make the evening news?"

He'd been subtly advancing down the hall as they talked, forcing Rainbow to keep backing up, and letting him deeper inside the church. The music had lowered until it was barely a thrum, and he could still smell a rather large amount of people, but elsewhere. The incense had faded to a background irritant, and it was because of it he picked up the faint but undeniable scent of a cat. It was diluted, but quite recent.

"I don't watch the news," she admitted. "It's never good."

He had to give her that. "Tweaks was killed, Rainbow, and so were three kids staying at his place."

She gasped hard, bringing a hand to her throat as tears welled in her eyes. It could have been a magnificent bit of fakery, but he didn't think so; Rainbow just wasn't that good an actress. "What? How? What happened?"

"I don't think you want the details. But Danny was supposed to be there, and I have a horrible feeling that someone's after him. I'd like to get to him before the killer does. So I need those names, Rainbow." Okay, he

was bullshitting her, but he knew Danny was probably camped out at the house of one of these oh-so-helpful church visitors, who were as kind as could be to those with young, firm bodies.

She looked torn, her bottom lip quivering slightly as she squeezed her eyes shut in sorrow and doubt, but she let out a little sigh. “I don’t know—”

“This could be life or death. I’m serious.” And he was, if not precisely honest. He could see the thought process going on behind her eyes as soon as she opened them, the flicker and fade of emotions, doubt, and loyalty to the church. But Rainbow didn’t just look like an old hippie, she kind of was one too, and that’s how he knew she’d cave and give him what he wanted. She’d be more concerned about the welfare of the kids than her boss’s approval. “I may know some people who can help you. Wait here,” she said, disappearing through a side door.

But Roan had no intention of waiting. He decided to see if he could follow the scent of the cat who had passed through here recently, although that was far from easy. In fact, it was damn near impossible in a place where lots of people, especially infecteds, passed through, but with the incense extinguished he figured he had a good shot at it if he concentrated. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the smell, and carefully worked his way through the lobby and its pictures of big cats, and turned into the corridor beyond. He thought the scent headed toward the auditorium, but no, it headed the opposite way down the hall, where it seemed to get stronger by the simple virtue of so few people coming this way and the air conditioner being absent from this end of the hall. He opened his eyes as he banged into an end table, and he quickly snatched a vase of dried flowers out of the air before it hit the carpet. The scent trail seemed to lead upstairs, which was strange. Only a few select church “members” lived on the upper levels, and as far as he knew, none of them were actually infected. Had that changed? Or had someone decided to sneak their bit of jailbait upstairs? Perhaps both. Oh boy, he couldn’t wait to see.

He started up the stairs, which were narrow and creaky, probably the original stairs of the house that had never been upgraded. There was a wall sconce that looked tarnished with age, another holdover, but it was sadly dark so he couldn’t enjoy the feeling of being in a Victorian mystery, however fleeting.

“Roan,” Rainbow cried from below, and even though he didn’t answer her, she heard the creak of the stairs and looked up toward him.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, lowering her voice to a strained whisper. She quickly came up the stairs after him, a small piece of paper gathered in one bony fist.

She was too late, of course. He was in the upstairs corridor, which was narrow and unlit, so much so that he could barely make out the braided carpet runner or the separate doorways down the corridor. One was ajar, but it was simply a bathroom; he could smell the 1,000 Flushes from here. He’d just started down the hall when Rainbow did something unusually bold for her—she grabbed his arm. It was pure reflex, he didn’t mean to, but he yanked his arm clear of her grip more forcefully than necessary; he was concentrating on the scent trail and he didn’t like another of his senses (touch) being engaged. She took a step back, giving him some room. “What are you doing up here?” she whispered fiercely. “Guy won’t like this.”

“Guy can go fuck himself,” he snarled. “In fact, he’d best do so, ’cause I can’t imagine who else would.”

“You shouldn’t be up here.”

“I smell a cat.” The scent went straight down the hall; he was sure of it. The hall ended with a white painted door, the largest one on the floor.

He sensed Rainbow stiffen behind him; it was like the charge in the air jumped a thousand fold. “Why—you can’t... I mean, there’s no cats—”

“You’re lying.” She was. And more to the point, she was nervous, scared. Who the fuck was behind that door?

He just went ahead and tried the doorknob. It was locked, so he slammed his shoulder up against the door, once, twice, three times. Finally the door frame began to splinter as he put his weight behind it and got angrier and angrier, and finally it slammed open.

What it revealed was a fairly spacious bedroom showing signs of damage—broken mirrors and a shredded chair were strewn across the wheat-colored carpet, the bed listed to the side in a broken wooden frame—but what caught his eye was the movement of the curtain. The color of eggshells, it billowed and flapped in the breeze coming from the broken window like a trapped and frantic ghost.

The smell of cat was strong, as this one had clearly marked its territory, but there was something else. The faint smell of Ferragamo

aftershave permeated the room beneath the cat scent, and he knew of only one person in this place who wore Ferragamo: Eli.

Rainbow walked into the broken room, squeezing past him, and looked around with genuine shock. “He... he said he wasn’t feeling well....”

Eli was now an infected. Worse yet, he was on the loose in his cat form.

Roan wondered if he’d just solved the case.

11

A Town Called Malice

ROAN knew it was far too late to catch Eli—he didn’t even know what form of cat he was, except not tiger—but he decided to look for him anyway. He grabbed the note from Rainbow’s hand and headed downstairs. He half expected her to follow, but she didn’t.

There was no way in hell that “cat Eli” would be waiting outside, loitering in the bushes around the church and ready to pounce on him, although he had held out small hope that maybe he would be. He wasn’t afraid of the transformed cats, not like everyone else was, and he honestly wasn’t sure why. He knew he should be; they’d want to kill him more than most people because he smelled of a rival cat. He just figured he could handle one, and if he died, well, he probably deserved it. Was that fatalism? Even when he was on the force, he had no fear of going into a domestic situation or providing backup when there was a hostage situation, because all he could think was, “I’ve survived worse than you.”

He went back to his car and pulled out his HK P2000 SK from beneath the seat, clipping the holster to the waist of his jeans and putting on his jacket so it concealed the weapon from view. He wasn’t worried about a cat seeing it—they could smell it anyway, and wouldn’t care—but about people catching a glimpse of a strange guy with a gun and calling the cops on him. Nothing sent a cat fleeing like screaming sirens and flashing lights. He made sure the safety was off and he had a full clip before snugging the gun in the holster.

He took a good long look up and down the street, hoping for some sign of where Eli might have gone. If he’d changed around the same time as Paris (and since the transformation was based on viral cycles, that was the poorest bet you could make), he’d had two and a quarter hours on him; over two hours in which he could have struck out and hunted. He probably wasn’t anywhere near here anymore.

Or he could have been just around the corner. Cats were inherently

unpredictable, especially the human transformed variety. The one thing you could count on was they always came home to their territory before the virus cycle ebbed and they became human again. The general assumption was they started to feel bad and retreated to where they felt safest, and for whatever reason, that was where they first found themselves. So he could stakeout the church and simply wait for Eli the cat to come back, but he just knew he'd fall asleep due to boredom before he did. Truth be told, he was exhausted; the lack of sleep yesterday was catching up to him, and his forty-minute nap had given him a brief second wind that had already petered out. He was just too old for all-nighters, especially two days in a row.

But he wasn't giving up yet. He just picked a direction and started walking, hoping he'd find some sign that a big cat had been that way. If it had marked its territory along the way he'd catch a scent, but otherwise olfactory cues wouldn't help him now. Out in the open, in a (mostly) residential neighborhood close to a busy street, there were too many competing scents for one to stand out. Well, maybe car exhaust, but that was no help at all, and too much of it gave him a headache.

He tried to give off a "fresh meat on the hoof" vibe, but that was hard to judge. The night was quiet, save for its usual noises: the strangely arrhythmic thuds of a bass-heavy car stereo in the distance, the faint barks of dogs, the noise of a television bleeding through the walls of a house he walked past, the blue light almost strobing in the darkened window. He was catching no hint of big cat, seeing nothing helpful, and while he was trying to radiate a "tasty victim" aura, he really didn't know if he could. He slowed by big hedgerows and beneath overhanging tree branches, places where a big cat could lurk and hide. "Come on, big boy, come and get me," he muttered, no longer one hundred percent sure what block he was on.

Oh wow—had he just said that? There wasn't a gayer thing to say on Earth... well, besides "You know what this room needs? Chintz!" And frankly he wasn't gay enough to say that under any circumstance, unless he was being a smartass.

Eli wasn't anywhere near here. He had run off, possibly out toward Tweaks's place... and could he be responsible for that? It was possible, but frankly, anything was possible there. He would insist to his dying day that that crime scene didn't make sense, no matter what the medical examiner concluded.

He knew he could stakeout the church, wait for Eli the cat to come back, and simply shoot him in the head. While it wasn't legal for police officers to shoot "transformed humans" without attempting humane capture first, civilians could shoot a transformed in an open, public area without any penalties. It was considered a matter of public safety: the public couldn't be expected to have the major-league tranquilizers and stunning equipment that the cops had access to, and they had a right to defend themselves and other people. It was controversial, especially since rednecks put together posses that did nothing but drive around all night and look for cats to shoot, but Roan knew he could use it to his own advantage: he could murder Eli, and he wouldn't even get a slap on the wrist. It was a thought he mulled over as he walked back toward his car.

He knew he could kill a person—a cat—if he had to. He had joined the police force, however briefly, and if you couldn't pull the trigger, you never got through training. It could be boiled down to *Star Trek* crap, mainly "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." He also knew, thanks to his illustrious childhood, that there were simply some people who honestly deserved to die; there were some people who had no *raison d'être* besides causing misery and pain to others. Oh, he knew the arguments—who was he to judge the worth or life of a person, blah blah blah—but he also knew, from his own experiences, that there were some people that life would simply be better off without. It was cold, cruel, possibly psychopathic, but it was how he felt, what he sensed to be true. If life was made up of many kinds of people, there would be some in this vast ocean who were simply predators or parasites, remoras who existed only to drain the life from others. All they could do was destroy.

Not that he would ever back wholesale murder, or even the death penalty when it came to that, but he knew of at least a couple of people it would have been worth going to jail for. They were probably still alive, unless someone else had got them, but he knew if he ever ran into those people again, they'd better hope he wasn't armed.

He walked back to his car without being followed or stalked, and as he got in, he took off his holster and tossed it into the passenger seat. He had a free pass to get rid of Eli once and for all, a get out of jail free card plopped in his lap. Would he use it? Would Paris forgive him? That was the big one, the killer. Paris would know it was cold blooded; he'd know he staked him out to exterminate him.

He had some time to think about it; if Eli was new to transforming,

he could have four to six more active days before the virus went back into dormancy. It would give him time to consider whether he wanted to add murderer to his résumé or not.

COMING back from a transformation was akin to regaining consciousness after being hit and dragged by a train. Or at least Paris imagined it to be so; he'd never been hit or dragged by a train. But it seemed appropriate somehow.

He had to lie there for five minutes after he came to, feeling his muscles spasm and tasting coppery blood in his mouth, before he thought he could bear the pain enough to move. He wasn't strong enough to stand, so he had to crawl to the cage door, and after two tries managed to unlock it. There was no way to describe the pain; he felt like he had been pulverized, tenderized to within an inch of his life by the biggest meat hammer in existence. His muscles were probably as tender as veal.

Ro had left a first aid kit just outside the cage door, out of swiping distance. It was one of their medical kits, though, which meant instead of Band-Aids and gauze it was full of painkillers and hypodermic needles. Paris liked to call it the Courtney Love edition. He had to rest between opening the case, fishing out a needle, and loading one up, all actions that shouldn't have been exhausting and yet somehow were, especially when you were in so much pain your hands couldn't stop shaking and your eyes couldn't stop tearing up, and your muscles decided to have spasms that made your whole body tremble like you were an unstable fault line.

Paris reflected on the general irony of him being such an expert at shooting up as he stabbed the needle into his thigh and depressed the plunger. He used to hate needles, and he still did really, when he wasn't in so much pain, but at times like these he loved the needle. The needle was his friend now; the needle made it all stop. He lay on the cool concrete floor of the basement as he waited for the drugs to fully take effect, waited for that slow, warm wave to engulf him and carry him away to a tropical, forgiving sea.

He just laid there, staring up at the ceiling, feeling fantastic—maybe that's why Courtney was such a big fan of drugs—and finally pulled himself up slowly, using the base of the stairs to help him climb to his feet. He still felt strangely loose, like all his joints had been dislocated and his

bones replaced with rubber, but the good thing about the drugs was he didn't care.

He went straight to the downstairs bathroom and took a shower. The sense of smell was always strongest for about an hour afterward, and he could never stand the rank, musky smell of himself. Ro always said he didn't smell that bad, but he was just being kind, because for a little bit Paris had a near-feline sense of smell and he couldn't believe Ro could stand to be in the same room with him.

He felt lightly buzzed, relaxed, like he could go lie down or maybe just go out drinking, maybe go listen to some singer-songwriter who's having problems with her boyfriend. But his stomach didn't so much growl as roar, and he had to go have a bite before it started digesting itself.

Paris turned the TV on for some welcome noise, and he got the *BBC World News*, which was always infinitely depressing, but that Daljit Dhaliwal was a hottie. If someone had to tell him there was another war in Eritrea, she was the easiest on the eyes, and that voice was like liquid silk. She could announce the end of the world, and he'd still get a boner.

Ro was home—the Mustang was in the driveway, and his bike was still in the garage—but since he heard nothing upstairs, Paris figured he was sleeping. Sunlight glowed like radiation beyond the curtains, and it was already incredibly warm; it'd probably be in the nineties again. He hated heat waves, but there was nothing he could do about it but whine and turn on the air conditioner.

He ate two frozen croissant breakfast sandwiches he nuked in Chiquita the microwave, a breakfast burrito, an Australian toaster biscuit, and a slice of cold pizza with a can of cold, overly sweet coffee. He reminded himself of a pig in a trough, but it wasn't his fault he was always left ravenous after a transformation. He did wonder how many preservatives and grams of fat, salt, and sugar he'd just ingested, but did it matter? The virus would kill him long before his arteries would clog.

He went upstairs to get some clothes, and discovered Roan sacked out on the bed, lying on his back with half of the tan, suede-like comforter on the floor, the other half tangled around his legs. He was so deeply asleep that even turning on the AC didn't wake him up, so Paris figured he must have only gotten to bed a couple of hours ago.

Ro had left a yellow legal pad on the nightstand on his side of the bed, and Paris glanced at it. Sometimes Ro left him notes if there were

developments in a case, and he was hopeful, because maybe if he solved one case, he could concentrate on the other. The note was only partly for him, though; the rest of it was Ro clearly making notes for himself, things to do or keep in mind when he was awake:

Eli's infected, was out last night, loose. Killer? Haven't done anything yet—weighing options.

Marley probably knows where Danny is, but wouldn't tell me. Probably with someone they met at the church. Rainbow gave me three names: Timothy Nelson, John Hatch, Andrew Freeman. Follow up.

Connection: Eli to Tweaks? Eli to DeSilvo? Eli to both?

Follow up: Did DeSilvo steal from drug busts? Is this significant to his death?

Eli was rumored to have a drug problem in college. Coincidence? Something else?

Who infected Eli? How much of the church is now infected? (Rainbow clear—Guy missing. Significant?)

Need: Migraine strength Excedrin, microwave popcorn, AA batteries, paper towels, pineapple orange juice

There was something a little jarring about finding a shopping list beneath all these names of suspects. Roan could really multitask, he had to give him that.

But the most startling thing was the first item. Not Eli being infected; really, that was only a matter of time if he was at all serious about the “holiness” of transformation. It was what Ro had written after that: *Haven't done anything yet—weighing options*. What options were there? Calling the cops and reporting him as an unrestrained infected in a transformation cycle, or... what? Shooting him?

Oh holy shit.

This was Roan thinking out loud, and as a consequence drawing him into the debate. If Ro had honestly wanted to kill Eli, he could have done it and just claimed that he was menaced or something (although he found it personally a bit hard to believe that there were any cats out there with the balls to menace Roan), and Paris would have believed him simply because he would want to believe him. But the thing he really admired about Ro was his brutal honesty with himself; he could lie as much as the

next person, but he never believed his own bullshit for a minute. The fact that he even bothered to mention it pretty much meant he wasn't going to... probably. Still, Paris now knew what he was going to do today.

He picked up the comforter and draped it over Roan, pausing briefly to look down at his scar. Since he wasn't wearing a shirt and was lying on his back, it was quite visible. Even though most transformed lost their scars during transformation, Ro still managed to hold on to three, which he called "ghost scars": they were all so pale they looked white, slightly raised as if in relief. The two most visible were the smallest ones, one on the back of his hand and the other on his face, slightly subsumed by his eyebrow, while the most often hidden scar was the largest, a white line that started at his left shoulder and snaked along beneath his collarbone, tracing an irregular line toward the hollow of his throat. Paris tried to imagine what could cause a scar like that, and all he could think of was a knife, but Ro had denied that was the cause. But he never said what the cause was, and only by precision wheedling had Paris ever got him to admit the one on his hand was due to an iron. He didn't talk about his scars any more than he talked about his childhood, although Paris had picked up enough bits and pieces to figure out it was hellish. The thought that someone did this to Roan as a child infuriated him. He wanted Ro to name names so he could go and kick their ass, even though Ro was more than capable of doing the ass-kicking now. He pulled the blanket up to the scar, and then kissed him gently on the forehead, trying hard not to wake him up. His eyes didn't stop moving beneath his eyelids, so he took that as a good sign.

Paris finished getting dressed, grabbed his keys for the Mustang, and left the house, happy to have a mission no matter how grim it was.

He probably shouldn't have been driving, considering he was on twice the maximum dose of an illegal painkiller, but he felt oddly sober, probably because he was still in an incredible amount of pain. Pain was a great equalizer. He drove carefully anyway.

The thing about Eli—the thing he never told Roan—was that Paris felt that he was his own evil twin. He was a reasonably good-looking guy with lots of charisma (well, Paris knew he was better-looking, but why kick a man when he was down?); but whereas Paris devoted himself to hedonism, Eli had actual ambition and devoted himself to building a cult. He got people to worship both him and his own beliefs, no matter the fact that his beliefs were quite openly nuts. Perhaps this is what would have

happened to Tom Cruise if he hadn't gone into acting.

Anyway, Paris knew that his charisma, what his own grandmother called "the charm"—she claimed it ran in the family, although it skipped a person here and there—was a weapon of sorts. He never had problems getting dates, getting laid, and he had no idea what other guys complained about. He could get anyone he set his mind to, and he used to think he was quite special, but then he met Eli, and he realized he was just in a small minority of people who contained enough charm to be dangerous. And the more they believed they were special, the more they bought their own bullshit, the more dangerous they were. Eli had hit a special level, a plateau that few could reach: he was a cult of personality now, insulated in his own greatness, confident in his near-godhood, and now that he had gotten himself infected, his people were probably going to worship him directly and forget about the rest of it. It was all pretty fucked-up; actually, it used to be fucked-up. Now it was *so* fucked-up there was no adequate phrase to cover it. And none of this would be so bad if it was a small thing, even regional, but thanks to the Web he had an Internet empire, and he was head of the biggest kitty cult around. He was power and he was trouble, from several different angles. Even if Ro legally killed Eli in his kitty form, Ro would probably be assassinated by an angry follower.

By the time he reached the church it was pretty quiet, and he found a place to park right out front. Getting out of the car, he noticed he'd accidentally put on one of Ro's T-shirts, his Clash one. Normally Ro's shirts were a bit small for him, but his Clash shirt was oversized, so it was just about a perfect fit for Paris. He still couldn't quite get over that: a cop into punk. It seemed wrong somehow, but he bet he could chalk up some of it to Ro's contrariness. He never liked to be what anyone would expect.

Rainbow was sitting on a wicker chair on the far right side of the porch, working on her laptop, enjoying the early morning heat. She looked up as he came up the stairs, and she gave him a brilliant smile, which he returned, cranking up his charm. She had dark crescent moons under her eyes, suggesting she was sleep-deprived. "Paris! How good to see you."

He heard the "without your damn boyfriend" in that, and he had to swallow a laugh. It was unfair of him to use the charm on Rainbow, but he really did think of himself as Roan's "guy Friday." What Ro couldn't get by smarts or muscle, Paris could get by guile or charm. He couldn't actually pay Ro back for saving his life, but maybe he could make a small contribution when possible. "Good morning to you too. I was wondering if

it was possible for me to get a private conference with someone.”

She put her laptop aside and stood up, and he pretended not to notice the hopeful gleam in her eyes. A “private conference” wasn’t just talking one on one with a “counselor” here; it was the first step in indoctrination, in joining this wondrous cult. And he bet Rainbow would have loved to get him in a private conference. “Oh really? That’s fantastic! I know you’re quite special, Paris, and we’d be honored to have you.”

Quite special? Oh yes, he was tiger strain—also known as the “suicide cat.” No one knew why a tiger strain was worse than any of the others, but it was, and as far as he knew, he was the only living tiger in the tri-state area. What an honor; he felt like he should have a sash and perhaps a tiara, waving to bystanders from the back of a convertible. “I just have a request, if you’d indulge me.”

“If I can.”

“I want the consultation with Elijah.”

Her thrilled little smile faltered, cracked slightly, and she made strange motions with her hands, like they were fluttering birds trying to escape. Finally she just wrung them tightly together. “I... um, that’s perhaps not...”

“Oh, so Mr. Lebane wants to talk to me, does he?” Eli said, appearing at the door. He was wearing a button-down robin’s egg blue shirt, sleeves rolled up and buttons open at the collar, and loose khakis that were quite baggy at the knees and probably only held up by the thin alligator skin belt around his waist. Paris could understand: you were never quite prepared for the drastic weight loss the first transformation caused. That’s why some people trumpeted infection as a “weight loss miracle.”

Eli was lean anyway, so he couldn’t afford to lose too much more weight. He had the fake-bake tan that was probably airbrushed on him daily, giving him a healthy (if oddly artificial) glow, and neatly swept-back blondish-brown hair that looked effortlessly styled in a way that probably cost him about two hundred dollars. His eyes were a watery pale blue in a high cheekboned face that was a bit too severe to be classically handsome, but he was good-looking in an icy, slightly Eurotrash way. He claimed to be six feet tall on his Web site bio, but he was actually only five ten; Paris looked down at him easily, and in more ways than one.

Although a wicked smile curved Eli's bloodless lips, he never broke challenging eye contact with Paris even as he came out on the porch and said, "Why don't you give us a minute, Rainbow?"

She hesitated, looking between them nervously. "A-are you sure, sir? I'm not sure—"

"I'm fine, Rainbow. It's okay."

She seemed doubtful, but she did go inside the church, closing the door behind her so they had some privacy. Once she was gone, Eli said, with fake casualness, "So Roan sent you out, huh? Odd choice."

"He didn't send me out here, Eli, I came on my own. Thought I'd welcome you to the club. And give you a warning."

Eli tried to raise an eyebrow at him, but he couldn't quite do it. It was tricky. "A warning? You?" he snickered derisively. "It doesn't work when you're known to be the guy who hates confrontations."

"Ah. See, that's what I love: generalizations. They do give me such an edge. Here's the thing, Eli: I do hate violence, as a general rule. Physical." He gave him a cold smile that never hit his eyes, and felt so false he was surprised it actually held. "But emotional violence, psychic violence? Love it. Bruises heal, bones set, but that kind of injury could last forever. When I wanted to hurt someone, I simply slept with their girlfriend, boyfriend, sister, brother, mother... hell, father even, possibly all, depending on the person and circumstances, and then I let them know about it. See, what you and other people seem to forget is I'm a completely manipulative bastard; there isn't an angle that I can't play. And I'm not going to let a good man go down for you."

Eli was still eying him with humor, but something unsettled was starting to creep into his expression. Paris was being honest, and Eli must have recognized that, also being a manipulative bastard. They were evil twins and all, at least in spirit. "What's that supposed to mean? Is that some kind of threat?"

"That wasn't, no. But this is: tonight, turn yourself over to the cops. Tell them you're infected and in the high part of the cycle, and you have no cage. They'll have to put you up in a cell as a public service, and you'll be safe for the night. Oh sure, they may question whether you have an alibi for yesterday and the day before, but even if you did nosh on all those people, we both know you'll be down in Florida golfing with O.J. within

the week. You're too rich and too well-armed with lawyers to go down for any crime but white collar; you have a pass. You're good. And it's better than the alternative."

Eli looked deliberately bored and hostile, crossing his arms over his chest. His pupils were a bit too wide, suggesting that he too was high on painkillers. "Oh, here's the threat. I was starting to nod off."

Paris walked toward him slowly, staring him down, putting his size advantage to good use. "Roan and I will come back here about five-ish, and you'd better be gone, Eli, or we're coming to take you home with us. See, my idea is, you share my cage with me."

He looked like he was about to make a smart-ass remark, probably based on sexuality, when the reality of what he was saying—and who was saying it—sunk in. He tried to beat back the horror in his eyes, but the drugs were slowing his reaction time. "You—you can't be serious. That's murder."

"No, it's not. It's law of the jungle, survival of the fittest. Do you think your cat can beat a tiger?" A rhetorical question: the tiger strain was the most deadly, and the tiger itself was the most deadly of the cats. Now he was so close to Eli he was invading his space; he couldn't just reach out and touch him, he could pick his fucking pocket. Eli was forced to look up to keep eye contact, and he was fighting his own body posture so he didn't seem like he was cringing. "Perhaps I'm overestimating the appetite of a tiger, but I can't imagine there'd be much of you left, and once we dump the assorted kitty parts left over, there's a very good chance that the cops will simply assume you were an unrestrained cat who got bested by another and won't even attempt a DNA match. You'll probably become a legend, a mystical figure—dropping off the face of the earth like Aimee Semple McPherson. You'll probably convince them you really were the second coming of Jesus or whoever the fuck it is you're claiming to be. You'd become more in death than you ever were in life. Which is a bit of a piss, but at least you won't be here to enjoy it."

Eli had paled, even beneath his spray-on tan. It took him a moment to find his voice. "Y-you'd never do that. It's still premeditated—"

"No, it's not; legally, it's not even manslaughter, because neither of us are technically men once transformed. You know cops don't care if one cat kills another. It'll come down to Roan's word, and do you really think they'll disbelieve him if he says I broke out of my cage in tiger form and

got into yours? Face it, Eli, you're fucked. If you don't want me crapping you out for the next week and a half, then turn yourself over to the cops and take your lumps like an actual human being for once." He was staring down at Eli, his chest almost touching his, with Eli backed against the wall. He had nowhere to go, and Paris had such a size and experience advantage that even if Eli attempted to shove him back it wouldn't do any good; he'd never succeed. "Where's your faith, Eli? Don't you think the best cat'll win?"

Eli took a last hopeless jab at dignity. He looked him square in the eye, setting his jaw, and said, "You couldn't live with that."

"Oh, you'd be surprised at what I could live with." If it was Eli or Roan, Eli just didn't have a chance, no matter what he had to do. Just to have a dramatic exit, Paris growled, but it didn't come off how he anticipated. Namely, there were still some lingering aftereffects of the cat; the growl that came out of his throat wasn't even remotely human. It was deeper than even Roan's growl, not so much inhuman as monstrous, something that vibrated through his bones and seemed to rattle his brain. Eli's eyes almost popped out of his face; he was just as startled as Paris was, too much to even attempt to hide the fear. Paris was freaked too, but the drugs made him so lethargic it never got through.

He turned and walked away, confident that Eli had gotten the message. Yes, he could buy and sell the lot of them, he could sue them into indentured servitude, but even Eli wasn't willing to face off with a tiger. Man, talk about a ball-less wonder. Some evil twin he was.

Halfway down the front walk he turned to see Eli glowering at him, but when Paris caught his eye, it seemed to startle Eli out of his hateful reverie. What, was he afraid of him now that he remembered what strain he was? Pussy. "You didn't think I was just a pretty face, did you?" He tossed his car keys up in the air and, without looking, snatched them out of the air as they came down, a sudden movement that made Eli twitch nervously. Paris gave him a big, insincere smile, and turned away for good.

Some people just needed to learn the hard way that there were limits to his good graces.

12

Destroy Everything You Touch

ROAN woke up rather suddenly out of a nightmare. Even though he could barely remember what it was about, his heart thudded heavily in his chest, and he was glad to be awake. He was also glad that he seemed to have a subconscious “eject” button, one that told him to wake up when dreams started really turning south. He had no idea when he’d acquired it, he was just happy to have it.

He sensed warmth beside him and looked over to see Paris sprawled on the other side of the bed, so deeply asleep it looked like he was barely breathing at all (those were the drugs for you). Sunlight was bleeding through the edges of the curtains, a plague of light, but the air conditioner was on and it was almost chilly.

As he got up, he noticed Paris had written something at the bottom of the legal pad on the nightstand: *Don’t worry about Eli*. Really? Why not? He wanted to shake him awake and ask him what he’d done, but it wasn’t like Paris had gone out and killed him, so it wasn’t that urgent. But Roan was curious: what had he done?

He hopped in the shower and went downstairs to get some breakfast—okay, now it was technically lunch—before knuckling down to work.

Although Sikorski was one of the few higher-ups who would talk to him on a regular basis, he had other friends in the police department, including one who let him peek at files he maybe shouldn’t have had access to. While he was searching DeSilvo’s personnel records, he also started searching the database for all the names Rainbow had given him, as well as for Eli’s name. John Hatch had nothing on his record but a DUI and a speeding ticket, both of which gave his address as that of a subdivision in Harrison Park; Andrew Freeman had a juvenile record that included vandalism, assault, misdemeanor pot possession, and resisting arrest; but Timothy Nelson was the real troublesome one. Although his

record was clean here, there was a notation in his file: sex offender. Apparently he had been convicted of molesting one of his friend's sons—twelve at the time—with an Alford plea (which was a guilt-free way of pleading guilty; it meant you were not guilty, but were pleading guilty because a jury or judge would most likely find you guilty), but for some reason he only did four-and-a-half years before being released and moving from Maryland to here. There was no information pertaining to whether he'd finished counseling or had simply cut a deal with the prosecutors for the plea, just that "sex offender" notation. It meant either that he had been red-flagged by the Feds or Maryland police as a high risk, or that someone on the staff had a bug up their ass about all sex offenders. He lived alone about a mile away from the church, suggesting that his wife must not have believed his Alford plea, divorced him, and left with the kids.

Roan made a mental list in his head, the ones he would visit in order: Timothy Nelson (of course), John Hatch, and then Andrew Freeman if those two were dead ends (all Freeman's troubles were juvenile ones; his adult record was clean).

DeSilvo, meanwhile, was a bit of a troubled man himself. Allegations of thefts from busts dogged him over the years, and he had been investigated by Internal Affairs a couple years back, although they found no evidence to substantiate the charges. It wasn't above felons to make unsubstantiated allegations against cops, that pretty much came with the territory, but all this smoke? There must have been fire somewhere. Roan was now positive that sawed-off shotgun he had was ill-gotten booty, a methhead's prize. Yet this didn't actually explain anything. So he was mildly dirty—so what?

DeSilvo's first partner, Curtis McAvoy, died eight years ago in an off-duty car crash. His partner until early retirement was Mitchell Henstridge, a man ten years his junior, a man who—oddly enough—had taken a lot of medical leave in the last couple of years. There was no reason given, and he'd recently left the force. There was a reference in his file to the Family and Medical Leave Act, so presumably all that medical leave he took wasn't necessarily for him. He too had been investigated by IA, and came up clean.

Speaking of clean, Eli was. But Roan knew the old police captain around here, McClarty, was a Winters' family friend. If Winters's troublemaking son got busted, McClarty'd have been happy to sweep it all under the carpet and keep it off the books. Roan had no way to prove it,

though.

While he was writing down the last known address of Mitch Henstridge, a forwarded call from the office came in. Technically the doors were closed today, but he was still taking calls.

It was a woman on the phone, who introduced herself as Susan Heffernan, and wanted to hire him to investigate her husband Ryan. He sighed and grabbed a notepad by the phone, so he could take her information. Infidelity cases were the bread and butter of detectives nowadays, and they were usually pretty simple to prove or disprove. A couple days' work, and not hard work at all.

But as she kept talking, he realized this wasn't typical. "Wait, let me get this straight," he repeated, in a bit of disbelief. "You want me to find out if your husband is gay?"

"I know that sounds funny," she admitted nervously. "But he spends so much time with Cooper, he talks about him all the time, he invited him to come with us on what was supposed to be our eighth-anniversary trip. And when we were in Vegas, they supposedly spent all their time in the casino and I never saw either of them. Ever since that movie, y'know, I'm wondering...."

"Movie?"

"Brokeback Mountain."

"Ah." He rubbed his eyes, and briefly wondered if someone was playing a practical joke on him. It was possible, but she sounded awkwardly sincere. "Look, Mrs. Heffernan, I think hiring me would be a huge waste of your money. Just talk to your husband. Just tell him you feel uncomfortable about how close he is to his friend, and how you'd prefer if there was some space there."

She let out a tiny little laugh. "You don't think I've tried? It's not an easy topic...."

"And you think spending hundreds of dollars to confirm his sexuality is easier?"

"Well... hundreds?"

"Do you have any other reason to doubt his sexuality or his faithfulness, Mrs. Heffernan?" Sometimes he felt like a marriage counselor, and that was definitely not what he'd signed up for.

“Actually... um, yes. Lately he’s started dressing nicer.”

Roan almost dropped the phone, but instead he put her on hold and laughed. If the husband redecorated or tidied up, that would have been the end of him for sure. As soon as he got a hold of himself and calmed to his neutral, professional tone, Roan picked up the receiver once more. “If you really want to pursue this, I suggest you come by the office tomorrow. We’ll be open by ten.”

“Can’t we just set this up now? I’d rather just know as soon as possible.”

“I’m afraid there’re contracts to be signed, and we’re not open today. I’d suggest you talk to your husband if you want to get this over with sooner rather than later.”

It was a last-ditch attempt, and he hoped he’d finally gotten through, but after a long moment she sighed, and said, “Fine. Ten o’clock tomorrow. I’ll be there.”

After he hung up, he wrote down her name and the time, with the added notation of Ryan Heffernan and Cooper Godwin. He’d never “outed” anyone before, and he really didn’t want to start, but his was not to cast moral judgments, just see his clients’ cases through to the end. Besides, if this guy was actually in denial or in the closet, it wasn’t fair to his wife.

Also he made a note to drop her one of Melanie’s cards. Melanie was a divorce lawyer he worked for on a semiregular basis, and even if Ryan and Cooper were as straight as Henry the Eighth, just a bit too close and male bonded, that marriage was done. If you couldn’t straight up ask your partner if they were fucking around and get an answer you felt you could accept, then why were you together? If communication had broken down to the point where you felt you had to hire a complete stranger to trail them with a digital camera, stick a fork in the damn thing and move on. It was over in all but name.

It made him think of Connor, which he didn’t like, so he grabbed up the addresses of Nelson, Hatch, Freeman, and Henstridge, and headed out the door.

But Connor lingered like a bad taste in his mouth. Roan had had two whole relationships in his life, or at least ones he counted as genuine relationships: Connor Monaghan and Paris. So far, the one with Paris had

been running a lot smoother.

Connor had been married once to a woman. His parents were staunch Catholics and he tried to pretend to be straight to please them, but he called the marriage the biggest mistake of his life. His wife was “cool” about it when he told her the truth (the marriage was annulled), but his parents didn’t see why he didn’t just stay married to her and try to “be normal.”

He’d met Connor when he was a rookie cop, and he’d met him literally on the job. A drunken college football celebration turned into a small riot near a downtown bar, and Connor was one of the few who was willing to and could actually identify who had beaten a bystander half to death. (The man ended up in a coma and eventually died. A star college football player went down for his senseless beating, although that was very controversial.) He remembered Connor standing there with blood all over his white T-shirt—he’d tried to help the beating victim—clear-eyed, sober, and perfectly indignant. He was handsome, with a voice that Roan could have listened to for hours (he was an immigrant from Dublin; his Irish lilt was nothing like the grotesque stereotypical Irish accent), and eyes that seemed to vary between green and hazel. There was nothing stereotypical about Connor, and most thought he was joking when he said he was gay.

He knew where Connor lived, due to his witness status, so he made sure he went out of his way to be at a café in Connor’s neighborhood when he was off duty, so that when Connor ran into him, it was as a civilian. Luckily, Connor found him attractive too, so it wasn’t too awkward, and he didn’t accuse him of stalking him. (He wasn’t really; there was just something about Connor he found unforgettable and magnetic.)

The first warning flag should have been the fact that he was a writer. Mostly novels and short stories, although he wrote a short play that was an entrant in a local playwrights’ competition. He was extremely intelligent, extremely talented... and tortured really didn’t cover it. He was an alcoholic and knew it; alcohol was a “demon” he said he’d lived with all his life, and when he was drunk, he could get pretty ugly. Roan let him know immediately that he wouldn’t stand for it; he’d had enough drunks in his childhood and on the job that he didn’t want to put up with one at home. They lived together for three months, and for those three months he managed to stay sober, and had won the competition, and everything

seemed good. But Connor seemed to have a gift for self-sabotage; any time things went well for him, he seemed to go right out and shoot himself in the foot. Connor got incredibly, stinking drunk on his prize money, and Roan took him into the station on a drunk and disorderly. He spent the night in the drunk tank, while Roan moved out. By the time Connor was sober and out, Roan was gone.

He made it clear he loved Connor, he just wasn't going to do this drama. He'd given him the choice: booze or him. As far as he was concerned, Connor made his choice.

Connor was all apologies and self-pity, and while Roan decided to give him another tentative shot, Con couldn't even last a week without getting drunk. So he broke it off completely. He wished him well—and honestly, it killed him—but he couldn't do this.

Connor committed suicide two weeks later. Always dramatic, he walked out on some train tracks as drunk as hell, in front of the Amtrak headed to Coeur D'Alene. He left a suicide note that simply said he was tired, and Roan found that Con had left a message on his answering machine. It wasn't much, but the words still haunted him: "I'm sorry. I loved you, you know." Roan wasn't perfectly certain, but he thought he heard a train whistle in the background.

He had pretty much written off relationships at that point. He was never good at them anyway, and Con's death seemed to be a big universal flashing sign: *You suck at this*. So he fought getting into a relationship with Paris, at least with himself. These things were always fraught with peril, and he'd had enough drama in his life. But at least Paris wasn't an alcoholic or suicidal; in fact, he couldn't even imagine Paris deliberately sabotaging himself, not the Paris he knew anyway. He was like the polar opposite of Con. No worries there.

But he had never told Paris about him. He didn't talk about Con at all. Even when the paper ran a little feature on suicides in the local creative community and he was gobsmailed to find Connor staring out at him from his morning newspaper, he never said a word. Why? He knew logically he wasn't responsible for Con's suicide; it wasn't even his first attempt, he'd had faint scars on his arm from when he'd tried to kill himself as a teenager, razor blade marks that ran the length of his forearm. He varied from angry to hideously self-piteous when drunk, and declarations to "finish it" were part of his drunken script. You couldn't blame another person for someone else's suicide (unless they crammed

pills down their throat or forced the noose around their neck), as that was a personal choice. And yet he still felt so unbelievably guilty he couldn't bear to speak his name. Could he have kept Con from doing it? Did he push him over the edge? Would Con be alive today if he hadn't left him?

Some tough guy he was. Pathetic.

Nelson lived in a relatively clean but bland apartment building known as the Hampstead Arms, which proved the odd law that the "fancier" a name for a place the more low-rent it was. No one answered the door, and Roan was pretty sure he didn't hear anyone inside (hard to tell; someone the next floor up was really cranking up the Jay-Z). A Hispanic woman carrying a laundry basket walked past as he was at Nelson's door, and paused to ask if he was a "friend of Tim's." He played along and said yes, just to see what would happen.

As it turned out, nothing. She said he was gone most of the day and usually didn't get home 'til around six or so. He thanked her and left, adding that note to his small list of names. At least if Nelson had a job, it limited his time for hanging around the church.

Hatch lived in a pretty nice place, a prefab suburban house not unlike DeSilvo's, but newer, and with more trees lining the streets and the yards. A woman answered the door of the house after he knocked, a slightly chubby brunette with a pale, round face, her makeup barely covering a smattering of acne that decorated her forehead like a scatter of buckshot. (Did Dick Cheney live around here?) John wasn't home either, although she didn't offer up when he'd be home. Her expression was pinched, suggesting she didn't like him a bit; she didn't know him, but she didn't like him. Maybe they didn't like strangers around these parts.

He showed her his photo of Danny and asked if she'd seen him. She barely even glanced at it before saying no. He had a feeling he could have held up a photo of Hatch and she would have denied seeing him; she just gave off a hostile vibe. It could have been simply that she didn't like his face, she didn't like (vague) redheads, she didn't like guys wearing olive drab T-shirts... it could have been any piddling thing. But this reaction was simply too suspicious for him to dismiss so easily. After leaving, he did a brief tour of the property, but the backyard was cut off by chain-link fencing, and a dog that looked like a cross between a German Shepherd and a wombat snipped and growled at him as he looked over the fence at a large outbuilding that was probably a shed, but was large enough to have been someone's workshop... or something else. The yard stank so badly of

dog shit it made his eyes water. Again, he made a note to come back, and bring binoculars.

He got lucky with Andrew Freeman. He was home, as he was laid up with a broken leg and was on disability from the quarry where he usually worked. He was a guy with dirty blond hair and an honest-to-God mullet, as well as a mustache that was a quarter inch short of a Fu Manchu. To top off his general redneck/stoner look, he was wearing homemade cut-offs and a sleeveless black T-shirt depicting an eagle fighting a snake. He smelled of sweat, cigarettes, and pot smoke.

His watery blue eyes had the glaze of someone who was high, but that also made him very friendly and slightly gregarious. He admitted that he liked going to the church because they had some “hot bitches” there and the guy he liked to buy his weed from usually hung out there, but he hadn’t been there since he got his leg broken a week and a half ago. He admitted that he didn’t go anywhere anymore since he could barely get around on his crutches in the house, but his brother, roommate Chuck, and “on-and-off” girlfriend Mindy brought him supplies, and he had satellite TV, so he was good. He admitted he might have seen Danny around the church but wasn’t sure because he didn’t pay too much attention to the guys. He invited him in for a beer, but Roan politely turned him down and wished him luck. Only when he was back at the car did he realize he’d never identified himself to Freeman, and he had never asked who he was. He scratched Freeman off the suspect list.

On a whim, he drove past Henstridge’s place, but found the quaint little clapboard house had a “For Sale” sign in the yard, and a quick glance in the living room window proved that the house had been cleaned out; Henstridge had moved on. He called the real estate agency handling the sale of the house, and told them he was a private detective who needed quite badly to find Mitch Henstridge. The real estate agent was a rather hyper-sounding woman named Sabina, and after looking for several minutes she finally gave him an address that he took without comment. He knew that address quite well; it had been a favorite of transients or people who didn’t want to reveal their actual place of residence when arrested—a vacant lot at the end of a dead end street downtown. Fifteen years ago there had been an apartment building there, but it was condemned and then burned down, and the city, which owned the land, had done absolutely nothing with it. But the address still technically existed on city maps, and would register as valid to anyone who checked in any way but personally.

So Henstridge had turned rabbit? According to Sabina, the house had only gone up for sale two days ago, and he was “highly motivated to sell,” although she couldn’t exactly say why. Well, this didn’t make sense at all. It was possible it was just coincidence; maybe the family member who was sick had died. Then why give a fake address?

He was running and hiding. But from who and why? Curiouser and curiouser.

He sat in his car and called Sikorski. As soon as he answered, he asked, “What do you know about a former cop named Mitchell Henstridge?”

Sikorski sighed heavily. “Don’t you believe in foreplay?”

“I’m Scottish. My idea of foreplay is “roll over, Margaret.” So what do you know?”

He snickered. “Wouldn’t it be Angus in your case?”

“Don’t ruin a classic joke, Gordo.”

He heard him settle back in his chair, which creaked like doors in a haunted house. “The name sounds vaguely familiar, but I can’t place it. When did he leave the force?”

“Three months ago. He was DeSilvo’s partner.”

“Oh. Why are you checking out DeSilvo?”

“I’m checking out Henstridge now. I’m finding some oddities in his current behavior that could use a bit of explaining.”

“Like what?” Sikorski challenged, almost belligerently.

“Like giving 1520 Oakview as his home address.”

“Oakview? The dead drop?” That’s what cops called that area: “dead drop lane.” Mainly because it would be a perfect place for a money exchange with kidnappers, but also because dead people had a tendency to show up there with great regularity. Many were just ODs and transients who died in the cold, but sometimes they were people killed on the spot, or killed elsewhere and then dumped in the vacant lot. It was a really fun part of the city. “That is weird. Is he escaping creditors?”

“You tell me.”

“Huh.” Roan heard the click of his fingers on his keyboard as

Sikorski went to work. “Here I thought you were calling to gloat.”

“Gloat? Over what?”

“Coupla things. Eli Winters showed up with that hard-ass lawyer of his—what’s his name, Stovik?”

“Stovak. Why’d he show up?”

“Apparently he’s infected and doesn’t have any restraints; he was out last night. He thought somebody told us already and was doing damage control. Who woulda known and not told us?”

“It’s a big church, Gordo.” What had Paris said to Eli? Oh, now Roan *had* to know how he could have scared Eli into a confession at the police department. Again, Paris had the makings of an excellent supervillain, which really should have scared the shit out of everyone, but he was so disarmingly pretty you couldn’t help but think he was honestly harmless. And that just made him that much more dangerous. “What’s the other thing?”

“Oh, the coroner’s report came back on the kids at Tweaks’s place. You were right.”

His stomach burned, and he suddenly felt more awake than he had all day. “What? How?”

“The kids were killed by a bladed weapon, probably a machete, hours before Tweaks was killed. The cat gnawed on them, but there’s some indications they were killed at different times and repositioned afterward. Why, we don’t know. Tweaks was definitely killed by the cat, though.”

Vindication should have felt better than this, but he supposed when it came to a mass slaughter, there was never anything to feel good about.

13

Putting Out Fire with Gasoline

HE AND Gordo talked for a few more moments, but neither of them could think of a viable scenario where the kids would be killed, then a cat would get loose in the house and kill Tweaks and gnaw on all the corpses. It didn't seem to fit any workable plan they could think up. But after he hung up, sweating miserably in the hot-box Mustang, he realized there was an un-viable setup that would kind of fit: a smart cat. A cat that knew what it was doing, even in its non-human form. It was part of the killing, perhaps Tweaks was also a part of it, but then Tweaks was killed in an attempt to cover it all up.

That story had more holes in it than a sieve, even if you set aside the fact that there'd never been a cat that had retained an iota of human self-awareness. It was even more unlikely than Gordo's pet "virus child cat mutation" theory (which was right up there with "Bat Boy Becomes Secretary of Agriculture").

He rubbed his eyes and then pulled his T-shirt out of his armpits, as he was sweating enough that it was sticking to him. God, he hated this fucking heat wave; he hated the weather and he hated this goddamn case. Well, okay, it wasn't his case, he wasn't a cop anymore, but so far he had been right. That and five dollars would get him a latte, okay, but he now felt a duty to see this case through to the end.

So what did they have? A bunch of dead bodies, three killed one way, one another way, all in the same house, and all chewed on by the same cat, which had presumably jumped out the back window and yet didn't leave a path in the backyard. A magical cat, and a magical killer. He hit the steering wheel in frustration and started the car, just to get the hell out of here.

He stopped by a Starbucks, which he shouldn't have done because he couldn't see how anyone could justify charging so much for coffee or tea... but those green tea lattes were so good; goddamn the Starbucks

corporation! They were in it with Microsoft, some kind of Seattle hegemony determined to wring every cent out of you. (He liked to entertain wild conspiracy theories from time to time, solely for their entertainment value. Paris had once thought up a great one involving grunge music, flannel shirts, and sexually frustrated loggers, but he couldn't remember how it went now.)

By the time he got home he called “fag hag” Randi Kim and asked her if she could check out all known financial records for DeSilvo and Henstridge, and if she went extra-legal that was fine, she just wasn't to tell him. Randi not only had connections across all financial institutions, but she had a cousin who worked for the IMF—well connected didn't even begin to describe Randi. But of course she wanted something for the info, so he had to promise she could come over to dinner one night. Why she wanted to come over to dinner at their place he had no idea; why was that a prize? So she could stare at Paris while he ate his mashed potatoes?

Oh. Come to think of it, yes, staring at Paris was always a prize.

Speaking of which, Par was up and working on the plywood reinforcement to the broken sliding door. He'd called some people he knew to get an estimate on replacing the glass, but apparently the cheapest estimate was in the thousands. So he was shoring up the plywood for now, until they could save up for that additional expense. Because it was so hot, Paris was wearing nothing but his cargo shorts, and the hammer he wore through one of the loops was pulling his shorts down until they were just barely covering his firm little ass. Roan watched a bead of sweat trickle down his lovely long spine, and thought he should really throw him in the shower and get in with him.

Pheromones—all it was. He could ignore it. He could, seriously, honestly. (As long as Paris stopped parading around him all sweaty and half naked and muscular and ... oh shit, he hated this part of the viral cycle.)

He went upstairs so he'd stop looking at Paris, and got down to work on his computer, background-checking Tweaks. His real name was Anthony Andersen, and Roan couldn't believe it when his birth certificate said he was thirty-two. He looked like he was in his mid-forties at least; he looked like fucking hell for his age. But drugs could do that to some people.

Another shocking thing was he had been married and divorced, and

had two kids, the youngest being four years old. Tweaks was a college dropout who used to work for a software company until he apparently discovered the waning edge of the rave scene, and first experienced Ecstasy and meth. It was all downhill for Tweaks from there, as he lost his job and his wife in subsequent order, as well as his expensive condo in Lakeside, trading it in for that dilapidated house right by the railroad tracks in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. Tweaks had a spotty employment record after that, usually just doing odd jobs, most at minimum wage, all well below his experience level. With his résumé he could have done a hell of a lot better, but that meant actually putting effort into it, and actually agreeing to show up to work on a regular schedule. He owed child support into the double digit thousands at the time of his death.

He was arrested several times for disorderly conduct as well as possession of drug paraphernalia, but somehow he never got nailed for drug possession itself, so he'd managed to keep some of his wits about him as far as that went—or he'd had the special luck of the intensely stupid, which Roan knew existed. His last arrest was six months ago, when he was run in for public intoxication after cops busted up a rave at a house in Edgewood (he was probably just stupidly high, but it was also probably easier for the arresting officer to nail him on a public intoxication beef).

And that's when Roan's heart skipped a beat. The arresting officers? Hank DeSilvo and Mitchell Henstridge.

No fucking way.

He stared at the computer screen for a moment, willing the words to change back into what they were, not what he wanted to see, but they didn't. DeSilvo and Henstridge were the last to arrest Tweaks; now two of them were dead by cat, and the third was presumably on the run. What the fuck...?

Now he investigated the house in Edgewood. It was owned at the time of the party by a guy named Edgar Rodriguez, but had since been taken back by the bank that held the mortgage, since he'd defaulted shortly after the rave. Rodriguez had moved out of state as well, relocating to Florida. Coincidence? Perhaps; his record was clean.

But now he had a connection between Tweaks, DeSilvo, and Henstridge. Still, it was what a prosecutor would call circumstantial, at best. So they arrested him, so what? Eight different cops had arrested

Tweaks in his brief life as a junkie, and DeSilvo and Henstridge had arrested hundreds of people in their time as cops, DeSilvo alone possibly thousands.

Yet his gut, his detective “instinct” was absolutely screaming. This meant something; this had to. No way was this just coincidence. He had tied the three men together for a very brief period in time, and now death seemed to be tying them together again. That had to be something.

What the fuck had happened in that house in Edgewood? If he could find Henstridge, he could ask him. But oddly enough, he didn’t trust him to tell him the truth.

He had finished making a note of the rave house when Paris came upstairs, complaining, “Now I thought those lascivious looks you were giving me earlier were going to add up to something.”

“They weren’t lascivious, they were... distracted.”

“Don’t be a tease; it doesn’t suit you.” He ducked into the attached bathroom and came out toweling off the sweat. “You have that look on your face.”

“Lascivious, is it?”

“No, it’s your I’ve-blown-the-case-wide-open face. So what did you discover, Sherlock?”

“A connection between DeSilvo, Henstridge, and Tweaks.”

“Who’s Henstridge?” he asked, sitting on the end of the bed. It looked like he’d pseudo-made the bed, which meant he’d just spread the blanket over the top and figured, good enough.

“DeSilvo’s partner. Oh, and what did you do to Eli? He grabbed Guy and scampered to the police.”

Paris chuckled, a sly grin breaking across his face. “I told him he either threw himself on the mercy of the cops, or we were gonna be over there pre-sundown and drag him back here, so he could share a cage with me.”

Roan stared at him, hoping Paris was joking, but he clearly wasn’t; his clear blue eyes sparkled like diamonds. “You threatened to eat him?”

“Not in a good way.”

Roan rubbed his eyes, and wondered what kind of lecture he’d get

from Guy next time he saw him. That was assuming Eli told him what had happened—maybe he wouldn't. Guy hated him openly, Eli treated him with smug contempt, but both of them seemed unsure how to feel about Paris. Did his beauty or charm—or both—make him hate-proof? Or did Paris so kill them with (patently false, although they never quite caught on) kindness that they put him in the “okay” category? Maybe they just dismissed him; maybe he didn't even register on their radar. (Although Roan was willing to bet that he did now.) “You think you know a guy, and then he does something like this.”

“Oh, come on. I knew it would work because I know exactly what Eli thinks of us. He thinks we're a couple of weird and potentially dangerous gay boys who don't deserve the “gift” of infection, and are living proof that his god occasionally makes no sense, especially since his god hates fags.” He paused. “Wait—*do* the cat worshipers hate queers?”

“I don't know, I can't say as I've read their entire playbook. But it's a safe assumption, since nearly all religions do.”

“Yeah, figured. Doesn't it just make you feel so special?”

“I've always felt special. Being handled like nuclear waste for most of your life can do that to a person.”

“Shall I go get the violin?”

Roan flipped him his middle finger and Paris just chuckled, the sly grin never leaving his face. Actually, he appreciated Par never letting him slide down into self-pity, but telling him that would only encourage him. After a moment, Paris asked, “What about the case you're actually being paid for?”

Again, he never let him get away with anything, but that was good. Annoying as shit, but necessary; much like medicine, it was good for him, no matter how bad it initially tasted. “I may be close to him. That woman at the Hatch house acted way too hostile, and Nelson wasn't home, so I intend to go back tonight and see if I can get him after work. If neither of those leads pan out, I only have to wait until the weekend.”

“Why?”

“Marley has weekends off, and that's when she usually joined Danny at the church.”

It took him a moment, but he got it. “You're going to tail her.”

He nodded. "See if she leads me to him."

Paris stood up and stretched, deliberately showing off his nicer-than-average torso, all lean muscle that he genuinely worked to get, as opposed to those strange people who spent huge chunks of their day in loud, depressing gyms. And Roan hated him all the more because *he* could work in a steel mill for ten hours a day for a year and *never* look like that. It just wasn't fair. But then again, Paris's odd mix of hard work and vanity had probably saved his life; all the doctors speculated that he only survived the tiger strain because he was in peak physical condition. Anything less, and the stress of the change would have killed him.

"Isn't that a bit weird, you tailing a teenage girl?"

"Tell me about it. I already feel like a stalker, and I haven't done anything yet."

The turns life took sometimes could give you whiplash.

ONCE he had Paris safely locked in his cage for the evening, Roan placed a call to the Nakamuras, but only got their home answering service. The message he left was honest, that he hadn't found Danny yet, but he was confident he was still in the city and he was on the verge of finding him. He told them to call back if they wanted further details, but he honestly wasn't sure how much he'd tell them if they did. Did he have the right to violate Danny's privacy by telling them about his fascination with kitty culture and the church? Yes, his parents probably had the right to know, but Danny was on the verge of adulthood, and probably felt infringed upon by his parents enough. If he wanted to tell them, he could, and they should really hear it from him, not a private detective. He thought Danny's obsession was idiotic and dangerous, and yet it felt almost like "outing" someone, and again, that wasn't something he was inclined to do.

He showered and changed into clean clothes, which made him feel marginally better, and then drove back out to the Hampstead Arms. The heat still rose off the pavement in shimmering waves even as the sky turned a deep blood-orange beyond the inverted cracker-box shape of the building, making it look more dingy and ominous than it actually had in unforgiving sunlight. There was a racially mixed group of kids playing in the cracked parking lot, most of them between seven and ten, and they all

gave him dirty looks. He wanted to ask if it was his face, his clothes—what was with people giving him unaccountable dirty looks? His tattoo wasn't visible, he wasn't carrying his gun, and it certainly didn't read "dirty fag" on his forehead, as he had checked before he left the house. Maybe it was just this part of town; maybe they equated a stranger with trouble.

He knocked on Nelson's door, the surface marred with peeling paint, and he saw the glass peephole darken as Nelson looked out of it. In a strangely quavering voice, he asked, "What do you want?"

"Mr. Nelson, I'm Roan McKichan, a private detective working on a missing persons case related to the Church of the Divine Transformation. May I speak with you a moment?"

There was no answer, and for a moment he thought he'd best step to the side so, in case Nelson was getting his shotgun, the first shot would go wide, but after a long moment he opened the door a crack, the inner chain lock still securely fastened. "I haven't done anything wrong," he hissed, his voice an angry whisper. He was a slightly bloodshot brown eye staring out of a face yellowed slightly with nicotine and liver problems, his hair so short it was almost shaved to a nub, a stain of black hair like mold discoloring his scalp. He smelled ill; Roan could actually smell a certain sickly, vaguely rotten odor coming from him that was by no means a good sign.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Mr. Nelson," he said smoothly, producing the photo of Danny from his pocket. "I'm just wondering if you've seen this boy at the church lately."

"Did you find out about me on that Web site, is that it?" he continued in an angry, breathless whisper. "I don't know what you people want from me, I served my time, I—"

"Sir, I'm not here to harass you. I simply want to know if you've seen this boy." He kept his tone soothing and low, like he was talking to a spooked animal. By Web site he assumed Nelson meant one of those that cheerfully listed the names and addresses of everyone declared a sex offender; there were so many he really had no idea which one the man meant.

That one eye glared at him over the chain for several long seconds, and then he looked down at the photo, which he stared at for several seconds. "I dunno. I can't tell the Asian kids apart."

Charming. He had to keep his poker face on firmly to keep from grimacing, rolling his eyes, and asking how the weather was in 1952. Roan pocketed Danny's photo and pulled out one of his business cards, which he held out toward the crack in the door. "If you see him, I'd appreciate a call."

He reached through the crack and snatched the card away like it might come alive and bite him. "I didn't do nothin'," he protested. "I'm leavin' the kids alone."

Roan nodded, glad but not convinced that this was truly a decision made by him. "Is it cirrhosis of the liver?"

The eye seemed to get higher as he stiffened in shock. "What?"

"What you have. It's a liver disease, right?"

Roan heard him swallow hard, a dry click in his throat, and that single accusing eye shined wetly with something akin to regret. "Liver cancer. H-how did you—"

"I'm a detective, Mr. Nelson," he replied blithely, turning and walking away. Chemotherapy would explain his unfortunate haircut.

In the car, he made a mental note to cross Nelson off the list. He was too ill to be a threat to anyone at this rate, although just barely. He was convicted of molesting a boy, and he lived in an apartment building full of kids in the same age range as his victim. And he was "reformed," huh? Maybe that just meant he jacked off while watching them from the window; either way, if Nelson had been in full health, Roan might have felt it was his civic duty to warn the parents to watch their kids more closely.

So, he could smell cancer. That was just fucking creepy. He decided he was never going to mention that to anyone and hope that this was a complete fluke, something that would never happen again.

Roan was only about to start the car when the opening chords of Pete Townsend's "Rough Boys" started, startling the shit out of him and making him drop his keys. He quickly deduced it was his cell phone going off, as Paris had clearly fucked with his ringtone. He liked a plain, simple ringtone, something professional, but Paris lived to monkey around with it. Since Paris had put "Rough Boys" on his phone before, he had to ask him why, and Paris claimed the song reminded him of him. He was not rough trade! Okay, yeah, he was kind of butch, but he wasn't a leather

daddy. Roan decided he should just take it as a compliment—kind of—and let it go, but he had uninstalled it from his phone. Clearly Paris had reinstalled it. But it could have been worse. Paris's ringtone varied lately between "Michael," Franz Ferdinand's ode to homosexual lust, and "Let The Wind Erase Me" by Assemblage 23, a bouncy piece of electro-beat-pop that wouldn't have been out of place in a gay nightclub. The only gayer things he could have had were show tunes or something by Clay Aiken.

He was a little surprised to see that it was Sikorski calling him. "What's up, Gordo?"

"You doing anything right now?"

What a weird reply. If it had come from anyone else, he might have suspected it was a bad come-on. "Just work. Why?"

"We need you to come by the station and get a bite print from Winters for us. Vasquez is in Toronto."

"What?" He put the phone down and leaned his head against the steering wheel, barely repressing the urge to head-butt it until either his skull or the wheel broke. It was standard practice for all police departments voluntarily (or involuntarily) restraining cats to get a "bite print" from them, since most were as unique as a Human bite print. The problem was, usually only a certified handler could do it—the union wouldn't let a cop do it—and as a rare "cat handler," Annie Vasquez did all the "cat business" for every police department on this side of the state. Since she sometimes had her hands full, he had been asked personally by Chief Matthews to become certified, in case "filling in" needed to be done within the precinct. Much to his chagrin and horror, getting certified was sitting through a three-hour class—it had been harder to get his detective license. "Why the fuck is she in Toronto?"

"Some kind of conference. It'd take us a couple of days to get someone from the university, 'cause they seem to be all on vacations."

How nice to know he was the last resort. "Fine. But I want Stovak gone; I ain't dealing with that piece of shit right now."

Sikorski grunted an agreement. "We already got him the fuck out of here. God, whatta piece of work. I just wanted to stomp on his head until it broke like a hollow chocolate Easter egg."

"He seems to have that effect on people." The Guy effect seemed to

be the direct opposite of the Paris effect: repulsion instead of attraction. He sighed and glanced at his watch, aware that he honestly had no timetable for visiting the Hatch house. “Fine, I’ll be right over. Oh, and there’s something you should know: DeSilvo and Henstridge were the last officers to arrest Tweaks, six months ago.”

Now Gordo sighed right back at him. It was almost a contest. “So? Do you know how many cops have arrested Tweaks in his lifetime?”

“Around here? Eight: Jones, Alvarez, Thun, Martinez, Scott, Jackson, DeSilvo, and Henstridge. I refuse to believe it’s mere coincidence when both DeSilvo and Tweaks were killed by the same unidentifiable cat.”

The pause on Gordo’s end was so long it threatened to stretch into eternity, and he could feel the disapproval coming in waves over the phone line. “How the hell do you know that?”

“I can’t reveal my sources. But look at it this way—I’m doing the work for you. All you have to do is reap the glory.”

“Reap the glory?” he repeated in disbelief. “God, you are so gay sometimes.”

“I’ll be right there. Hide the homophobes.” He shut off his phone—Pete Townsend was not startling him again—and started the car, which had heated up about twenty degrees while he’d been talking. While Gordo didn’t like that Roan clearly still had access to police files, he probably wasn’t going to make a big stink about it, because he honestly did like other people to do his work for him sometimes. He wasn’t lazy, he was just usually juggling a dozen active cases at once.

Roan was, personally, just sorry he wasn’t wearing his Pansy Division T-shirt. Whenever he had to turn up at the cop shop he liked to wear it or a similarly “gay” shirt, if just to make everyone uncomfortable and piss them off. He got almost more shit for being gay than for being an infected when he was on the force, and the sheer ignorance of it all made him want to start Tasing officers at random. The more they sneered and made their little jokes, the more he fought back by being as blatant as possible. Deny who he was to make them feel more secure in their own masculinity? Fuck them. He had no intention of being like Robinson over in Vice.

Kevin Robinson was a good cop, and being on the vice squad was an

unpleasant job, but he seemed unfailingly sanguine about it all. He never went out of his way to harass Roan, which put him instantly in the minority, but he wasn't overly friendly to him either... until after work. And then he was a kind of awkward friendly, always looking over his shoulder to make sure no one saw him with the gay guy. He invited him to a barbecue he was having at his place one weekend, it was just a "welcome to the neighborhood" kind of thing for some people who had moved in on his block, and Roan went out of sheer curiosity. No one had ever invited him to one of their do's before, except the lesbian cop on the homicide squad.

There had been no other cops there, just him and Kevin, which was pretty weird, since cops generally socialized with other cops (who else was there to socialize with on their time schedules?). As the thing wound down, they sat at a picnic table in Kevin's backyard—he had a fairly sizable house for a man who lived all alone with two cats and a dog, but apparently he'd inherited it from his uncle—and Roan watched Kevin pick at the label on his beer bottle as he admitted he was gay and kind of wanted someone he could talk to who would understand. He said if he came out it would just kill his mother, and he knew the shit that Roan was taking at the precinct and didn't want that to happen to him either. He claimed to not be "that brave."

Roan pitied the guy that day, and still did. He lived alone in a big house with few genuine friends—no one who knew the truth about him at any rate—living a life of quiet, lonely desperation, with the underlying fear that he might get outed if he crossed any sort of lines. How did he live that way? He didn't get it; he had no idea how anyone could be that hard on themselves just to make other people happy.

Kevin was a quasi-friend, as he still wasn't sure how friendly he could be with Roan (he was always looking over his shoulder), and never in public. But he was very good about giving Roan access to the police computer system. He should probably invite him over to dinner when they had Randi over; that wasn't public, and he'd probably fall head over heels in love with Paris on first sight. Maybe that would encourage him to get out of the closet.

The sky had turned a pale shade of indigo by the time he reached headquarters, a "modern" sprawling cinder-block complex that managed to look oppressive and depressing as all hell, in spite of efforts to make it "friendlier" by adding ornamental trees in little concrete islands around the

parking lot, with bright white rocks that seemed to glow in low light. If your life was going well, you wouldn't be here; a precinct house could never look friendly enough to overcome its basic function of locking people up.

Inside it was busy, with the usual assortment of perps in various stages of sobriety and belligerence, almost rivaling the assorted disbelief and belligerence of people here to bail someone out or accompanying the newly arrested. The assortment of smells was unpleasant and nearly overwhelming. But a couple of the cops looked up and scowled, recognizing him, and Gordo appeared in the doorway of the corridor leading to the "special" cells and waved him over. Roan cut through the crowd, only the people who recognized him bothering to hurry to get out of his way, and joined him there.

As soon as the door closed, sealing off a great deal of noise and smells, Gordo bitched, "I thought you'd be here five minutes ago."

"Traffic is hell this time of night. So what type of cat is he?"

"Leopard... I think. He's spotted."

"That's a leopard all right." That was kind of a shame; he'd really been holding out hope that Eli would turn out to be a house cat or something; maybe a skunk.

He followed him down a cool corridor of easy-to-hose-down cement, although the air was redolent of that curious odor of industrial soap, vomit, body odor, and piss, with the lingering tang of cat; many different ones, all blending into a sharp, indefinable stink.

A metal door opened into what could best be called an antechamber, with a concrete floor and industrial white painted walls, and a guard's observation post, where a pudgy, uniformed woman sat, observing the cell block on the monitors. Each cell was separated from others by soundproofed portable walls, but the cats could still smell each other and generally spent their nights (or days) pacing in agitation. A quick glance showed that six of the twenty available cells were occupied, five by cats in various states and one by a woman curled up in fetal position on the floor, one who had probably just metamorphosed out of her cat form. Also in the room was Sikorski's usual partner, the almost abnormally calm and stoic Detective Sebastian "Seb" Estes (if he'd been white, he could very well have been Joe Friday), a guy from the tech branch he only knew as Allen, Officer Jeremy Brown, a cop he knew (and loathed), and the Chief herself,

Julia Matthews. Chief Matthews stepped forward and gave him a courteous if slightly strained smile. "Thank you for coming in, Roan."

"Anything for you, Chief." And she was yards better than McClarty, who'd retired ahead of a minor scandal involving all those "good" families whose rebellious offsprings' names he kept off the books. The first female chief of this particular precinct, she ran a really tight ship, as if appearing as anything less than a ball-buster might open her up to charges that she was too "weak" to run the place. She was on the far side of forty, her almond-brown hair cut almost military short, her uniform seemingly so starched and tailored you could have cut yourself on its crisp edges. She was above average in height, almost six feet tall in flats, and fairly solidly built; she claimed that's just "how Montana farm girls turned out," but Roan knew that was just deflective self-deprecation. She was a good cop; he didn't hold it against her that she asked for his badge after that whole Jenkins' incident, and she always seemed shocked that he didn't resent her for it. But how could he? She was simply doing her job, and he had already concluded that he couldn't remain on the force. It seemed like a momentary lapse of reason that he ever even became a cop; he suspected he only had because people told him he couldn't.

Little Allen—not an insult; at barely five-five he was the shortest person in the room—stepped forward with what looked like a thick, square dustpan on the end of a pole, the dustpan coated with a thick layer of a whitish-orange compound that smelled of antiseptic, filling amalgam, and plaster. "You know how to use one of these, I presume? You—"

"Yeah, I know the drill," he said, taking it from Allen. The dustpan thing was the "bite plate", the thing he had to make Eli the cat bite so they could get an accurate bite print. The stuff set pretty fast and tasted nasty, so after a cat bit it, it was more than likely to let go quickly, but there had been instances where the cat tore the whole thing to pieces. You had to be careful, which was also why it was on a long pole, so you didn't have to get too close to the bars. "What cage is he in?"

"Three-B," the female officer at the observation post reported, sounding so bored she could have been half asleep. The name patch on her uniform shirt said Stahl. "Go in, take a right; he's the second one down."

He nodded, and headed to the metal door plastered with all the warning signs in English and Spanish. "Got it." Stahl hit a button that unlocked the inner door with a mechanical clank, and then he was within the small maze of cat cages, the tiny wing smelling like a disreputable zoo.

The door clanked shut behind him and locked with an ominous thunk.

As he walked the aisle around the cages, he remembered bringing Paris here when he was homeless and living in his car, on the verge of a shift but having nowhere to go. Paris was just getting his sanity back, his self, and had told Roan he hated police stations and hospitals, he hated places where there were so many people he could hurt if things went wrong. Roan had to soothingly talk him in here, and promised him he would watch from the monitors and make sure he didn't get out and hurt anyone; he promised he'd watch him all night. Roan had no intention of doing so, because even a tiger had no hope of getting out of here, and certainly not into the heart of the station. But as soon as his shift was over, he did come back, and the poor schlub on watch duty was more than happy to cede the chair to him. He told himself he just wanted to see what an actual tiger looked like, if they looked like the ones you saw in zoos, and yes, they did, or Paris did at any rate. He was the most magnificent cat he'd ever seen in his entire life, as well as one of the largest; no wonder he was worried about hurting someone.

He did end up watching him all night. He just hadn't meant to.

As cats went, Eli wasn't that big, just as he wasn't in real life. He was a lean, almost scrawny leopard with wheat-colored fur, his spots mere suggestions on his thin coat, ghost echoes of circles like the rings of enlarged moles. His lean, almost vulpine-shaped head turned toward Roan, and he snarled, stopping his restless pacing to run, snarling, at the bars, reaching a paw through to try and swipe at him.

Roan was too far back for the cat to even get close to scratching him, but he swore he could almost see Eli's arrogance in those yellowish eyes, something more Human than cat, and something in him bristled. "Back down, Eli," he snapped. "Be a good loser for once."

The cat looked up at him and snarled again, black lips pulling over ivory teeth, and Roan snarled back, the growl rising easily to his throat. He crouched down so he could be at eye level with him, and the cat's ears went back flat against its head in what could very well have been confusion, if cats were even capable of that. Roan felt his snarl and growl become one, a thrumming like the engine of his bike, and the leopard charged forward again with a roar; Roan roared right back, stopping it in its tracks.

It was a roar, although it was also half-angry scream, and it scoured

his throat raw the moment it was pushed out. But the growl continued throughout it all, and Roan didn't know how. He didn't know a lot of things, actually. He was feeling oddly dizzy, almost detached from himself, and he felt his anger like a physical entity inside his own body, making his muscles bunch together beneath his skin, smooth fibers flowing into hard knots. He leaned forward on his hands, now on all fours, closer to the cage than he should have been, and somehow he roared once more, the force of the noise making blood well up in his throat, as he felt the muscles in his back tense, the hair on his neck bristle as his lips pulled back and revealed his teeth to the cat, growling as he moved forward slowly toward the bars of the cage.

The Eli leopard backed up, its posture one of submission, but that wasn't enough for him. Roan's blood pounded in his ears as his head seemed to swim in its own internal fog, and he could feel his muscles become liquid steel as the anger rose inside him, drowning his vision in red as he realized this cat had to die; he wanted to feel its warm blood gush in his mouth as he ripped open its throat, and—

What the fuck?

It was an effort of will to reassert himself over the beast in his system, the one rising up to take him over, and he nearly threw himself backward, shoving himself away from the cage as he panted for breath and finally stopped growling. What the fuck was that? *What the fuck was that?!* His own blood was coppery in his mouth, his throat ached as if it had been rubbed with a steel scouring brush. His muscle shifted back into their usual places as—

His muscles shifted?

He looked at his hands, almost expecting to see fur and claws, but they were just hands; he could see the black curl of his Leo tattoo and his ghost scar, and he could see his hands were shaking. His whole body was quivering, again it was an effort of will to make it stop, and it was almost painful, since his muscles wanted to spasm. He felt like he was coming back to himself, but he had no idea where or when he had gone. He didn't even remember dropping the bite plate.

His head spun, swam, and he felt almost unable to deal with his own thought processes. Was he going to become. ..? Was he going to change? That was impossible; the change couldn't be forced, it couldn't be controlled or made to happen outside the viral cycle. It couldn't happen; it

had *never* happened.

He'd felt the muscles move. He didn't roar; he couldn't make that noise. The second one wasn't even remotely human. He had no idea where all that rage had come from, or why he was so mad.

His first urge was to run, to get as far away from here and cats as he could, to barricade himself in his house and try to hold on to his humanity against an enemy that lived inside his own body, in his own head, but that was such a chickenshit reaction he was ashamed of it. He swallowed down his own blood, the very act of swallowing making him wince in pain, and he picked up the bite plate as he got to his knees and shoved the thing sideways through the bars, only turning it level once it was inside. "Come on and bite the thing, you stupid cat," he grumbled, and his voice was gravelly hoarse, painful to listen to.

The leopard had lain down on the floor of its cage, its head down on its paws like a person in a guillotine waiting for the blade to come down. He jabbed the plate at its face, annoying it, and finally it raised its head and bit the thing, but it was strangely perfunctory, with almost no aggression in it at all. After he pulled the plate out of the bars, it resumed its submissive posture, its tail twitching in mild irritation.

Roan used the wall to get back to his feet, and as he walked back to the exit, he saw something that horrified him to his very core: the other cats were all in submissive postures, too. The lion, the panther... he had a feeling if he walked the entire block, they would all be that way. They had somehow all heard him, or smelled him, or... no, no, he couldn't deal with this. It suddenly felt as if the air was thickening, the walls closing in on him.

The door unlocked mechanically several seconds after he'd reached it, almost as if no one had wanted to let him in. As he stepped inside the antechamber, he saw a sea of faces all staring at him in abject horror, standing as far back from him inside the room as possible. Even Stahl was standing up from her station, although duty dictated she couldn't move anywhere.

He shoved the bite plate into Allen's hand—he nearly flinched away from Roan as he did so—and finally Gordo asked, the shock making his voice reedy, "Roan, what the fuck was that?"

Not sure he could keep his poker face intact, his vocal inflections flat, he still managed to spit out, "I had to establish dominance. I guess

I'm done here." He quickly left the room and no one challenged him, no one made to follow, and he simply plunged through the crowd outside, elbowing people aside as he tried to leave the building as fast as he could without breaking into a run. His heart was pounding triple time, a beat that seemed to reverberate inside his head and his eyeballs, and he wondered if this was a heart attack. He wondered if he'd mind if it was.

He barely made it back to the Mustang before he doubled over and vomited on the asphalt.

14

Watching the Detective

ONLY after the painkillers started to work did Paris realize the thudding he was feeling was actually coming from above.

As he climbed up the basement stairs, he realized it was music, a bass line and drums pulsing through the floor, and as he pushed open the basement door he recognized it as a song from Absurd Pop Song Romance, Roan's favorite Pansy Division album. He'd heard it enough now that he could recognize it from a single guitar riff.

The sound washed over him as he stumbled blearily into the living room and found Roan sprawled on the sofa, swigging directly from a bottle of rum. That was shocking for several reasons. Roan didn't like rum (the bottle was a Christmas gift from a totally clueless passing acquaintance); Roan drank very sparingly, and when he did, he had a preference for microbrews; and, perhaps most shocking of all, it was just after seven in the fucking morning! Since when did he drink in the morning?

"Ro?" he asked, padding around the sofa.

Roan looked up at him slowly, his bottle-green eyes glazed, red-rimmed, and strangely unfocused. "Oh, sorry, hon," he slurred, his syllables an almost inaudible mush. "I didn't think I'd wake ya."

"You're drunk." Yes, it was an idiotic thing to say, but it was startling to see him this way; he couldn't help but be stupid.

Roan shrugged in a strangely defeated way. "Con always liked it, so I thought now was as good a time as any to give it a serious shot."

"Con?" he repeated, puzzled. Or had he said Vaughn? Either way, he had no idea who that was.

"I guess I get the appeal of drunkenness, but fentanyl's easier." He took a swig from the rum bottle, then grimaced as if it was the worst thing

he'd ever tasted. "God, this is horrible. It's like drinking hair spray."

"Then why drink it?"

"It's the only hard liquor we have in the house." He sighed heavily, and let the bottle thunk onto the carpet, where it still managed to remain upright. His voice was scratchy, hoarse, and Paris wondered if he was coming down with something. (Which would be about time, really. The whole time he'd known him, Roan had never gotten a single cold.) "I didn't want to think anymore; I wanna stop thinking. I wanna shut off my head." He dry-washed his face, and that's when he saw that the knuckles on Roan's right hand were red and slightly swollen, filaments of blood marking the back of his hand like a henna tattoo.

He reached out and grabbed his hand, examining the injury close up. "Holy shit, Ro, did you get in a fight?"

Roan yanked his hand away violently before Paris could get a cursory glance. "Naw, I... I broke the bathroom mirror. Sorry. I'll replace it."

"How'd you break it? Are you all right?" But even as he asked that, he realized that the injuries on Roan's hand could only have come if he'd punched the mirror, possibly more than once.

He shook his hand in the air as if it did actually ache, but then he let it fall casually to his lap. "I'm fine. I'm so fine I'm golden," he replied, but with a derisive, sarcastic snicker, and he got a pained look in his eye. "I'm the king of the fucking cats. I'm the alpha male."

Paris sat on the couch beside him, and it was a fight to catch Roan's eyes, as he seemed to be looking everywhere but at him. "Sweetheart, you're not making sense."

Roan's eyes started to turn liquid as tears welled in them, and once again Paris was quietly amazed at how perfectly, richly green they were. When he'd first met him, he thought he was wearing colored contact lens.

"They knew I could kill all of them. How'd they know that when I didn't know that?"

Paris shook his head, trying hard to make sense of this. Well, drunken rambling wasn't new, it was just new for Ro.

Roan sniffed and wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. "There was this social worker once, her name was Allison. Rainbow

reminds me of her in a way: very hippie-ish, kinda mousy. Allison was the only one who would touch me; she'd take my hand or give me awkward hugs. She would always tell me at the end of our sessions: 'You are not your disease.' She'd look me in the eye and say that, and I didn't know why she was telling me that; it was other people who needed that info, not me. But I'm starting to think she was smarter than everyone else. I'm more my disease than I've ever wanted to admit."

Paris reached out and touched his face, cupping his cheek and turning him toward him. "That's nonsense—"

Roan pushed his hand away and shoved himself farther into the corner of the couch, like he was in one of his moods where he didn't want to be touched. They were rare, but every now and then he'd get in these dark places inside his own head where he wanted no one near him, where a casual touch, no matter how gentle or affectionate, would make him nearly jump out of his skin. Roan never wanted to talk about it, and Paris respected him enough not to ask. He could imagine what it meant, though, and it made him a little sick to think about it.

"It's not. I wish it was. I've known for some time that too much of the cat is bleeding into me, but I liked to pretend it didn't mean anything. But it does. What d'ya think'll happen one day? Do you think I'll change and never change back?"

What in the fucking hell was he talking about? Was he serious? "That doesn't happen. Infecteds don't become cats and stay that way. You know that."

"Infecteds like you. Functional virus children... the medical profession still doesn't know what to make of us. We're the freaks of freaks." He continued wiping away snot and tears, even with tears still streaming from his eyes as he stared resolutely down at the carpet. "And I've just gotten confirmation that I'm King Freak. I suppose I should be glad. If I gotta be a freak, at least I'm the biggest one."

Paris wanted to tell him that was total bullshit, he was not a freak and he was not his disease—what kind of thing was that to say anyway?—but Roan was not in a mood to listen right now. He reached out tentatively, letting Roan see his hand in the corner of his eye before gently touching his face, feeling if his forehead was hot. His skin did seem abnormally warm, but that could have just been the booze; he'd been to enough keggers to know that. "Come on, let's get you upstairs. You need to get

some sleep.”

Paris stood and took his arm, and Roan reluctantly let him help him up to his feet, not so much stumbling as taking a moment to find his balance. He leaned against him, and buried his face in the side of his neck. “You smell good,” he said, his breath hot against Paris’s neck.

Oh joy. You had to love these drunken mood swings. “No I don’t, I haven’t had a shower yet.”

“Doesn’t matter. Tigers smell good.” He scraped his teeth along his neck, not quite a love bite but very much in the same spirit.

“Are you serious? Have you ever been to the zoo?” He held Roan back by the shoulders, and said, “I’m on a supposedly lethal dose of illegal painkillers, and you’re falling-down drunk. Do you actually think we’re capable of doing anything at the moment?”

Roan stared back at him in glazed, bemused defiance. “Nobody likes a quitter.”

Paris frowned, trying not to laugh. At least Roan was still in there, beneath all the self-pity and alcohol, still being a smart-ass. “Come on, horndog, let’s go.”

“Shouldn’t that be hornecat?” he suggested, but not very seriously.

Paris helped him up the stairs in an odd reversal of their usual roles, chewing over everything Roan had said. It didn’t make any more sense in retrospect, and he wondered what the hell had happened to drive him this far to the edge. Roan was one of the toughest guys he’d ever known, in just about every sense of the word; he had a contrarian’s soul, so the more you tried to push him down, the more he fought back. You could beat him black and blue and dump him by the side of the road, but he would just spit out teeth and go right back to where he had been (once quite literally). It was either tenacity or insanity, depending on who you asked. It wasn’t that he wasn’t afraid, it was just that his fears had a tendency to be more esoteric and obscure. A gun in the face would just make him roll his eyes, but an EEG appointment would keep him up all night.

Obviously something was bothering him about himself, about his strain, but what? Yes, Roan had several aspects of the cat that never quite left him in his human form. The most obvious was his sense of smell, but his eyesight was equally acute, and he had a tendency to move with a feline grace that occasionally verged on eerie. People couldn’t actually

move without making a noise, but Roan seemingly could; if he wanted to, he could be in a room with you and you'd never know it unless you somehow saw him out of the corner of your eye. He could stand in the shadows, move in them, and you'd never know it (that's why he got so many great pictures of cheating spouses, and could tail people so successfully). He also had lightning-fast reflexes that allowed him to catch insects in midair and grab people's fists even when they attempted an out-of-nowhere sucker punch; according to him, the police recruiters were especially impressed with his reflexes. (That *Matrix* shit, ducking bullets? He bet Roan could do that in real life, although he hoped that never actually had to be proved.) But none of that seemed especially "inhuman," although he had to admit his "super-smelling" was a bit creepy at times.

Oh, and he did growl a bit. Usually when he was really angry—he always seemed to be startled to find himself doing it, like it was an unconscious reflex—but sometimes when he was aroused too, although that was a different kind of growl. It was much softer, lower in the throat, almost a kind of purr. Did he know he did that? It had never occurred to Paris to ask, but now it did, although there was no way in hell he was bringing it up while he was drunk. Paris always found it kind of flattering, that he could make someone want him enough to growl; a weird kind of ego boost.

His eyes were always the same. Did Roan know that? He never told him because he didn't know how he'd process the news. But even when he was in his lion form, his preternaturally green eyes remained, almost like there was just a little bit of Roan still in there (the eyes changed shape, of course, it was just the irises didn't change color). Did he find out and freak? No, Paris didn't see how he could find out, and even if he did, that would hardly send him careening toward a self-pity drunk. He was having a hard time imagining any scenario that could shake Roan so badly.

Although he tried to help him down onto the bed gently, Roan just kind of collapsed on it, but didn't seem to notice or mind. He took off Roan's shoes and put them aside, pulling the blanket over him as Roan stared up at the ceiling, water still leaking from the corners of his eyes, tears like fragile diamonds getting suspended in the stubble staining his jaw. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Paris knelt down beside the bed so he could be more or less at eye level with him, and stroked the hair off his forehead. He did feel a little feverish; maybe he was simply sick and reacted weirdly to it.

“For this, for everything. I’ve just wanted to believe I was more than a virus, but I don’t think I can deny it anymore. I am my disease; I’m not sure I’m all that human.”

“What bullshit is this?” He turned his face toward him, and this time he seemed too weary to resist it. “You aren’t your disease. You are Roan Christopher McKichan, and don’t even try and insult me by implying I love a walking virus. Got it?”

He smiled weakly, but it almost looked like a grimace. “Yes, dear.”

“Don’t you ‘yes dear’ me,” he said in mock-outrage, before giving him a kiss. He was right; the rum kind of did taste like hair spray.

Paris held him close, putting an arm around his chest and burying his face in his neck, and before he nodded off, Roan said the weirdest thing. “I wonder if I wanted you, or if it wanted the tiger.”

He was a little surprised to find out he was dozing off as well—Roan’s voice made him start a little—but when he looked at him, his eyes were closed, and his breathing had the deep, slow rhythm of sleep. Had he dreamed Roan said that? He must have. What a weird thing to think you heard. What did that even mean? Oh well... dreams, right? They weren’t supposed to make sense.

He shoved himself up from where he’d been kneeling beside the bed, and he figured he’d be aching from being in such a strange position if it hadn’t been for the fact that he was so full of painkillers his insides felt like jelly, and his joints were so loose they could have been greased with WD-40.

Paris went and took a shower, and since the mirror in the bathroom was intact, he figured Roan must have broken the mirror in the downstairs bathroom. That reminded him of Roan’s hand, and as soon as he got out of the shower, he found the actual first aid kit—not one of their Courtney Love variations—and returned to work on his hand.

Roan slept through everything: the antiseptic spray, the wrapping of his hand in gauze, even the last-minute slapping on of the “cool patch,” the ones they kept in the medicine cabinet for Roan’s migraines. Paris was hoping it would bring the swelling in his knuckles down. He couldn’t have punched the mirror hard enough to break them, could he? What would upset him that much?

He went downstairs and shut off the stereo before going into the

bathroom to clean up the shards of bloody glass. Roan had done an excellent job of shattering it in its frame; in fact, there was a fist-shaped indent in the wall behind the mirror. He'd hit it incredibly hard, so hard he must have broken his hand. But you'd think, even as drunk as he was, he'd have felt a great deal of pain. You'd think he wouldn't have been able to use it to hold a bottle of rum. Maybe that was another gift of the cat; maybe he could do things like this and not be hurt as much.

A bizarre thought, especially since Roan was hardly immune to injury, but since that was what Ro seemed so upset about, his cat aspects, he wondered if that was somewhere in the neighborhood of what was bothering him. God, he hoped he was willing to talk once he was sober. Ro shut down so often, he kept things so bottled up, Paris felt privileged to pry little bits of information out of him. That thing he said about the social worker? Paris had no idea he even used to meet with a social worker, but if he was a kid in the state foster care system, that would make sense.

He thought about calling Sikorski just to see if he knew what the hell had happened to Ro last night, but Sikorski barely knew who the hell he was—he'd met him briefly at the funeral for that cop friend of Ro's a couple months back—and Paris could still remember the look the old man gave him, like he was thinking "So you're the guy Roan fucks," a look both dismissive and disdainful yet tempered with an obvious splash of amusement. Paris loathed him on first sight, but played nice because it was a funeral, and because he was an acquaintance of Roan's. But he also hated him because he so obviously used Roan; he used Roan's compulsion to solve puzzles and his ability to look at a scene, at a pile of evidence, and see the tiny little flaw that would bring the whole thing crashing down. Roan was a born investigator, he was almost supernaturally good at it, and Sikorski knew it; Sikorski knew the force had lost a major asset when Ro was bounced. Worst of all, Ro had to know Sikorski was using him, but he so loved to do this, he so loved what he did, that he let him. Mundane private detective work was never going to completely satisfy him; he needed meatier puzzles, he needed challenges to make him feel useful.

And that's all this came down to. Roan, cynical and tough as he was, just wanted to help people. He did, and it was so obvious Paris didn't understand why Ro pretended that wasn't it. He felt totally abandoned by people, by society, and yet he wanted to help them, because maybe that would allow him to be a part of them in some way. If he couldn't be "normal," if he couldn't be un-infected, then maybe he could be valued for what he could do. And if society was at all smart, they would have. It was

a terrible cliché, but even Roan just wanted to be loved, even though he'd never admit such a thing, even under the threat of death.

Thinking of mundane detective work reminded him that Ro was supposed to be at the office today to meet a potential client. He'd mentioned it last night before Paris had to go in the cage, something about a woman worrying her husband was on the down low with his best friend. Roan was a little queasy about possibly "outing" some closet case, but Paris pointed out it was a cheating spouse case, just like any other, with the possibility that he's fucking a guy as opposed to his secretary. After all, they had had one case that accidentally turned into an outing: the Patterson case. That was just last year. A guy showed up and wanted his wife followed, as he was pretty certain she was having an affair with a guy named Grassow, a neighbor, but as Roan soon discovered, Mrs. Patterson was actually having an affair with *Mrs.* Grassow. The husband was utterly flabbergasted, and apparently wasn't sure what he was going to do with this information. In the end, it probably didn't matter; the two women ran off together, and last Roan heard, they were living in Rhode Island.

Paris found the notebook Roan had left by the phone, and found all the information he needed to know. Ro was rather eccentric in that he liked to keep handwritten notes, usually meaning half of Paris's "job" at MK Investigations was scanning or transcribing his copious handwritten case notes and entering them into the computer files for the various cases. Paris always left out Ro's occasional conversations with himself on the paper ("Coincidence? Follow up. This guy is so disgusting I'd cheat on him too") although he hated to do it, because they were often the most entertaining things.

Paris hated to put on a long-sleeved shirt on a day that was already promising to be as miserable as yesterday, but Ro tried to look "casually professional" on the job, meaning he'd only wear a "cubicle noose" (a tie) if he was absolutely forced to, but otherwise he tried to look professional and presentable. So Paris followed his lead, since he'd be filling in for him, playing detective.

He didn't do it often, but he did like to do it. He felt like putting on a fedora and one of Ro's long coats (bless him, he had trench coats and dusters, giving in to the stereotype stylishly), maybe stick a cigarette between his lips (he hadn't smoked since he was infected, but it seemed to go with the image), and not so much walk as swagger. Again, he knew none of this was true—he knew most detective work was rather dull and

somewhat voyeuristic—but it was such a *good* stereotype, how could you not want to be a part of it?

Still, it was hot enough that he eschewed the trench coat, and rolled up the sleeves of his button-down shirt as he went out to the Mustang and drove to the office, stopping along the way to grab some fast food to calm his roaring stomach.

It was stuffy and slightly stale in the office from being closed yesterday, so he opened the blinds and turned on the rattling air conditioner, and although he thought caffeine had absolutely no chance against the painkillers in his system, he put the coffee on to get a pleasant aroma in the office. He almost sat down behind his desk out front, then remembered he really should be in Ro's office. He felt odd walking in and not seeing him there behind his cheerfully weather-beaten wooden desk, which was relatively neat, with a cup of gel and ballpoint pens (Ro preferred gel pens; he felt they were smoother and easier to write with) and an appointment book on one side, and his computer on the other. Paris booted it up, feeling a little like he was prying where he shouldn't, and wondered again what was in that locked bottom drawer.

It was on the bottom right, and it was the only drawer that was actually locked (the left bottom one could lock, but it never was). Roan said the lock was stuck on that drawer and there was nothing in it, but Paris suspected he was lying. Why, he had no idea, and he supposed if he pushed, Roan would tell him eventually, but in a strange way he almost didn't want to know. He feared he'd find artifacts of old lovers or something, things Roan didn't actually want to share and things that Paris would feel better off not knowing.

Roan didn't talk much about his romantic past at all. He said he'd had "one or two" relationships that never worked out, but he mostly stuck to casual relationships because he wasn't good at serious ones. Paris suspected he had gotten his heart not so much broken as minced, sautéed, and served to him in a light Béarnaise sauce, but if that was too painful for him to talk about that was okay. Everybody had a hard-luck relationship story... well, okay, not him, not unless you counted the one-night stand with Darlene that got him infected with the tiger strain. All in all, that could probably top a lot of people's stories.

He sat in Ro's chair, an old leather seat that looked battered but was incredibly comfortable (no wonder he never got a new chair), and tried to pretend he was him for a minute. He was pretty sure he could mimic the

attitude—be a smart-ass? Check!—but he couldn't actually think like Roan. He wished he could. In fact, he'd decided a while ago that while he was initially attracted to Roan's gorgeous, intense eyes, the slinky way he moved, and his great ass, what he fell in love with was his kindness and his fascinating, almost inscrutable mind. Paris knew he wasn't the most intellectual guy around—hell, he'd spent most of his life as a dedicated hedonist, only focused on getting laid as much as humanly possible—but he knew there was something different about the way Ro thought, the way he could find those little flaws, take obscure leaps of logic that miraculously panned out, find the threads that everyone else missed. Paris wished he could think that way; he wished he could feel out leads like they were tangible objects, something he could hold in his hands and examine at his leisure. But he felt more comfortable in his male “femme fatale” role. He didn't know things, but he knew people; he knew what they wanted, he knew their desires, and he knew how to make almost anyone beg. That was good enough.

He heard the office door open, and he jumped to his feet and went out to greet the client. Susan Heffernan was a Clairol sun-kissed blonde with muddy roots, average height and average weight, with relatively large breasts and a small bulge of a gut, dressed in a pink top that was a bit too tight for her form and a pair of denim capris that didn't quite work with her clunky sandals. As she adjusted her suede hobo bag, she stared at him in what must have been shock. “You're Roan McKichan?” She said it like someone might say “*You're my daughter?*”

“No,” he replied with a small, professional smile, and wondered if she knew how lucky she was. She'd just pronounced his last name “McKitchen.” “I'm afraid Mr. McKichan”—he pronounced it correctly, with some emphasis—“is ill today. I'm his partner, Paris Lehane.”

“Oh.” She shook his hand, but held on a bit too long, and he knew she was taking a mental snapshot of him for later. Oh well... it happened too much for him to be bothered by it now. “Named after the city?”

Most people guessed that; Roan had impressed him by asking, “City or myth?” His mother was a teacher of classical mythology; he was named after the guy who supposedly started the Trojan War by kidnapping (or eloping with, depending on interpretation) Helen. Of all the kids, he'd probably got the best end of the name game; his sisters were named Antigone and Deianira.

It was a pretty much straightforward transaction: he gave her the

standard forms, told her their rates, he got the basic information about her husband (where he worked, what his shift was, where he liked to go after work), and she also provided a photo of Ryan and his “best friend” Cooper. They were both blandly good-looking and not screaming queens, so it was impossible to say if she had a reason to be worried or not. What an easy case to solve; just give him five minutes alone in a room with Ryan, and he’d know if he was gay or bi or not.

It didn’t seem perfectly ethical somehow, but they were one payment closer to getting the sliding glass door replaced, so that eased his conscience a bit. He was happy to put the down payment receipt in his wallet (so she paid by credit card; it was better than a check) and decided to close up before Braunbeck came over with a sack of gorp and an offer for a free rolfing. He couldn’t help but worry about Roan, although he knew the last person in the world he ever needed to worry about was Roan. But whatever had happened to him last night must have been... heavy.

While he was locking up, Randi came over, buzzing on coffee, and handed him a manila envelope as she talked in a Starbucks-fueled mania (it wasn’t her lunch hour, so she must have been taking a break). She’d e-mailed Ro all the stuff, but she thought he might want to have some hard copies to look at. Apparently DeSilvo and Henstridge both had been receiving money from something called Metropol Limited, which was, as far as she could tell, a dummy corporation and a very lame tax shelter based in the Cayman Islands. It no longer existed—it shut down after a huge donation was made to Henstridge’s account two days ago—and she was sure it was probably just a person trying to hide some cash. Her guess was they were trying to hide money from the IRS, but the amounts were dribs and drabs, so she wasn’t sure. But she thought Ro would be really interested in it, and so did he. It was suspicious, but he had no idea what it could possibly mean; Roan would undoubtedly know what it meant, and would stare at the two of them like the complete morons they apparently were.

On the drive back home he kept running over scenarios where Roan would freak-out over being infected, but he kept drawing a blank. Ro wasn’t like him; he wouldn’t wake up one day and find himself covered in someone else’s blood, aching like he’d just been shoved off the roof of a twenty-story building and run over by the ambulance that was supposed to pick him up, and take a minute to figure out that the weird... things on him, the things that looked like random pieces of shredded plastic, were

actually flesh cut so thin it was almost translucent. Paris shuddered at the memory, his gut churning, but he felt a certain healthy distance from it now, which was probably good. That would make anyone lose their mind for a while, right? Well, maybe Ro could deal with it; maybe anyone would deal with it better than he did.

Pulling up to the house, he saw a silver Subaru Outback parked across the street, and a man standing at the base of their driveway. Paris recognized neither the SUV nor the man, and he suddenly had a really bad feeling about this. It didn't help that the man turned around suddenly, as if surprised. The gun was under the seat, right?

He got out of the car and the man came up to him with a friendly enough "Hi," and an additional, "Do you live here?"

Ro was a bit paranoid, but there was always some logic to it. For instance, he always advised Paris to be careful in giving away information, no matter how seemingly harmless, if you didn't trust someone. Paris didn't trust this guy enough to confirm even that. "Can I help you with something?" he replied, meeting a question with a question.

The guy was six foot even, probably mid-thirties, reasonably broad across the shoulders but slender, face square-jawed and ruggedly all American, his eyes hidden behind slender, pitch-black sunglasses, his ash-brown hair short and slightly spiky in the front, like he combed mousse through his bangs with his fingers. He wore a loose, vintage T-shirt, dun brown with the "Twister!" logo on it, and oversized Levis that were baggy enough to hide his legs (and surely his ass as well... and maybe a gun). Paris figured he could take the guy if he tried anything, unless he was a martial arts expert or a character from a Tarantino film or something.

The guy claimed to have been driving by when he saw the GTO. He also claimed to be a classic car collector (in a Subaru Outback?!), and it had happened to Paris before, when he was painting the GTO, so he could almost buy it. The guy did seem to know something about muscle cars, but Paris couldn't shake his suspicion that that wasn't why he was here, that if he hadn't drove up, this guy would have... what? Was he casing the joint? Was he looking for Roan?

For some reason, that made him feel slightly queasy. *Looking for Roan.*

The guy said his name was Mark, and he made Paris an offer for the GTO, a thousand in cash and another thousand in check form to buy the

car as is—with the engine out—but Paris turned it down. Restoring cars like the Mustang and the GTO was a hobby, one that allowed him to turn off his mind and pretend for a while he was normal, like he was back in high school working in his Uncle Mick's garage—not infected, not doomed to a grisly fate. Also, he didn't believe "Mark." He had no real reason to disbelieve him, but something about this was all wrong. Paris couldn't completely shake the feeling that he had interrupted "Mark," but in the course of what he had no idea.

He watched the Outback drive off, but not overtly. It was a new car, apparently; it had no license plate, and the temporary one in the back was so obscured by the tinted windows he couldn't read it. You'd think the cops would hate that.

Once inside, he went straight upstairs, and was relieved to find Roan still asleep and perfectly fine. He didn't know why he was seized by the sudden fear that he'd find him hurt... or worse. It was stupid; he wasn't a nervous Nelly, and Roan wasn't helpless (although currently he was as close as he ever came). There was absolutely no reason for him to be worried about this.

Right?

15

Bloodshift

CURIOUSLY, as bad as vomiting felt, he always seemed to feel better afterward.

Well, perhaps that was an overstatement. It was just that after the violent spasms of his stomach, the feeling of emptiness was a strange relief. Unless he got the dry heaves; then it was another form of misery.

Roan leaned over the toilet for a full minute after the last stomach spasm, watching a thin line of saliva dangle from his bottom lip to the very surface of the water, but his stomach finally seemed hollow and quiet, so he figured he was safe to move.

He flushed the last of his vomit away and stood up with the help of the sink, rinsing his mouth out with water and mouthwash to try and get the burning taste of bile out of the back of his throat. It kind of worked, but his head continued to pound as if his thoughts had rebelled and taken up violent revolution against the confines of his skull.

Paris knocked softly on the bathroom door before gently pushing it open. "Didn't drown in the toilet, did you?"

"Only wish I had," he admitted, looking at Paris in the bathroom mirror. He looked far too awake and happy, in khaki walking shorts and a maroon T-shirt with a drawing of a piñata on it, and the phrase "I'd Hit That" written beneath. (He recognized that as a gift from Randi, which Paris of course absolutely loved.) "I feel like a complete asshole."

"Don't. If you didn't break down now and again, I'd worry about you." He came in and put the bottle of ginger pills and a bottled water on the counter beside the sink, then put his arms around Roan and pressed up against his back. "Excedrin's in the medicine cabinet."

"So's Vicodin. I think I'd rather have that." He leaned back against Paris, who was warm and comforting, and made him feel a bit better (at

least physically; he still felt bad in every other respect). “You’re being far too nice to me. I’m getting suspicious.”

“Why? If I was pissed off at you, I’d be a total hypocrite. You do know I probably had three sober days in college, and those three days were total flukes. The ’shrooms weren’t magic, and the pot was mostly stems.”

Roan grimaced, as he still hurt too much to smile. “Exaggerating much?”

Paris rested his chin on his shoulder, still looking at him in the bathroom mirror, his hair tickling the side of his neck. “Hardly. I can’t even remember what my bullshit major was supposed to be. Drama or film studies or some shit like that. Thanks to my athletic scholarship, I had access to the hot chicks, but I had to go into the arts to get the hot, sensitive guys confused about their sexuality and unable to hold their liquor.” He grinned at him and raised his eyebrows in a mock-suggestive manner.

It hurt to laugh, but Roan chuckled weakly anyway. “I can’t quite totally believe that, you know.”

“You really should. I was a pleasure-addicted man whore, a complete and utter slut. I was just there for the sex and drugs. Isn’t that what college is for?”

Roan smiled as he popped a couple of ginger pills and washed them down with the bottled water, which was clean and icy cold. Paris really was too nice to him sometimes.

(That made him wonder if he had been a total bastard to Con.)

“I’m sorry I missed out.” He opened the medicine cabinet and found the bottle of Excedrin, popping off the cap and pouring three bitter-tasting pills directly into his mouth. He had never gone to college. In fact, he’d dropped out of high school and got a GED instead, because it wasn’t like he could hack it at a normal high school anyway: he was a fucking lion five days out of every month. And if normal teens thought high school was hell, they should have tried it being both infected and gay. At least it taught him how to fight and how to take a beating, which was almost as important as the former.

Besides, he felt like he learned more on his own, spending so many long days and evenings reading (there often wasn’t much else to do in the

temporary group and state homes he was sent to), plowing through entire libraries until he could read so fast people began to think he was a speed-reader.

He closed the mirrored medicine cabinet to find Paris grinning at him in an openly lecherous way. "I'm still a man whore at heart, you know. I can help you make up for lost time."

It hurt to smile, but he continued to do so anyway. Okay, maybe Paris was a man whore, but he was *his* man whore, damn it. "Maybe when I'm not hungover."

"Excellent choice. It's more fun when you're not half-dead." Paris's smile faded slightly, although he continued to stare at him in the mirror. "So, you gonna volunteer the info, or do I have to pull it out of you?"

Roan sighed, weighing his options. He didn't have many that he could see, and Paris did deserve an answer. He glanced down at the sink, busying himself finding the shaving cream among all the bottles at the back of the countertop, and told him, not meeting his eyes in the mirror. He only glanced at him when he was done, and Paris's expression was unreadable, save for surprise in his eyes.

"Feeling you can bring it on and actually being able to bring it on are two different things," he finally said.

"I know. But... there was a moment there when I was sure I could do it if I just let go."

"No change happens that fast."

"I know. But..." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Something's happening to me, and I'm not sure I like it."

"You shouldn't worry. I know you, and I know you'll always do the right thing. That's the kind of guy you are. Unlike me, Slutty McWhore over here." He kissed him on the cheek and added, "When you're ready, I've got lunch and news for you downstairs."

"I really don't think I could eat right now."

"Give it a minute." He gave him a final squeeze before letting him go and leaving the bathroom.

Slutty McWhore? Oh, he was definitely writing him up a name tag with that on it. And knowing Paris, he'd wear it proudly.

PARIS apparently did know what he was talking about when it came to hangovers, because as soon as the smell of eggs and sausage hit his nose, his empty stomach rumbled hungrily. Perverse little thing.

Paris had made what he called his “kitchen-sink omelets,” which was basically anything he found in the fridge or cupboards thrown into a bunch of eggs and cooked together in a pan. He sat down at the breakfast bar and Par slid a plate full of eggs in front of him, along with a vanilla Frappuccino (he told him he’d need the sugar and caffeine). As far as he could tell, the eggs were full of salsa, olives, vegetarian sausage, red peppers, and pepper jack cheese, and it was incredibly good; he had to close his eyes for a moment just to savor it. Why couldn’t he cook like this? Everything he tried to cook inevitably tasted like the processed food it started out as.

Paris sat on the opposite side of the breakfast bar from him, eating his own lunch, and filled him in on what he’d missed. He’d covered for him in meeting Susan Heffernan (he deserved some kind of boyfriend medal), and handed him the relevant paperwork, the meager fact sheet and the photo of Ryan and Cooper. Looking at the photo, he felt like he’d been smacked in the face. “Is Ryan the one in the blue T-shirt?”

“Yeah, that’s him. Why?”

“Just trying to keep it straight in my head,” he lied, turning the photo facedown and setting it aside. How did this happen to him? Was it because he hadn’t ever moved out of this state? Maybe he should have moved to San Francisco or New York City or something; maybe these things wouldn’t happen in such a big place.

The New Year’s Eve after Con had committed suicide—and before he met Paris—he had wandered the streets in the biting cold, trying not to feel depressed and failing miserably. He always hated the holidays, and didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas; they seemed to be holidays invented for people with families and something to be happy about, neither of which applied to him. (Paris insisted on having a Christmas tree, though, and generally made pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving, and Roan didn’t stop him, mainly because he couldn’t.) He hated gay bars and nightclubs—they were just too damn annoying; geared toward femmes or butchies and little in between—but he didn’t feel like being alone, so he

ended up in a sports bar, trying new microbrews and munching on barely passable Buffalo wings. He started up a conversation with this guy who said his name was Jeff, and while he wasn't hitting on him—who cruised a sports bar?—it became clear that Jeff was subtly but obviously hinting that he thought they should go someplace more private. Jeff wasn't really his type; he wasn't too bad-looking (or that attractive, actually), but it was New Year's Eve, and he was tired of being so fucking depressed. It was just a one-nighter, no biggie... but Jeff was clearly Ryan, unless Ryan had a twin brother. He glanced at the fact sheet to see how long the Heffernans had been married, and saw that it had been eight and a half years. Holy shit, he was married then. He certainly hadn't been wearing his wedding ring that night.

At least he'd already solved the case.

He quickly forgot all about his inadvertent fling with a married man when Paris gave him the envelope Randi had given him earlier. DeSilvo and Henstridge were on someone's secret payroll? Oh, now that was interesting. Why? Whose? According to the dates, Metropol had started shifting little amounts into their bank accounts, a couple hundred here and there—as Randi had noted, dribs and drabs, just small enough not to raise any eyebrows—less than two weeks after the Tweaks arrest at Edgewood. There was no way in hell Tweaks had that kind of money, no way he even knew how to set up a dummy corp in the Cayman Islands (even if it only existed in a post office box and on the Internet), and if he'd ever had that kind of money, it'd all go to Ecstasy and meth, not some patrol cops. The last payment to Henstridge alone was sizable, nearly thirteen thousand dollars, but it was like a money dump, somebody emptying the account so they could close it, and Tweaks was dead by then. Still, he called Randi and asked her to do a similar search for Anthony Westmore Andersen, and promised that Paris would make her dessert for that. As soon as he hung up, Paris asked, "I will, will I?"

"I'm hoping begging and pleading will work at this juncture."

He smiled slyly, and Roan knew he'd just walked into something. "How about a trade?"

Roan figured he knew exactly what he was alluding to. Man whore. "We'll haggle when I'm not hungover."

"Oh joy, your excuse for the day," Paris replied, but lightly, with a tolerant smile on his face.

Actually, Roan was feeling a hell of a lot better; the combination of the pills, the food, the caffeine, and something else to think about were doing wonders for him. Paris probably knew that too. He always claimed not to be all that smart, but Paris, being an expert manipulator, always knew how to read people as easily as any decent criminal profiler. He followed people's subtle emotional shifts, to the point that he could easily extrapolate what they wanted from him, what they expected, and he could tailor his response to get what he wanted from them. That was probably why they worked so well together; they had a whole left brain/right brain dichotomy going on.

Which was why the next thing Paris told him was a little troubling. He recounted the incident with the man he didn't trust in their driveway, although the description of the guy was just vague enough that he was almost familiar and yet obviously not at the same time. "Maybe you should have taken the check," Roan suggested. "The name and address might have been something we could've traced."

Paris frowned, making faint furrows appear on his smooth brow. Paris was creeping toward thirty, creeping toward the age when tiger-strain victims began to die in large numbers. No tiger strain had ever been documented as living over the age of thirty-five. He felt a twinge in his chest just thinking that these might be Paris's last years on Earth... and he'd obviously chosen to spend them with him. Just another reminder that there was no way in fucking hell he deserved this man, and yet he couldn't possibly imagine life without him at this point. In fact, he wasn't going to, because the mere thought of it would cripple him. He had to focus on the here and now, and let the future worry about itself.

"Oh fuck. I didn't think of that."

"Doesn't matter. If this guy was as phony as you thought he was, that would have been a bogus check, borrowed or stolen. Wouldn't have panned out."

Paris sighed slightly, letting his shoulders sag. He seemed to be relieved at being let off the hook. "Good, I don't feel like such an incompetent asshole now."

"You've never been that, Par."

"Oh come on! I can't even tell you why I didn't like this guy."

"Except he had a cheap-shit David Beckham-ish haircut," he replied,

parroting part of the description he'd given him earlier.

"And he was driving a fucking Subaru Outback."

Paris had a pretty amusing and slightly baffling hatred for all SUVs, minivans, and any type of similar bulky, boxy vehicle, with Hummers especially singled out for his acidic scorn. As he liked to say, "If your penis is really that small, they have surgery for that now." Roan couldn't say he was a fan of any of them, but Paris's extreme hatred of them always struck him as kind of funny.

Paris sighed, letting his fork drop to his mostly empty plate. "I'm just being stupid. If he was really some kind of bad guy, he'd have attacked me or something."

Roan shook his head. "Not at all. If he was planning something, a second person could have screwed up his scenario. And you're not exactly a limp-wristed pansy; you're a big guy. Maybe he figured that, even with the element of surprise, he couldn't take you." Paris opened his mouth to speak, but he cut him off. "A man whose joke would be really inappropriate now."

"Damn it." Paris got up and took his plate to the sink, rinsing it off before putting it in the dishwasher (Which they hadn't named yet: Roan wanted to call it Joe, and Paris wanted to call it George. It was a stalemate). He went ahead and did this to all the pans he'd dirtied while making his omelet, so he didn't have to face him when he asked, "Do you think someone might be after you?"

Roan chewed on a forkful of eggs, considering his answer carefully. "He could have just been a process server, you know. They have to deliver those directly to the person named. I wouldn't worry about it at the moment, although I'll be careful. Being a P.I. is never a popular job." Which was true. He knew people sometimes held a grudge against him for "ruining" their marriages by snapping pictures of them with their lovers. Once a guy had tried to jump him in the parking lot and beat the shit out of him, but Roan was easily able to put him in an arm lock and slam him onto the hood of a car, letting him know that he'd be willing not to press charges if he got the fuck out of here and never crossed his path ever again. He was still belligerent and cursing him until Roan told him he was gay, and damn if he didn't have a really nice ass, especially from this vantage point. That made the guy shut up and leave.

Sexual threatening was as low as you could go, but it did work with

surprising alacrity on a number of straight men. All he could figure was they assumed gay men were all sexual predators, treating men like they'd like to treat women: all as potential (if unwilling) fucks, whether they were attractive or not, as long as they had the appropriate holes.

By the time he was nearly done with his eggs, Paris asked, "So are you going to tell me why you looked at that pic of Ryan and Cooper funny?"

Damn it. There was no getting away with anything in this house, was there? He could have lied, but why? No point. "I had a one-nighter with Ryan a couple years ago. I didn't know he was married."

Paris laughed, wiping down the countertop so he couldn't see the evil look Roan was now giving him. "Oh shit. That's going to be an awkward confrontation. So, was he any good?"

Only Paris would have asked that. And the fact that Roan had to think about it pretty much answered the question. All sex was, by definition, good, but if you couldn't recall it instantly, if it was completely lost to you, it couldn't have been *very* good. "He was astoundingly average. I wasn't drunk, but I barely remember it. I only recalled him because I've never been picked up in a sports bar before or since."

Paris finally looked at him, a disbelieving grin lighting up his face. "A sports bar? What the hell were you doing in a sports bar?"

"It was open and had beer."

Paris shook his head and went back to stacking the dishwasher. "You think you know a guy, and he does something like that. What's next, a tractor pull?"

"I'm going now," he said tartly, swigging down the rest of his Frappuccino, hiding his smile.

"Oh, I know," Paris continued to taunt him. "Monster trucks. Maybe a duck hunt!"

He was saved by the phone, which rang and cut off any further teasing. The fact that caller I.D. identified the caller as Sikorski didn't discourage him at the moment. "Hey, Gordo, what do you got for me?"

"Good news, in a way. Eli's bite print matched a mauling we had a couple days ago."

That was *good* news? "What?"

“A homeless man was mauled in Sprague Park the night before yesterday; he’s still in the hospital but they think he’s going to make it. Anyways, Eli’s bite print matches the bites on his arms and legs, so we can hold him and charge him for assault and being unrestrained. We have a pool going, see how mad we can make Stovak before that vein in his forehead finally explodes.”

“Is he aware of this? He might sue.”

“Not if he’s in a hospital with an aneurysm he won’t.”

Roan smirked at the thought. When Guy got really angry, a little vein *did* start to pulse in his forehead, like it was a second heart. But Roan had gotten him pretty upset, and it had never gotten close to exploding (not for lack of trying). He wished the PD luck. “Got anything on Henstridge for me?”

“Uh, no. He was a decent cop, retired out early ’cause of his son’s health problems; his wife died a while back, and he was the only one around to take care of him. Last known address we have for him is 1725 Longview.”

That was the address of the little clapboard house that was currently up for sale. Quietly, Paris said, “Super Bowl party,” and Roan flipped him off. “What did his son have?” Was that relevant? Perhaps. Health problems, especially if they were chronic, cost lots of money.

Gordo sighed in disappointment. “Is that really any of your business?”

“It could be relevant.”

“How?”

“Humor me.”

The pause was so long he wasn’t sure if Gordo was going to actually tell him or not. He heard his chair creak, and in the background he could hear someone angrily ranting. Was that Stovak? “Couldn’t you find out yourself? You seem to know everything else.” But that was a rhetorical question, as he heard him shuffling papers, and a moment later, Gordo read, “Polycythemia vera, some kinda rare blood disorder. You owe me.”

Roan grabbed the pen and pad by the phone, and asked him to spell that for him. With an angry sigh, he did. After that, Gordo asked something Roan had been hoping he’d forget. “You gonna tell me what the

fuck happened last night?”

“As soon as I figure it out. Thanks, Gord.” He hung up before he could press the issue. He’d decided that not thinking about it was the best way to go; denial could be your friend.

“I take it you have another lead,” Paris prompted.

“I have a medical condition to research. I figure I can look it up before I head out to Hatch’s place. Oh, and Eli apparently mauled someone the other night, so he’s being held.”

Paris stared at him in surprise, all traces of humor gone, and he let out a low whistle. “His followers won’t like that.”

“Tell me about it. The cop shop will probably be swamped with angry cultists tonight. Glad I don’t work there anymore.”

But Paris grinned in an unsettling, predatory way, his eyes glittering with malice. “You should take the video camera there tonight. That way if someone does something terminally stupid, you’ll have the footage to prove it. There’s no better way to destroy someone than to let them do it themselves.”

“You know I love you, hon, but sometimes you’re frightening.”

“We man whores are a vicious breed.”

In that case, he was glad Paris was on his side.

ROAN didn’t understand how Henstridge’s son could have polycythemia vera. Was it a lie?

A quick check of his personnel file confirmed his son, Michael, would only be thirteen, but polycythemia vera was an abnormal increase in blood cells caused by excessive production in the bone marrow. It was extremely rare, it was almost never diagnosed in people under forty, and yet if he used Henstridge’s requests for personal time off as a measure, the kid might have been diagnosed as early as eight. Maybe if the kid had had leukemia at some point it could have been the cause, except oddly enough, polycythemia vera could actually lead to a form of leukemia. So was this just a kid doomed with a strange illness, or was his father lying for some unfathomable reason?

He searched online for what had happened to Henstridge's wife, who was listed in his personnel file as Anita (Havner) Henstridge. He found an old newspaper obituary from ten years ago, saying only that she died after a "long illness" that was never specified. Could it have been something related to polycythemia vera? Another weird thing, though: PV was more likely to affect men than women. This didn't make too much sense, but what in this case did? Maybe Anita used to be Arnold, pre-surgery.

He made sure Paris was locked in and safe before heading out, and while he wondered briefly if he could make the tiger become as submissive as Eli and the other cats, he decided that he didn't want to know. Roan felt it would confirm something about the cat in him, and he was still embracing denial at this point.

He set the Henstridge/DeSilvo case aside for the moment, and drove out to Hatch's place. The same beat-up red Mazda Miata that he'd seen in the driveway when he'd talked to the acne-riddled woman was here, as was a white Ford pickup with some minor body damage and peeling paint. (He could almost hear Paris giving him an itemized rundown on how much it would cost to fix the damage.)

Lights were on in the house, although the curtains were drawn and most of what he could see was bleeding through cracks, places where the drapes weren't closed all the way. Their closest neighbors apparently weren't home—there was no car in the drive, no lights on, their gate locked—so he parked just in front of their house, hidden from direct view by a large Ponderosa pine. He was in what Par called his "ninja clothes" (black T-shirt, black pants, black hiking boots), and since it was a warm night he didn't wear his coat. He tucked his HK in a belt holster and pulled out his shirt to cover it, and wore his binoculars around his neck. He had a digital camera small enough to shove in his pocket; he could have just gone with the cell phone camera, but he didn't like their generally poor definition.

He got out of the car and walked toward the house, sticking to the faint but growing shadows in the blue twilight, and the wind came up against his back, warm and dry, making dead leaves scrape down the road with a sound like claws. It was like he was the only living thing on earth.

The Hatch's dog caught his scent and began to yip and growl, but as he came across their yard, he started to growl, too, a low sound that almost got lost in the wind, but the dog heard it and stopped. Roan approached the chain-link fence where the dog waited, reeking as if marinating in its own

shit, and his growl grew louder as he looked down and met the dog's empty brown eyes, feeling his lip pull back and bare one of his sharp canine teeth. The dog whimpered and ran for the back of the yard to hide.

He heard the low murmur of a television inside the house, as well as a woman's voice slightly raised, yelling at someone to get their ass out here. Did Hatch have a kid?

He was on the verge of moving toward the front when a bright flash of light caught his eye.

It came from the large outbuilding in the backyard, which was shut up completely, but there were some gaps in the black paint covering the tiny windows that allowed that light to pulse through. Roan stared at the shed, almost willing it to happen again, but it didn't. No matter how muffled a gunshot, he'd have heard it from here, so it must have been a picture flash. Now who would be taking pictures in a blacked-out, locked shed?

Roan grabbed the top of the fence and easily pulled himself over it, jumping down and landing quietly in the dead grass. The dog was too scared and too busy hiding from him to comment, and the woman was still arguing with someone in the house.

There was only one way to find out what that flash had been. He just hoped it was worth risking a trespassing charge for.

16

Stockholm Syndrome

ROAN checked what the vantage point would be from the rear of the house, and crept carefully across the back lawn, glad that no lights were on outside yet. Mentally he asked himself—again—what he was doing, but he'd had a bad feeling since talking to Hatch's wife, and he wasn't about to ignore his instincts. There was something going on here, whether it was connected to Danny or not, and he wanted to determine what the fuck it was before moving on. It wasn't like he had any other leads at the moment anyway.

He moved around to the window that was improperly covered with black paint, and pressed his eye against the narrow strip of clean glass on the far right side. It took him a moment to focus, but there were low spotlights on inside the shed, illuminating shapes that only came to life as the figure moving around the shed kept turning on more lights. They looked like floor lamps, the kind you could pick up for a song at Ikea, although some of them had brighter than average bulbs. As he—Hatch?—lit the place up, Roan could make out what appeared to be hard drives on shelves (which would explain the electric hum he was hearing through the glass), and metal poles... no, a type of makeshift headboard, wasn't it? As more lights came up in the small room, he saw there was indeed a bed in there, and silver metal glinted against the black iron. Handcuffs? The way the sliver of clear glass was angled and the way that he was turning on lights, it was hard to get a good look, but then the camera flash went off again. It caught him off guard, and he had to blink away afterimages that nearly blinded him. But in that short window between overexposure and blinding, he caught a glimpse of a face: a young man in profile, his black hair a mess and nearly obscuring his eyes, which were closed. He was Japanese and looked unconscious, his wrists handcuffed to the bedposts.

Oh holy shit.

He felt the rage rising, and he let it come as he darted around to the

door. As he hit it with his shoulder, Roan could feel the change wanting to happen, he could feel his muscles going hard; they were humming like live wires as the door exploded open, and Hatch jumped in shock, dropping his digital camera. “What the fuck—” he exclaimed angrily.

The smell of the place overwhelmed Roan, and in its way it was as stunning as a punch to the gut. It was the smell of body odor, fear sweat, piss, semen, adrenaline, vomit, blood, and ozone, all confined in a small space and baked in heat and static electricity. Roan saw Hatch coming for him, swinging something he’d grabbed up from the corner (baseball bat?), and even though he knew he could have grabbed it out of the air—his arm twitched, the knotting muscles responding without him—he let it come down, only bringing up his arm to keep the blow from landing on his face.

He needed an injury, a mark, a bruise, to legally excuse what he was going to do to this man.

The bat hit hard, possibly fracturing a bone, but Roan hardly even felt the pain as he yanked the bat out of Hatch’s hand and threw it away, hitting something with a solid thud. Hatch’s eyes darted toward the hit object, but Roan never bothered to look.

Hatch tried to land a punch then, throwing a wild right, but Roan easily caught his hand and twisted the arm with a sharp, savage motion, snapping the bone clean. At the same moment, he kicked out, stamping a foot flat against Hatch’s left knee with excessive force. The leg bent as it was not supposed to, and the crack of his leg breaking was as loud as a rifle blast in the tiny shed.

Hatch tried to scream, but he had no breath; the noise that came out of him as he toppled to the floor was a high-pitched squeal, like some kind of bizarre tea kettle whistle. But as soon as he hit the floorboards it jarred his broken leg, and he managed a surprised, agonized yelp, grabbing for his leg with his one good arm as tears of pain streamed from his eyes. “Do not try me,” Roan grated. “You will lose.” Only belatedly did he realize he was growling as he spoke.

Swallowing back his rage, reining in the beast, he went over to check Danny. He was still breathing, but his breaths were slow and shallow, and even when Roan called his name he didn’t move. He appeared naked to the waist, but that’s where a tattered green blanket covered him; it was probably safe to assume he was completely naked. The handcuffs looked like old regulation issue, before plastic ties came into wide use, and the

skin of Danny's wrists looked abraded, like he'd been in them for some time. "Where are the fucking keys?"

Hatch was still curled up on the floor on his side, his broken arm hanging down uselessly, and when he looked up at Roan his slate-gray eyes were wild and showing too much white. He was a soft-looking man, of above average height, but middle age was catching up to him rapidly, making his bark-colored hair lank and thin, and his middle looked like a pillow of slowly swelling dough. "Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm a detective hired by Danny's parents to find him, you sick son of a bitch." He saw that Hatch's good hand was scrambling to pull out something beneath a lower shelf, and just because he felt like playing with his prey he let Hatch pull out the gun—a little Smith & Wesson 9 mm—before he put his foot down on the gun and let him take a good, long look up the barrel of his HK. "Mine's bigger." He kicked the gun behind him, and Hatch didn't try to fight. From the sharp new scent in the shed, he'd just pissed himself. "Now, keys, or I'll take your other arm."

It took him a moment to form the words; all the blood had drained from his face, and he wondered if Hatch was starting to go into shock. Like he gave a fuck if he was. "C-coffee can, to your right."

There was an old Folgers can on the largest shelf, roughly waist high, and inside it were the little silver keys to the cuffs. He plucked them out and holstered his gun—like Hatch was capable of making a sudden move right now—before freeing Danny's hands. It was then he noticed small needle holes in Danny's bicep, ones that looked fairly fresh. "What the fuck did you shoot him up with?" When Hatch didn't answer promptly, he snapped, "You have more bones I could break. Wanna see?"

"Special K," he replied, his voice weak and defeated. Part shock, and part realization that he was powerless. Roan bet he was in a lot of fucking pain now that the initial numbness had worn off. "He wanted it; I wasn't doing anything he didn't want."

"Oh fuck you, asshat. If he was so willing, why did you keep dosing him with Special K? Why are his wrists raw?" He pulled out his cell phone, and hit the number for Sikorski.

He picked up on the third ring. "This better be good," Sikorski replied crossly. Roan thought he could hear a lot of noise in the background.

"I need you to get your ass down here ASAP and send ambulances to 125 Lake Court South. I got a kid dosed on ketamine, a probable victim of sexual assault, and the perp's been injured."

"Whoa, whoa—what? What the hell are you involved in, McKichan?"

It was funny how he called him by his last name only when he was angry at him, or about to get angry. "I found my clients' kid. He's not in good shape."

That news, a good answer, seem to short-circuit Sikorski's temper tantrum. "Oh shit. You hurt?"

"Do I sound hurt?" Actually, his arm was aching a little where he took the blow (not from a baseball bat—he could see now that it was an ax handle), but the fact that Hatch was hurting so much more made him feel better.

"What'd you do to the perp?"

"Nothing," he replied blandly, couching his sarcasm in a dark, funereal tone. "He fell down the stairs." He hung up the phone before Sikorski could comment on that.

Sikorski must have been worried that he was going to go psycho on the guy before he got there, because a patrol car came screaming into the cul-de-sac barely three minutes later. Still, Roan had time to look around the shed: a miniature and very cheap-shit version of a sadomasochist's lair, layered with cheap soundproofing and small Internet and digital video cams set up to capture the action, although none appeared to be on yet. But those hard drives—all of them—were active and humming. He'd probably interrupted just before the show could start.

The blue boys (actually, one was female) had to deal with Hatch's wife, whom he could hear shouting epithets and abuse at the cops until they had no choice but to cuff her and stash her in the back of their prowler. It made Roan fairly certain she knew what her husband's hobby was; perhaps she participated from time to time. Although most sex predators were men, you did find the odd woman or two.

The ambulances and Gordo and Seb arrived at about the same time, with the two detectives who usually got the sex crimes beat (Foster and Blanchard) close behind, and he was glad to see a friendly face among the EMT crews, Diego Cole. Diego was actually an ex-boyfriend of his, but

unlike him and Con, their breakup had been mutual and free of drama and hard feelings. They just knew they weren't a good match, and there was no point trying to pretend they were. Roan's idea of relaxing after a hard day was reading a book, maybe watching a movie; Diego preferred playing Xbox until three in the goddamn morning. He liked to say it kept his reflexes sharp, but somehow Roan doubted that.

Gordo and Seb took it all in, and seeing Hatch on the floor in a small pool of his own piss, they both stared at Roan as the two EMT teams split up, the strangers going to Danny, while Diego and his rig partner, Steve Tsuru, got the fun task of working on Hatch. "His right arm's broken, as is his left leg," he told them.

Diego, who was crouched beside Hatch, looked up at him rather coolly. "Anything else we should know, Dirty Harry?"

He scowled at him, but decided to save the evil remark for a more private moment. "He's a total prick."

There was some fear that Danny had been mildly overdosed on ketamine—mild meaning he wasn't dying, but he was barely alive. His respiration rate was incredibly low, and they couldn't even get a reflex response from him. The rest of them had to clear the shed so the EMTs could work, and Seb kept an eye on things from the doorway, but there was hardly any need: Hatch was too hurt to try anything, and knowing Diego and Steve, they'd just smash him over the head with their kits if he did. Foster remained in the shed, looking over the crime scene, while Blanchard stood near the back of the house, barking into her cell phone that she needed Judge Shapiro to get her a warrant now.

He gave Gordo his gun, still in its holster. Since he hadn't fired it, Sikorski'd give it back to him as soon as statements were taken and everything was judged kosher. To make it all easier, Roan lied about what had led him to the shed, namely he said he had smelled blood and fear, and recognized Danny's scent from the Nakamura home. Complete bullshit, but everybody was so in the dark about his smelling ability that they wouldn't be able to disprove it, and they wouldn't know that the Nakamuras kept their home so surgically clean that they had all but scrubbed out every trace of Danny's scent, and that the dog shit around here was so pungent it was overwhelming his sense of smell. It was all more legally plausible than simply saying he had a hunch. In the shed, Foster had recovered Hatch's gun.

Hatch, clearly shocky and immobilized on a portable gurney, complained that he'd just broken in and attacked him, and then repeated that he didn't do anything Danny didn't want. That's when Roan showed the cops the bruise on his right forearm, and even he had to admit it was impressive. A deep, angry red already becoming blue-black at the edges, it was in the exact shape of the segment of the ax handle that hit him. "He hit me first," he pointed out. "I simply defended myself." And that was the truth, even though it was a deliberately calculated truth on his part. He could have prevented the hit, but he didn't. Again, it was something that couldn't be proven.

Diego, done with Hatch, came over and looked at his arm. "This looks bad. You'd better come to the hospital with us."

He stared at him in surprise, almost feeling betrayed by Dee. "What? It's a bruise."

"Which could be a fracture. Look, you can see the imprint of the damn thing in your skin. And don't you even think about arguing with me." Dee gave him that look, the kind of look you could only get from an ex who knew you so well that it was borderline mortifying, and he knew arguing was pointless.

Didn't matter. He could give his statement at the hospital as easily as he could here.

BY THE time they got to County General, the waiting room was swamped with an unusual amount of people. Apparently there had been problems at the police station involving some angry cultists, who'd turned over cars in the parking lot and got their fool asses hurt. (Paris was right: he should have been there with the video camera.)

He was lucky, if you could call it that. Being an infected, he was to be handled a bit differently than everyone else, and therefore got processed pretty quickly, with people wearing latex gloves as thick as oven mitts handling him gingerly as they x-rayed his arm, as if he was somehow wildly contagious even though he was not bleeding. It did turn out he had some blood on his hands, but it was Danny's; he must have gotten it while taking the cuffs off of him.

Afterward he called the Nakamuras, and when he told Sara he'd

found Danny, she actually shouted with joy, an emotional response that surprised him. It also made him feel worse when he had to tell her Danny was in the hospital.

Danny was expected to make it, but right now there were many questions about the condition he would be in when he regained consciousness. The problem with ketamine was it could fuck people up as much as a bad acid trip: it could give you a psychosis you never had before using it, and some people who abused it a lot could find it as psychologically addictive as heroin. The fact that Hatch was pumping him full of so much of the stuff and not saying how much he'd dosed him with and for how long meant they wouldn't know how profoundly Danny had been affected until he woke up. The only good news in that was if Danny was riding high on Special K through most of his ordeal, he might not remember any of it.

His injuries were essentially superficial, although there was basic confirmation he'd been raped, or at least subjected to rather rough sex (and if he was on ketamine, it was considered rape regardless—it was a date-rape drug after all, a dissociative anesthetic, and no one on it could make any kind of decision or consent). Hatch had stopped complaining and started demanding a lawyer, but he was totally fucked. Not only were they confiscating his hard drives, but a rather large stock of ketamine had been found in the shed, and that shit was so illegal he was guaranteed to spend a butt-load of time in prison for possession of it alone.

Although things weren't perfectly clear at the moment, Roan had figured out a workable scenario. LadyLeopard, the not-so-secret secret admirer on Danny's MySpace page? It was either Hatch or Hatch's wife, using infection and the Church of the Divine Transformation as a lure to meet impressionable, lonely kids in their general vicinity, and fuck them up royally. Hatch was nothing more than a bargain-basement predator, who simply adapted tactics to use the taboo "thrill" of infection to lead them to victims who would inadvertently help them. After all, if you were running away to get infected, you'd hardly announce it to your parents, would you?

And the kicker? He wasn't infected; neither was his wife. Presumably Danny got lucky, but he was being tested anyway, because it was unclear if Danny had been "shared" by other people.

When the Nakamuras arrived, he was prepared to break the news to them, but in an odd act of sympathy, Gordo came over and helped him do

it. Although horrified by what had happened to Danny, they seemed glad the cops had the perpetrators in custody (although for the moment one was in surgery; Roan had apparently done a real number on Hatch's leg), and Sara had hugged him for "rescuing" their son. Maybe they were a bit hard on him, but they loved Danny, and that was probably what counted the most.

He went and sat in a currently unused exam room afterward, feeling like he wanted to be alone. He didn't know why exactly, technically this had to count as a good resolution—he'd found Danny, he was still alive, he'd gotten at least one predator off the street (and fucked him up pretty good)—but in an ideal world, Danny never would have been hurt in the first place. In an ideal world, he'd have just been crashing on a friend's couch and smoking pot all day. But this world was not ideal, and he didn't know why he suddenly wanted it to be.

Diego tracked him down, coming to join him sitting on the edge of the exam table. Dee was his height but much more slender in frame, almost willowy (although he would object to that description), a light-skinned black man with male model cheekbones and sleepy but expressive dark eyes. He was, as he liked to say, "half black, half Mexican, all man." He was good-looking, funny, smart, but they just didn't work as a couple, which was kind of a shame. They were, sadly, better friends.

Dee squeezed his bicep as he sat down, and Roan scowled at him. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing how strong you are now, macho man. Jesus, have you been working out?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He scoffed. "It means what it means. Did you see how you fucked-up that perv's arm? To get a complete spiral fracture like that, you must be in the bodybuilder category now. How much do you bench?"

That made no sense... except in retrospect he remembered how liquid his muscles had felt when he got mad, when he let the beast peek out, and suddenly he wondered if the shift made him stronger. It must have. Hadn't he always been aware that he was at his strongest when he was mad or hurt? The transformation from human to cat did change your body; why wouldn't it effect your strength levels? "I dunno. I've just been borrowing Paris's weight set from time to time."

“Time to time? Somebody’s being modest. Have you been replaced by a pod person?” Roan glared at him, but it only made Diego grin, flashing blinding white teeth. “How’s Paris?”

Dee was one of the few exes that Paris knew about; in fact, they’d met. They got on so well it made him wonder if he really was attracted to a certain type of guy. If asked, Roan would have claimed he had no type, but he was no longer sure. “He’s good. He’s going in for his routine checkup next week.” Tiger-strain people always needed to go in for checkups after the high point in the viral cycle, just to make sure there weren’t any aneurysms waiting to explode or that their hearts weren’t damaged. The older they got, the more vital this became.

“Good. And let me say, on behalf of the entire gay male community, we hate your fucking guts ’cause you landed him. Share, you selfish bastard.”

Roan chuckled, although he really hadn’t wanted to. Dee and Par had that in common: they could always make him laugh. “Let me officially say, to the entire community, tough titties.”

“I just knew you’d say something like that. Creep.” He sighed dramatically, but then changed the subject. “By the way, your arm isn’t fractured; you just have some tissue damage.”

“I figured.” His fingers on his right arm tingled a bit, but mostly his arm just ached. He’d get over it.

“Why didn’t someone get you an ice pack? I’ll go get you one—”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t need it, really.”

“Being macho again?”

“No. I’ve just had worse. I’ll live.” He felt Dee’s suspicious glare, but didn’t turn to acknowledge it. “Can I ask you a bizarre question?”

“Do you ask any others?”

He ignored that. “Do you know anything about polycythemia vera, a blood cell disorder?”

Dee thought about that a moment, staring down at the foam-green tiled floor and frowning. “Specifically? No, I’d have to look it up. Why?”

“Do you have any idea why a thirteen-year-old boy would get a blood disorder specific to middle-aged men?”

He gave Roan a suspicious look, one that seemed to say *What are you up to now, freak-o?*, but he did give him a serious answer. “Well, if the kid had an immune system disorder, he could be susceptible to almost anything. Age would be irrelevant.”

“What kind of immune system disorders are we talking about? AIDS?”

“That would be the most devastating, sure; people with that have been known to die from diseases that humans aren’t supposed to be susceptible to.” After a pause, he added, “Being infected can do that to people sometimes too.”

That was news to him. “Since when?”

“Well, some infectees’ systems don’t take the major infections quite well, mostly tiger. But mainly it’s the virus children. You’re a bit of a miracle, Roan, although I’m sure you’ll roll your eyes at that. You’re a fully functional virus child; that’s about as rare as surviving a tiger infection. Most viral kids are damaged on the genetic level; they get diseases that come out of nowhere within their respective families, like progeria, Tay-Sachs—”

“—and maybe something like polycythemia vera?” he interrupted, feeling his skin prickle as the answer seemed to explode in his mind. Oh shit. It all made sense now. He didn’t have all the answers, but damn if he couldn’t see the through line, the connecting thread between it all, the bits and pieces falling into a shattered picture. He jumped off the exam table, no longer aware of how much his arm hurt or how bad he felt for not finding Danny sooner. “Oh God, I know who killed Hank DeSilvo.” He grabbed Dee’s face in his hands and planted a quick, friendly kiss on his lips. “Thank you. Remind me to buy you a drink sometime.”

As he left the exam room, wondering where the hell Sikorski was now, Dee called out, sounding flustered, “What the hell did I say?”

He found Seb first, nursing a cup of the toxic swill that passed for coffee in the hospital, and Gordo wasn’t far away; he was talking on his cell to someone down at the station. As soon as Gordo saw him, he told the person on the end of the line to hold on, and gave him a piercing look. “What now? I really hate that look on your face, Roan.”

“You need to bring Mitch Henstridge in now.”

The stare didn’t waver. In fact, now Seb joined in, although his look

was more deadpan. “Did they give you pain medication? Are you having a reaction?”

“I’m not asking for an APB; just bring him in for questioning, that’s all I ask. Do it now before he skips town... if he hasn’t already. If he was at all smart he’d have already run, but I don’t know if he has any further loose ends to tie up or not.”

Gordo’s look was one of stark disbelief. “What the fuck are you on about?”

“Henstridge killed DeSilvo, and probably Tweaks as well.”

Now he looked downright hostile. “You telling me he’s a killer cat, is that it?”

Roan felt his stomach start to burn. It felt like damning, outing, and he wasn’t sure how it worked precisely, but it was the only thing that made sense. The Nakamuras instinct had been right about Danny’s disappearance: although he left voluntarily, he didn’t end up where he expected to. His instinct was right that Hatch was hiding something. Now it was Sikorski’s turn to be right about a virus child mutation. “No. His son is.”

THE tiger paced in its cage restlessly, not understanding the bars but enraged with them all the same. Biting them didn’t work, and swiping them with its claws did no good either. Sometimes if it threw its body against it, it would hear a rattle, feel a shift, but nothing else happened.

It stunk of humans here, but there was another scent, one that nearly drove it into a frenzy: another cat. It was faint though, tangled with a human scent, enough to confuse it. Was the cat here, or had one once been here? It thought if one was here the scent would be more tangible, that it would be able to smell the blood as well as the musk, hear the other cat’s heartbeat. But all was silence and cold, and not even the human scent was strong anymore.

It had lain down on the hard floor, giving up, when it heard a noise.

It was a strange noise somewhere above its head; it could see nothing but the same pale orb of light that was always there, but the noises—strange, unidentifiable, far—continued. A faint scent eventually

came with it, a new human scent, and....

... a cat.

This was a new cat. A new musk, and better yet, new blood, a new heartbeat. On its territory. The scent was above its head somewhere, above the glowing orb, and there was no containing its frenzy now. This was its territory, its, and no other cat was allowed.

The tiger began throwing itself against the bars of the cage, the pain only making it that much more determined to escape and rip the other cat's throat out.

THE plywood plank had been nailed to the back door far more expertly than he had thought. Mitch had had to go back to his car and get his tire iron to pry up a corner of it, and he was glad that McKichan lived so far from his neighbors. He had to break the panel to get a big enough opening, but it would do. Whoever had put that up had done a damn good job, though.

In all honesty, he hadn't wanted to do this; he didn't want to be here. This was all Hank's fault.

If he hadn't been a cop, he'd have been a thief; Hank had even told him that once. But Mitch hadn't really believed it until the money was on offer, and that's when Hank's ugly true colors started bleeding through. He was going to fuck him and Mitch knew it. Mitch needed the money, Hank knew that, and yet Hank intended to fuck him out of it anyway. Hank had even made vague noises about the truth about Mitch's son getting out, and that was the last straw. Fuck him over? Fine. But no one fucked over his son.

Mikey was getting harder and harder to control, possibly due to puberty. He strained at the leash, so Mitch let him go, detaching the lead from his shock collar, and whispered, "Go upstairs, boy. Go get the man."

Even in the dimness, he could see that the living room he was in was astonishingly ordinary, a living room like any other. He had expected different, although he didn't know what. He supposed that a gay guy would have a more flamboyant place, something a bit more extravagant.

He had absolutely nothing against McKichan at all; he didn't know

him, and frankly, he didn't want to know him. A kitty fag? Great—the worst of both worlds. But he'd heard from his buddies in the department that he was digging around, that he'd started investigating Hank, and for some reason had turned his sights on him. That was intolerable; he was getting too close.

And he wasn't even on the fucking force anymore! Why wasn't someone reining him in? Why was someone letting him investigate cops? In a way, this was his fault. If he'd just minded his own business, he'd have gotten to live.

But Mitch felt somewhat bad about his boyfriend. He probably had no idea what McKichan was up to, and yet he was sending Mikey up to kill him. He was shocked by his own feelings, because gay guys usually made his skin crawl a bit. Who'd want to fuck a man? Seriously. A naked man wasn't an attractive thing. The sheer size of the boyfriend had surprised him; he had the shoulders of a linebacker. He didn't think they made gay guys that big... but there was that transvestite he arrested that one time, wasn't there? That guy had been six-six and nearly three hundred pounds if he'd been an ounce. Scary.

The problem was those kids. He hadn't been able to sleep since he'd had to take out those kids at Tweaks's. But he didn't have a choice, much like with McKichan's boyfriend. The kids could have identified him, and God knew who Tweaks had talked to. They had to go, much like the boyfriend had to go. He had to protect Mikey.

He was a special boy, with special needs. If he didn't take care of him, who would? They'd probably throw him in a fucking zoo or something. He had to stay out of prison to take care of him, especially now.

Mikey made a strange noise, a growling whimper, and seemed reluctant to approach the stairs. He pulled out the collar control and gave him a little shock, adding insistently, "Go." The cat that he was twitched its tail in annoyance, but after a moment's further hesitation, Mikey loped upstairs, as quietly as a... cat, which figured.

He knew McKichan was gone, and he had no idea when he'd be back, but he was prepared to wait. He'd had to wait for Tweaks too, and that fucking space brain never even noticed that everyone was dead. Supposedly, McKichan would be more on the ball—no pun intended—but he'd get him as soon as he came in the door. He might be armed, and

gunfire might get attention before he could get out of here.

Mitch waited at the base of the stairs, stomach knotting as he braced himself for the aborted scream of someone waking up to find a cat ripping out their throat, when he heard a strange noise. It was like a muffled, metallic clang, but very faint. He looked down at the carpet, and wondered if it had come from beneath the house. Did they have a basement? Was the boyfriend down there at this time of night?

Now there was another noise, one that was growing louder. It was a repetitive thudding, almost a gallop, and as he turned he saw a door on his immediate left. He'd thought it was a closet, but now he wondered if it was the basement door, and pulled out his revolver.

Hardly in time. The basement door didn't open so much as it exploded off its hinges, and it slammed into him, knocking him to the floor. The door pinned his legs down with a tremendous weight, and he saw why the door was so heavy—there was a big, fucking tiger on it.

The cat was huge, its head almost twice as big as his, and it roared at him, its fetid breath washing over him, saliva dripping down from its large, ivory teeth. Its amber eyes were almost lambent in the dark, and he finally understood why Mikey hadn't wanted to come in here.

He hadn't considered the fact that maybe the boyfriend was infected too. But even if he had, he was sure he never would have entertained the possibility that he was a fucking tiger.

Mitch raised his weapon, and wondered if a bullet would even make a dent in this beast's skull.

17

Cat People

YES, the theory had very obvious holes in it, but it felt right. The motive was there: money, connected to some sort of illegal activity that took place at the Edgewood house (which would explain Tweaks as a loose end; perhaps he was a witness, if not openly involved). How Henstridge could “control” his infected son he had no idea, but he was sure that was the real cause of the son’s medical condition, and the real cause of his wife’s death.

Although Paris was one of the few exceptions, it was extremely rare for an infected woman to infect a man. The nature and mechanics of sex always made it easier for the man to infect the woman (or other men). As for why Henstridge would hide the fact that his son and wife were infected... well, who wouldn’t hide it if they could? There was still a huge stigma attached to infection, and it could have had a huge, negative impact on his career, or at least Henstridge might reasonably fear that that could be the case. Sure, the PD took Roan on as an officer, but only after a major lawsuit involving accusations (fairly well-proven) of sexism and racism in the department: he’d been part of public relations blitz and nothing more. He was waved about as “See—we take on filthy degenerate lepers too; we’re progressive.” Henstridge, already a cop, would know what a laugh that was.

Although they listened patiently, Gordo was quick to point out he had no proof of anything, just supposition—although that whole money thing was damn suspicious. But all that aside, he told his friend on the other end of his cell phone to see if anyone knew where Henstridge was, because he needed to talk to him right away.

With the waiting game begun, he went back to his clients, the Nakamuras, and sat with them a while. Danny was still out cold, but his vitals were starting to look better, so the doctor figured he’d be conscious in another couple of hours. She didn’t think there’d be any permanent

physical damage.

Gordo found him eventually, and told him no one had found Henstridge yet; no one seemed to know where he was. Gordo still wasn't sure about his theory, but he told him—in a hushed voice, in case someone wandered by—that he'd make sure Henstridge would be brought in, and when he was, he'd make sure he was there. “We both know the reason I put up with you is because you do have the sharpest instincts of anyone I've ever met. So... if you say you think Henstridge is the guy... okay. We'll look at him hard.”

This was clearly a painful admission from Gordo, and he supposed he should have been touched, but Roan was too tired to muster it. “Are you hittin' on me?”

Gordo scowled at him, shaking his head. “You just can't keep from being a smart-ass, can you?”

“Snarky is my default setting.”

He sighed heavily, a fatally put-upon man. “So I've noticed.”

Although there were some questions about trespassing and excessive use of force, he was essentially let go. After all, as Seb so helpfully pointed out, according to the law, anything short of death was permissible in self-defense—and death was acceptable in some cases. Hatch was hardly dead, just hurting (although probably not nearly enough).

He'd left the Mustang on Hatch's block, but Gordo and Seb offered him a lift home, and he figured he'd take it. He and Paris could head out tomorrow on the bike and pick up the Mustang—maybe they'd encounter a local “action news team,” and they could say something unconscionably filthy on the air. It was always fun to piss off someone with plastic hair and nothing better to do.

It was odd riding in the back of an unmarked police car, but at least Gordo gave him his gun back so he didn't feel totally like he was being run in. He mostly nodded off in the back, vaguely listening to Seb and Gordo talk to Em at dispatch, and was looking forward to simply crawling into bed with Paris and sleeping for three days. Except Paris wouldn't be there yet, would he? The sun was starting to come up, the sky's fragile blue giving way to a pale blush dotted with thin, blue-gray clouds, and he figured Paris had just changed back or was soon going to. He'd be happy he'd solved his cases, although then that meant they had to start worrying

about the bills again.

His eyes were half-open as they turned the corner down his quiet, rural street, and he saw, parked on the soft shoulder of the road across from his house, a silver Subaru Outback. “What the fuck?” he exclaimed, sitting up, totally awake now.

Seb was driving, and while this exclamation did not make his driving suffer in any way, he glanced at him in the rearview mirror as he pulled the car smoothly into the driveway. “What’s wrong?” His voice almost had an inflection; that was near panic for Seb.

“That Outback,” he said, hastily getting out of the car. “It belonged to a suspicious guy that was here the other day,”

“Suspicious how?” Gordo asked. “Nutball?”

“I don’t—” The reply died in his throat as he took a step toward the house and caught the scent of blood. He had the instant mental image of Paris lying on the floor of the cage, his head punched in on one side, collapsed due to the force of a bullet pulverizing part of his skull, in a pool of blood like a collapsed shadow. His heart was trip-hammering, and he knew he should approach with caution... but it all disappeared in a sudden flush of rage, his vision tinting red as the muscles knotted inside his skin, and as he ran for the house he shouted, “Paris!” Only later, when his throat hurt, did he realize that the scream turned into a roar.

He didn’t open his door, even though he could have; he was too enraged to think clearly, the beast surging out on a wave of desperate emotion. He slammed a flattened palm against the deadbolt and it shot out through the door, cracking like spun glass, the metal bouncing across the floor as he kicked the door open, braced to pounce on the first thing that wasn’t Paris. He could almost feel the hot blood of the intruder in his mouth already.

He was smashed across the face with the rank, meaty smell of blood, and he saw that the basement door had been ripped off its hinges and was partially covering the body of a man sprawled out on the floor at the foot of the stairs. It wasn’t Paris; he knew that from the smell of his blood before he was even able to rein back the beast enough to focus on the body.

He was dead; he smelled like shit and decay already. His throat had been torn out, his skull punctured and face scarred by teeth marks. His

right arm, extended away from his body, was held on only by the bone and a few straggly bits of sinew. There was a gun just beyond his curled fingers, and dark blood had pooled around him like a fallen shroud. He felt a dark sense of triumph that the stupid fucker had encountered the tiger and not Paris, the prey suddenly rendered predator in front of a man not prepared for it.

Anger mingling with relief and panic, Roan felt a bit more in control of himself, and looking around the room, spotted Paris curled up by the back door, blood so completely slicked down his naked back and torso that it looked like he was wearing a red shirt. He scrambled to him as Gordo and Seb came in the door, and one of them—he honestly didn't know which, and didn't care—exclaimed, “Jesus Christ!”

He grabbed Paris in his arms and curled himself around his upper body, fighting back tears as his nose confirmed that the blood wasn't his; none of it belonged to Paris. His pulse, thready and rapid in the aftermath of the change, pounded away in a steady rhythm, and Roan felt almost dizzy with relief. For a second there he'd thought Paris was gone; he'd thought he was dead. He tried to swallow back the lump in his throat and realized he was trembling now, partially out of adrenaline overload and partially out of the fact that he'd just realized he had been more than ready, willing, and able to kill someone with his bare hands. It never even occurred to him to draw his weapon.

He was aware that someone was standing nearby, just far enough away to give them some semblance of privacy, and just by the scent of his cologne—it was faint and he didn't recognize it at all; it smelled of wood smoke and pine, with a hint of cigar—he knew it was Seb.

“Is he all right?”

“He's okay. He's only out due to the change,” he replied, his eyes tightly shut, his voice gravelly. He stroked Paris's sweat-soaked hair, and was glad he wasn't conscious yet. How would he explain this? The last time Paris woke up in someone else's blood, he'd had a nervous breakdown.

“Oh my God,” Gordo gasped. Roan heard the rustle of Seb turning toward his partner, and he risked opening his eyes to look. A couple errant tears spilled out, but they stopped. Gordo was crouched next to the body, just beyond the penumbra of blood, and he was holding two driver's licenses that he must have pulled out of the coat of the victim. Gordo

looked up at them, blue eyes weary with the general horrors of humanity, and said, "It's Mitchell Henstridge."

Roan wiped the tears away with the back of his hand, and tried to figure out how he had become a loose end that needed tying up. Had Henstridge known he was investigating him? He must have. He must have worried he was getting close, and what the fuck were two more murders on top of the five he'd already committed? Once you killed at least two people, it was unofficially a "spree" anyway.

He laid Paris down carefully on the floor and grabbed the throw off the couch, covering him, as Seb called in for a meat wagon and the rest of the "cat" investigative unit. Roan had intended to go to the ground-floor bathroom and get Paris some fentanyl (he didn't give a fuck that they were here; Paris was really going to need it), but he stopped as his nose got so accustomed to the smell of blood and death that he could now smell something else: a cat. A cat he'd never smelled before, one that didn't belong. "Fucking hell, his son's still here," he snapped, heading for the stairs.

Gordo stood up, drawing his service weapon, and asked, "You can smell him?"

"Yeah, upstairs."

As he started up the steps, Gordo moved to follow, but he looked back down at him and shook his head. "I can get this."

"If he's the cat that's been killing people...."

"Remember what happened at the station? If he's a cat, I can handle him."

Gordo frowned, but his eyes seemed to darken with newfound knowledge as he thought back to what had happened at the cat containment unit, and he understood now what Roan only was starting to understand: the cats were afraid of him. He smelled half-cat, half-human, and they just didn't know what to make of him. He was the alpha male by default, because he was a strange mutation that couldn't fit into their limited frame of reference. Gordo nodded reluctantly, but kept his weapon out, pointed at the ceiling. "You need help, shout."

Roan nodded and went up the stairs quickly and quietly, unconsciously shifting his weight to the balls of his feet. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, following the scent trail to the room beside the

bedroom that they sarcastically referred to as “the library.” It was just a storage room for random crap that they hadn’t found a place for yet, but mainly it was full of Roan’s books; boxes and boxes of books. He knew of this great used-book shop on Pike Street that he could spend hours in, just perusing the stacks and finding hidden gems. He always went in there intending to buy only one or two books, and invariably left with a bag full of them. Paris used to joke that he should just open his own damn used-book shop in the house, if only to free up the room.

He slipped into the bedroom and then the connected bathroom, taking out a medical kit and loading up a hypodermic with painkillers, so practiced at it by now he could do it faster than Dee ever could. He hesitated, filled a second needle, and tucked them both in his pocket before returning to the library.

There was a window on the far wall, across from the door, and as he shoved the ajar door all the way open he was greeted by the smell of fresh air stirring around the scent of slowly moldering books. Mitchell’s son had jumped out, perhaps because it didn’t want to face a tiger. It had cut itself on the glass; he could smell a faint trace of blood, and that was enough for him to track it.

He went to the pane and looked out, but the backyard was clear. Glass sparkled below like water, and before he realized what he was doing, he’d jumped out the window and landed easily on his feet in the grass. The boy’s scent was easy to pick up, and he followed the faint smell of blood toward the copse of trees at the back of the property.

Had he just jumped out the fucking window?!

When he’d found this place, the copse was the second reason he wanted to buy it. Being far from human neighbors was the main attraction, but this copse, full of towering pines and thick underbrush, huge ferns that were almost waist high and tangles of blackberry bushes as tall as a man, was an attractive cat hideaway. It was full of small animals that development had chased out of their old homes, and it could, in theory, provide enough distraction for any big cat that might have broken out of the house. It was small hope that they’d be distracted enough by a possum to forget about hunting human prey, but he had odd moments of living in hope.

He found Henstridge’s son, Michael, by the dried-up creek, laying underneath the hollow of a blackberry bush, his injured leg still sticking

out from under the shrub. He was still in cat form, and as Roan knelt down and pulled a hypo out of his pocket, he saw why no one had been able to identify his bite pattern.

Michael Henstridge was like no cat Roan had ever seen in his life. His fur was short and camel-colored, but he had an awkward, lanky body, almost more like a cheetah's than anything else. But his head had the broader, flatter shape of a panther, and considering his age, he was a lot larger than he would have expected, almost the size of your average panther. But he wasn't an average anything; he almost looked like some kind of cat hybrid. Although one of the most bizarre and troubling things was the black nylon collar around his neck—it looked like a shock collar, the kind you might use on an obsessively barking dog.

He stabbed the hypodermic in a vein in its leg, and Michael looked up at him, ears flattening, but Roan aborted his growl with one of his own. "It's over, boy," he snarled. "Stay down."

For a long moment he stared into uncomprehending yellow eyes, and then the cat laid back down, the drugs taking hold of its system as powerfully as for any human.

Or at least that's what he told himself. He hated to think that, on some level, Michael understood him.

Epilogue

MAYBE he had simply come to terms with his own impending death far too well, but the fact that he had killed Mitchell Henstridge bothered Paris less and less as time went on.

According to Dennis Caldera, a criminal lawyer that Roan worked cases for occasionally, Henstridge's death wasn't so much self-defense as it was a classic "asking for it" scenario: he broke into a house with a gun and a dangerous cat, clearly intending harm. The fact that he was partially eaten by the resident cat only meant the possibility that karma existed was better than ever. In fact, Henstridge's death was basically classified as "death by misadventure"—no one even considered pressing charges against Paris.

Maybe he didn't feel bad about it because the bastard was coming to kill him and Roan. And because God knew what a fucked-up job he did on his own son.

Michael Henstridge was an infected, and a pretty odd one. A little digging found that Anita Henstridge had been infected by tainted blood given to her in a transfusion after a car accident in her first trimester of pregnancy, when the two of them were living in Chicago. The hospital had ended up infecting several patients in a similar manner; there had been a huge class action lawsuit that was settled out of court, and by the time the lawyers got their cut of the money, all the survivors blew through their meager leftovers quite quickly. By the time the Henstridges' had relocated here, their money was gone.

Michael Henstridge had several problems, beyond just being infected and having polycythemia vera. He was something of a flip side to most infecteds, meaning he was more often cat than human, reverting to human form for only about a week out of every month. And when he was in human form, he still acted like a cat. He walked on all fours—it was difficult to get him to stand unless he was trying to reach for something—and growled, yowled, and snarled; he didn't speak. He did understand some commands, though, mainly stay, down, no, and sic. Clearly he had

some serious brain damage, but there was some question as to how much of it had been made worse by Henstridge “conditioning” his own son. Michael was in a special hospital upstate, where they were trying to figure out what they could “fix” and what was permanent. He hadn’t been charged with his role in the murders, because he was a minor, because he was brain damaged, and because he was going to spend the rest of his days locked up in an institution anyway. How did you convict a boy who was mainly a cat?

Henstridge had a second identity established, Peter French, under which he’d been renting a ramshackle house not far from Tweaks on the East Side. There was a small pond on a neighboring property, and a search of it turned up a machete that was assumed to be the murder weapon used to kill the kids at Tweaks’s place. Roan had said there were some things left at the house that indicated that Mitchell honestly thought he was “protecting” his son, that he was taking care of him in some way, but Paris couldn’t quite wrap his mind around that psychotic reasoning. He trained his *son* to a *leash*—how was that doing the best for him, exactly? How was training him to kill on command beneficial? Bizarrely, he thought Roan might have actually felt a bit sorry for Mitch, although he was still glad the fucker was dead.

And Roan. He wondered how and if he should try and get him to talk about what was happening to him. He heard from Diego what he’d done to Hatch, just as he saw for himself what he’d done to the deadbolt on the door. Paris worked on doors, he knew how hard deadbolts were to break, and Roan had *punched it out*—in one single piece. There was a break in the door where the lock had been engaged and forced out. The strength needed to do something like that was supernatural, and if you combined that with how he broke Hatch’s arm, it added up to an interesting picture. Namely, the cat was bleeding into him more and more—but did he want to acknowledge that in any way? No, he was keeping it to himself, as if denial could somehow keep it from happening. Paris just went along with him, pretended he didn’t know, but he wasn’t sure how long he could keep doing it. Yes, he was an excellent liar if he said so himself, but he was sure that not talking about it was slowly killing Roan. He’d found him up some nights, pacing or staring out at nothing, once even trying to see if he could read a book in the dark (did that work? He was kind of curious), but he had a variety of lame excuses, from too much caffeine to insomnia. Roan had to know he knew too, but he hadn’t banked up the courage to say it. How funny was that? The bravest man he knew afraid of talking about

what was happening to him.

Paris had already decided what he was going to do. He was going to make him a nice dinner one night, and then simply tell him he knew. Yeah, that was a hell of a way to ruin a nice dinner, but that was how they did it in the Lehane family, damn it; it's what always made Christmas so interesting. Recriminations and presents.

Sikorski had come around shortly after the entire incident, once they had scrubbed all the blood out of the carpet and re-hung the basement door, and brought them a bottle of wine, saying he'd never brought Roan a housewarming present. Sikorski tried very hard to be nice to him, which made Paris instantly suspicious, and even Roan hadn't known what to make of it, but Paris was relatively sure he eventually figured it out. He felt bad for doubting Roan or using him, and also it got through his thick, straight head that he and Roan genuinely loved each other. It was probably a weird thing for the terminally straight to get, but hey, his boyfriend punched out a deadbolt for him and almost became a lion on demand—would Sikorski's wife have done that for him? (Assuming she could.)

Sikorski also brought up a point that awed him somewhat, and that was, if Hank had grabbed his Remington before going outside—instead of his sawed-off shotgun—Roan might have never taken an interest in the case, and Ro had to admit that was probably true. It just struck him as an odd weapon for a cop to have, and Paris couldn't help but feel a little bit of pride. That was what Roan was great at: finding the one little flaw, the one little thing that didn't quite fit, and blowing a case wide open.

He still didn't trust Sikorski; he'd still used Roan. But maybe he judged him too harshly otherwise. At least he was trying.

The money remained a question mark, the answer to which had probably died with DeSilvo, Henstridge, and Tweaks. Randi had confirmed that Tweaks was in debt up to his eyeballs and wasn't getting the Cayman Island gift baskets like Hank and Mitch, but since Metropol had disappeared as mysteriously as it had showed up, leads had dried up quickly. Roan had two theories, both of which were plausible enough: during the bust of the house in Edgewood, DeSilvo and Henstridge found a whole bunch of money (perhaps Tweaks, desperate to keep another more serious charge off his lengthy record, lead them to it, or was simply present when they found it) that was clearly ill-gotten gains, and took it for themselves. Unsure how to best launder it and wanting to keep suspicion off of themselves, the account was set up in the Cayman Islands and they

pulled out small amounts on a monthly basis, just enough not to garner attention. Or conversely, they had found something incredibly illegal at the Edgewood house, and knowing that Edgar Rodriguez had the cash or the capabilities of getting it, blackmailed him into paying them hush money. Rodriguez denied any knowledge of the cops or a Cayman Island account, but the cops in Miami were still investigating him. Roan had told Paris, if it was Rodriguez, he'd covered his tracks extraordinarily well. They would probably never know what precisely happened at the Edgewood house. That ate at Roan a lot—he hated mysteries even *he* couldn't solve—but he was learning to let go.

The Nakamuras were so pleased by the job Roan had done for them that they gave him a five-thousand-dollar bonus. Roan had actually tried to refuse it (refuse!), but the Nakamuras insisted he keep it, so he did. It went very far in home repairs, so they were able to get the house secure again in no time. Danny was okay, although he'd seemingly suffered amnesia, possibly due to constant exposure to ketamine (or because he didn't want to deal with it), meaning he didn't remember exactly what had happened to him. But the hard drives had an awful lot of incriminating evidence; in fact, it seemed Hatch was trying to get into the online porn business, and he'd had a couple more underage victims on film that the police were having a hard time identifying (mainly because Hatch didn't film too many faces). But between child pornography, kidnapping, rape, and ketamine possession charges, Hatch wasn't going to see the light of day for a long time. And Roan hinted rather darkly at what other convicts did to pedophiles in prison, so it wasn't a huge shock that Hatch's lawyer was trying to get him sentenced to a special sex offender's treatment center, although the state was resisting so far.

The Hatch case had gotten MK Investigations a lot of publicity, even though Roan had made it clear he didn't talk to reporters and wouldn't, and once when Paris did it just for the sheer lark of it, Ro got really pissed off. He didn't want to be a "sideshow," the infected detective, and Paris couldn't help but wonder if the new thing he was going through—the changes, the cat traits lingering behind longer now—had made him want to retreat even further from the world. Was he afraid he'd end up like Michael Henstridge, more cat than Human? That wasn't going to happen.

Okay, no, he had no basis for saying it, no proof he could give Roan, but Ro wasn't brain damaged, and if he was going to change into a cat permanently, wouldn't he have done so by now? He honestly thought Roan was simply growing into his abilities, which he'd never bothered to

explore before. Paris bet Roan could do a lot of things if he wasn't so afraid of himself and what he could do. Sometimes he just didn't get Roan at all; if it had been him, and he'd found out he could have super strength and shit like that, by God, he'd be out there using it. He'd be ripping off bank vault doors and juggling Volkswagens and just really impressing the hell out of extremely attractive people as well as trying to swing a movie or TV deal. Just call him Super ManWhore.

At least business was really good now; everybody wanted to hire them. They had cases backed up into next month, although Roan was very careful about weeding out clients who simply wanted to hire them for the novelty factor. He'd once angrily tossed out a guy who turned out to be a reporter, just trying to be sneaky.

Paris weeded through the newspaper, finding the only section he bothered to read—the lifestyle section—before heading to the basement. He was supposed to go out with Randi tonight, but he'd decided he wanted to spend the night at home. He and Randi usually went out to clubs, and Roan knew about it, but he didn't mind, because he trusted Paris.

Okay, maybe he didn't; he just knew that if Paris cheated on him he could smell the man or woman on him, no matter how well he showered. That was the problem with being with someone with super-smelling, although at least it kept him honest. (Of course the fact that he would probably kill anyone else he slept with kept him monogamous as well; was any sex safe enough when the tiger strain was like playing Russian roulette with a fully armed semi-automatic?) Besides, he had a good thing going here; he wasn't going to screw it up by fucking around. He had a feeling his fucking-around days were long past gone.

When Roan was in the high part of his cycle, he and Randi would hit the town, mainly going to gay clubs (which Roan hated) and the occasional straight clubs, generally just to dance and drink and have a good time. Also there was a continuing attempt to get Randi laid, but so far it hadn't really paid off, to the point that she preferred going to the gay clubs with him. While she hated being a “cock blocker,” she'd made a whole bunch of new gay male friends, although she claimed that most were just friendly with her in hopes of eventually getting to nail him. Paris didn't know if that was true or not, but they were generally nice guys, although not necessarily his type. (Which was funny, because pre-infection, almost everyone was his type if he was high or drunk enough.)

Randi had sounded a little disappointed when he called to cancel, but

she said it was okay; *Lost* was on, and she could stay home and watch it. Besides, she wasn't sure she was in the mood to watch him get hit on by gorgeous guys she had no hope in hell of nailing unless she got a sex change. Maybe tomorrow night (For going out, not getting her a sex change. That seemed more like a weekend thing).

Paris left the new basement door open, so the CD he'd put on the stereo could be clearly heard. It was Death From Above 1979's "You're A Woman, I'm A Machine," which was a recent album that Ro liked a lot in spite of its "flaming heterosexuality" (ah, he never did stop being a smart-ass). Paris went down the steps and sat in the center of them, a good distance away from the repaired cage, but still within the general eye line of the lion inside.

Roan in cat form always looked spectacularly regal. He was lying down in the pose of library stone lions everywhere, his deep green eyes a striking counterpart to his ocher fur and his large, luxurious mane, partially shot through with the dark, reddish-brown hair that Roan's mother had named him after. (It had taken Paris a stupid amount of time to realize that Roan's mother had named him after his hair color; roan just wasn't used much as a descriptive term anymore, except in relation to the color of horses. It made him wonder about Roan's mother, what she was like to know that name, to give it to her son.)

"Just so you know, I changed your ringtone again," Paris told the lion conversationally. "It's a Pete Yorn song that makes me think of you, so of course you're going to absolutely hate it. And I'll be the first to admit that that "sister" line is not only gender inappropriate, but even in correct context just totally creepy. I have no idea what possessed him to write that, unless he was just desperate for a rhyme. I mean, it's icky."

The lion just stared at him, oozing the lazy, arrogant disdain that only lions seemed capable of, its tail flicking with impatience. Sometimes he wondered if Roan was actually semi-aware in there; sometimes he liked to annoy him just in an attempt to prove it. If Roan, after changing back, went and deleted his ringtone, it'd be proof positive that he retained some kind of awareness.

Paris unfolded the *Lifestyle* section, and glanced at the day's scintillating headline. "Gray Is The New Black." "Seriously, who comes up with this shit? And who cares? Good lord, there are so many wrong things about this I don't even know where to start. And if you were here, I know you'd say, "Why do you read that stuff if it pisses you off?" And I'd

say, “Because sometimes I like to complain about things that have no consequence whatsoever. Sometimes I like to think about silly things that aren’t life and death.” You know what my favorite part about these imaginary conversations between us is? I always win the argument. I’m ten for ten, baby!” He pumped his fist in the air in triumph.

The lion continued to stare at him with Roan’s green eyes, its tail flicking once more. The oddest thing? Roan rarely growled at him. Oh, he supposed he would if he went right up to the cage, he might make a lunge at him, but as long as he kept his distance he just regarded Paris with what seemed to be haughty indifference. It was almost a “We both know I can kick your ass, so why go through the motions” kind of deal. And that kind of attitude seemed more human than cat, although he supposed that was debatable.

Paris opened the newspaper and looked inside, looking for something new to complain about, and maybe a movie they could go see on the weekend when Roan’s transitional phase was over. He glanced up at the cat to see it continuing to watch him in a way that could have been annoyed, or one that was almost—dare he even think it?—somewhat affectionate. “Isn’t it nice to spend a cozy evening at home?” Paris asked, flashing the cat a big, slightly sarcastic smile.

The lion’s tail twitched once more, and he figured that, as answers went, that was good enough.

Book Two

Prey

1

The Fallen

THERE was something unbelievably depressing about preparing to jail yourself for the night.

Ashley liked to think she'd feel better about it if she had someone to help, a boyfriend perhaps, or maybe a friend, but she'd only moved here a month ago and hadn't exactly made a lot of friends yet. She wasn't good at the club scene, and while being a barista was certainly a job that exposed you to a lot of people, most didn't seem to notice you unless you got their order wrong. There was that one guy with the piercings—she knew him best by his regular order, a half-caff macchiato with a shot of caramel syrup—who seemed to flirt with her, but the whole idea of dating anyone made her nervous.

All her life she'd only had one boyfriend, Jack, her high school sweetheart, and she'd thought they'd be together forever. Until she discovered he had infected her because he'd been fucking around quite a bit, including with hookers down in Tijuana, where he assumed he'd been infected. He claimed to be drunk, that he “didn't know what he was doing,” but then two other girls (including Savannah, that skank) at school turned up infected with the same strain. The fucking bastard!

So he'd cursed her to this, to this lonely, nomadic existence as a diseased freak. The irony? She never even liked cats; she'd always been a dog person.

Her family claimed to want to “support” her, but clearly she made them nervous, and her mother started drinking again. When Ashley accidentally cut her finger on a paring knife, everyone acted like there had been a toxic waste spill and wouldn't come near her. So she took the money that was in her college fund and simply moved on, hoping to start over in a larger city with a larger infected population, so she wouldn't be considered such a freak. She intended to lose herself in the crowd, become just another damned leper among all the other damned lepers.

But San Francisco and New York were both too expensive, and she didn't like Los Angeles. She'd heard there was a big group near Helena of all places (lots of wide open spaces—it almost made sense), but there was something about Montana that made her feel slightly agoraphobic. So finally she'd drifted here, near the Church of the Divine Transformation. She'd never been there, although she'd been encouraged to go since she was an infected and supposedly they helped all infecteds. But she couldn't quite get over the fact that they were blasphemers.

Her mother would have been proud. Ashley had never been quite the radically devoted Christian her mother was, but some of those boring Sunday sermons from her childhood had obviously sunk in, and she couldn't quite embrace the idea that this infection was somehow a “gift,” the actions of a god who favored them above all. She was alone with Goodwill furniture in a dingy apartment building, with barely enough to cover her rent and expenses, living on macaroni and cheese three days out of the week: she didn't feel “blessed.” That's where therapy kind of helped; the doctor told her she was “self-sabotaging” because she hated herself, hated her disease. He was trying to help her “come to terms” with it, and frankly she wished him luck, because she felt it was all bullshit. But she liked having someone to talk to, which was all the doctor was to her.

She let down the metal shutters over the dirt-smeared windows, glad that the government at least made sure even the poorest infecteds had some protections (even if the rich always got the best stuff), and was surprised by a sharp knock on her front door. No one ever knocked on her door, unless it was the landlord inquiring about the rent check or a neighbor complaining about something. As she approached the door, she asked, “Who is it?” She didn't like the way her voice went up half an octave. She was trying to sound mean, and she only sounded jittery.

“UPS, ma'am,” a man replied, his voice almost robotically flat.

She peered out the door, and saw a sort of plain-faced young man with curly almond brown hair tucked under a backward-turned baseball cap that was the same shit brown as his shirt—the unfortunate color of UPS uniforms everywhere. He held a box wrapped in brown paper, but she couldn't see who it was from. Had he gotten the wrong address? Who would send her something? Who would know where to find her?

She undid the chain lock and deadbolt, and looked out the door curiously. His eyes were pale blue and had a sort of bored vacancy to them, as if he'd been working all day long and had already left it inside his

own head. He had the type of broad, oval face that would keep him looking youthful until his mid-forties. He was a bit average-looking, but not bad; better-looking than your typical delivery guy.

He glanced down at the package, and asked, “Ashley Cryer?”

“Yes?” She looked down at the package, trying to see what the return address was.

He moved the package, pulling his hand out from underneath it, and it took her a moment to realize that he was now pointing a gun at her, and then another moment to actually grasp the reality of it. Why the hell would a UPS guy be aiming a gun at her?

It occurred to her that he wasn’t a delivery man just as the gun went off.

ROAN pulled himself up to the chin-up bar, and wondered which one this was. He’d forgotten the number. Forty? Fifty? Three? No, probably more than three; he could feel the sweat dripping down his back, running down his face, plastering his hair to his scalp. He switched to one arm, letting his right arm dangle as he pulled himself up with only the left, did five reps, and then did the same with his other arm. His muscles were starting to burn, but it quickly faded away.

He dropped down to the floor and decided to go have a quick shower before making breakfast ahead of Paris getting up.

He’d taken to sneaking out in the dead of night, leaving Paris sleeping peacefully and obliviously, just to see what he could do. Did he even know what the fuck he was doing? This was probably insanity, but so far he couldn’t stop. Rather than ease his anxiety, it just increased it. Roan knew that Paris knew he was taking on cat traits—after all, what was that dinner all about?

He should have known it was a trap. Paris had made some great pad Thai and found this hard-to-find pale ale microbrew that he absolutely loved, and as soon as he’d dug in, Paris just dropped it on him like a bomb: he knew Roan was keeping cat traits and manifesting other things, and he wanted to know why he wasn’t talking to him about it. That was a fun night. Denial became reluctant admittance became an argument, and

he'd stormed out for a while. Roan had considered going to a bar, but found himself instead at this run-down apartment building he used to visit quite a bit in his cop days (lots of domestics and the occasional incident of gang violence). Before he even realized what he was doing, he'd climbed out on the fourth-floor fire escape, looked down at the garbage-strewn alley below to make sure there were no homeless guys Dumpster diving, and then jumped off the edge.

He'd landed on his feet, and while he felt a pained shock up his legs on initial impact with the pavement, he was perfectly fine. He walked to the end of the alley, looked around, and then started running.

Four stories. He should have broken his ankles, his legs, both; four stories could even be a fatal distance, depending on how you landed. But he was fine; he had no problem landing on his feet at all. His legs didn't hurt.

Four fucking stories.

He wondered how high he could jump from without hurting himself, how high he'd have to be before landing on his feet was impossible. Five? Six? A dozen? He almost wanted to know—he was terrified to find out. At what point did he cross the threshold permanently? When did “cat traits” become inhuman? If he had already crossed the line, when had it happened and why hadn't he noticed? How could he notice everybody else's flaws but never see his own?

When he'd come home that night, he was flushed and shaking, so much that Par asked him if he'd been in a fight. Roan assured him he hadn't been, it was just colder than he thought. Whether Par had believed him or not he had no idea, but they both apologized and had absolutely fantastic makeup sex. Sometimes that was even better than angry sex.

He'd never mentioned the jump. Sometimes he could almost believe that he'd imagined the whole thing, that it was a delusion, but even he wasn't that masochistic.

He'd been getting up in the dead of night, unable to sleep and happy to exploit the fact that there were fewer prying eyes out at three and four in the morning so he could experiment, see where his “abilities” could take him. So far he had determined that he didn't pull muscles like a normal person, like he used to do; that if he could get his adrenaline up it increased his strength as much as getting angry did; that he could see quite sharply in very dim light; that even though he'd never been much of a

runner and had a desk job, he could run three miles without getting tired or winded or sore. He didn't time himself, but he figured he'd actually made really good time for a rank amateur. About the only thing left was to lock himself in the cage and see if he could force a change... but he wasn't ready for that. He wasn't sure he'd ever be ready.

Roan found himself wondering what else he could test himself on, and he was telling himself to stop. He didn't want to know anymore; he was freaked out enough. He'd spent quiet times at work pouring over the results he got on his MedNet searches for virus children and unusual conditions. Most of the stories so far had been about kids like Michael Henstridge, ones with multiple illnesses and brain damage. He'd found none that mentioned anything about lingering cat traits. He didn't want to believe he was somehow, through some bizarre fluke, alone, but... maybe others were reacting the same way as him, pretending their powers didn't exist.

Once he got out of the downstairs shower and dried off, he put on his work clothes, which he'd taken to stashing downstairs beneath the sink. When he pulled on his pale green Arrow shirt, he noticed the sleeves seemed tight at the biceps. His testing was giving him more muscle mass? Apparently so. There was another reason to knock it off; he'd never be able to hide that from Paris.

He heard the shower go on upstairs, and busied himself heating up the croissants and making scrambled eggs, a dish even he couldn't fuck up too much. He was just emptying the eggs into a huge salad bowl when Par came downstairs, looking crisp and frighteningly awake in a deep red shirt the color of old blood and black sharkskin pants that looked a bit like an oil slick. He was starting to grow his hair out longer, so now it fell softly to his shoulders and looked almost as shiny sleek as his pants. All he needed was a look of haughty disdain, a slight pout, and a personality removal, and he could be a male model.

They ate in companionable silence, splitting the paper up without even thinking about it, and it was just another day of bland domesticity, piling the dirty dishes in the sink before heading out to the Mustang, Roan just naturally taking the driver's seat as Par slid into the passenger seat and started fiddling with the radio as he drove. Roan had left it on NPR, the voices kind of soothing as he trailed yet another cheating husband (he didn't have a single mistress, just a penchant for a "massage parlor" near the airport), but Paris jumped between stations with obvious restlessness

until finally settling on a station playing Green Day.

Traffic wasn't too bad, and they got to the "office" with a couple minutes to spare. Oh joy, a day of background and credit checks. All day he got to stare at the computer and wait for a server elsewhere to spit out the past of these poor sods on his list. It never felt like proper work, but Vicuna Software and Edwards Financial paid well enough, so he couldn't complain.

Paris sighed heavily and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Is there someone else?" he finally asked.

Roan looked at him so sharply he almost gave himself whiplash. "What? Are you shitting me? Hell no! Why would you ask me that?"

Paris met his gaze with the slightest frown, mimicked in the crease between his eyebrows. "Because I woke up at three-thirty this morning and you were gone. It's not the first time either. I figured you either had a bit on the side that worked the day shift, or you were out... testing yourself again. And frankly, I preferred you fucking around over you not trusting me enough to tell me about it."

Oh good. That was a nice boot in the ribs. He rubbed his eyes, buying himself time to think as well as giving him an excuse not to look at Par's wounded expression. "It's not you—"

"—it's me'. Say that, and you'll be sleeping in the garage."

Fair enough. "It's not a question of trust. I'm just... if I talk about it, it's real. If I don't, there's still a possibility I'm just making it up or dreaming; it could all be a figment of my imagination. But saying it aloud... I'll have to deal with it. I'm not sure I'm ready for that." He couldn't look at Paris, not only because he wasn't sure he could face his rightful indignation, but also because he had inexplicable tears in his eyes. He had to rub them away before Paris noticed, and he had no idea why they'd appeared in the first place. Because it was the awful chickenshit truth?

There was a long and painful silence, but then Par touched his shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. "Sweetheart, I know you think this is horrible, but I don't think it is."

"I'm inhuman."

"No." Paris grabbed his face firmly in his hands and made him look

at him. He had his “wise beyond his years” expression on his face, his eyes a peaceful, sympathetic blue. “You are human, and you will always be human no matter what. What you have are gifts. They don’t make you less human.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t have them.”

“No, but I wish I did. Just think how much I’d get laid after that.” He gave him a big, cheeky grin, eyes sparkling like sapphires in the sun.

Roan didn’t want to feel better, didn’t want to laugh, but he couldn’t help but crack a smile. Par was just trying to make him feel better, but this wouldn’t be laughed away—how could it? “Can you ever not think with your dick?”

“I’m a man—of course not,” Paris claimed, then pulled him in for a kiss, dropping one of his warm hands to Roan’s thigh. It was nice, so nice he was kind of sorry they had to go to work. He kissed him hard in response, tangling his hand in Paris’s soft hair, and when Roan pulled away, he said, “We should go home for lunch.”

“Now who’s thinking with his dick?” Paris gave him a wink and got out of the car.

He sighed, blindly reaching for the door handle. The morning was overcast, the sky a layer of dirty cotton, but all it was doing was holding in the humidity. It felt like a storm was on the way, the ozone giving the air a sharp tang he could feel in his sinuses. “Bastard, you did that on purpose.”

Paris was already halfway across the parking lot, but he looked back at him with the kind of seductive smile that always cut him—and every other breathing humanoid member of the planet—off at the knees. “Did I? Oh, but I’m so harmless and cute.”

Roan shook his head, unable to keep from genuinely smiling now. “Cocktease,” he accused, just as one of the lawyers over at the small Gorman and Singh firm came out his unit door. He stopped as if shocked with a cattle prod, looked between the pair of them in goggle-eyed shock, and quickly turned and went back inside his office.

Paris tried to stifle a laugh but failed, and that startled a laugh out of Roan as well. Poor guy. Maybe they should send him a fruit basket or something as an apology.

Okay, no, fruit might not be appropriate in this context, and muffins

might be pushing it. Something manly was called for—a basket of power tools and motor oil. But he was a lawyer; a basket of Scotch and Peppid AC would probably be most appropriate.

Once inside the office of MK Investigations, the phone on Paris's front desk was already ringing, so he went into professional mode right away, and Roan put on the coffee before retreating to his office and getting down to the boring job of running computer checks. This was certainly the job for someone who worried they were losing what little humanity they had. Did anything make you feel more human than being a bored corporate drone? Inhuman was starting to look better and better.

He'd killed about forty minutes and two-and-a-half people on his list when he heard a tonal change in Paris's voice out in the front office. He couldn't make out the words precisely, not over the rattle and hum of the air conditioner, but Paris always had this smoothly professional but wonderfully friendly "assistant voice" he used on clients that always seemed to relax them and make them like him immediately. (Paris was the perpetual good cop, and he was the perpetual bad cop. Playing to strengths, as it were.) This was more his normal voice, with an added edge of hardness.

He got up and opened his office door, not sure what he expected to see, but fairly certain it wasn't what he did see.

Paris was standing up behind his desk, his arms crossed over his chest in a posture of barely contained anger. On the other side of the desk, out of lunging distance, was the last person Roan had ever expected to see in his office: Eli Winters.

Eli had managed to get off his assault and unrestrained charges with nothing more than community service, proving that, as odious and ugly a person as Guy Stovak was, he had some redemptive value as a weasely, shit-slick lawyer. So that's how he excused his own existence—Roan had always wondered.

Eli gave him a smile meant to be friendly, but it didn't reach his eyes and looked like a rictus, a final, muscular spasm of a dying body. Eli had a new haircut, fashionably short with the bangs swept up like a sea wall and highlighted sunny blond, a two-hundred-dollar haircut he probably spent five hundred for, and—oh, he was dying to tell him—extremely gay. All he needed was a skintight white T-shirt and jeans that were slung just below the waist, showing a few centimeters of taut, tan flesh, and he could

have been every other guy in any gay bar in this city. Was Eli aware he had a gay cut? Maybe it was trendy... but wasn't metrosexuality out now?

Eli's outfit seemed to tell him metrosexuality was still in, as he was wearing tailored Armani slacks and a needlessly expensive silk button-down shirt of bright green, blue, and red vertical stripes, the shirt open at the collar so you could see the silver necklace with the small cat pendant. Was it supposed to be a leopard? It was a detail-free silhouette, a drop of liquid mercury; it could have been any cat.

"Roan," Eli said, his voice both flat and slightly edged with sarcasm. "It seems your... assistant thinks I'm here to cause trouble."

Roan leaned against the doorjamb, fixing him with a caustic glare that he hoped would scare him off. "You don't cause much else."

Eli attempted to chuckle, but it sounded forced and false. "People say the same thing about you."

"In my case, it's true. And if you don't want some, turn around and leave."

Half of his mouth quirked up in what might have been a genuine smile. "I like that, that's good. You should be an action hero."

"Five seconds, then I physically throw you out."

He raised his hands in a warding-off gesture, as if Roan was physically advancing on him right now. Filtered sunlight coming through the blinds glinted off his platinum Rolex and a chunky gold and ruby pinky ring he always, inexplicably, wore. Roan thought it made him look like a Mafia don's kept boy. "Look, I know you don't like me, but this is no way to treat a client, is it?"

Roan straightened up, feeling muscles tense across his shoulders. "I told you to get out."

"This isn't a joke," Eli continued, ignoring him. "It's time to do something for your community, Roan." He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a check, which he held up like a shield. "I want to hire you."

If this was a joke, it was a really poor one.

2

The Best Revenge

ROAN felt he had waited long enough for a punch line. “You want to hire me?” he repeated, not bothering to hide the disbelief and contempt in his voice. “For what exactly? Piñata?”

“I have a serious matter that needs looking into, and I believe in hiring within the community,” Eli replied, without a hint of facetiousness.

Paris rolled his eyes, and Roan had to restrain the urge to do the same thing. Eli was comparing himself to Roan because they were both infected, huh? “I’m not your community.”

“Oh, I know you don’t like it,” he said, with a patronizing smile. “But we have much more in common than we have in difference.”

“Take that back and I’ll give you five minutes.”

“You this nice to all your clients? I’m surprised you’re still in business.”

Roan turned and walked back into his office, leaving the door open. Eli followed, closing the door behind him. “All this hostility,” Eli said, as he looked around his office, as if appraising its worth. “It can’t be good for your chi.”

Roan sat behind his desk, closing the browser on his computer screen. “You’re wasting time.”

Eli sighed expansively, like a balloon deflating, and took one of the metal and leather chairs before his desk. Eli had a “messenger bag,” aka a man purse (Seriously, was he trying to look as gay as possible? Was this some sort of obscure shot at him?), slung over his left shoulder, and as he sat down, he swung it onto his lap. “Did you see the paper this morning?”

“Yes. Why?”

He rummaged in his bag for a moment, and pulled out the local

section of the paper. “You see this?” He tossed it on Roan’s desk.

The paper was folded so the story that was facing up was a tiny column on the mysterious shooting of a nineteen-year-old girl at the Wildwood Apartments, which he knew from his cop days was a tenement. Nothing good ever happened at the Wildwood, so he couldn’t say he was surprised by a homicide—they probably had about three to five a year, mostly drug- and gang-related. “Yes. And?”

“Did you know she was infected?”

He scanned the article rapidly, but there was no mention of that. It only mentioned she was nineteen-year-old Ashley Cryer, originally from Corpus Christi, Texas, and a barista at the Starbucks on Third and Grant. Dead from a single gunshot wound to the head, which probably meant she was killed almost instantly. Not likely to be a gangbanger, so what was the deal there? Robbery gone wrong? Mistaken identity? Psychotic ex-boyfriend? “It doesn’t say that.”

“I have sources, Roan. And do you know what? She’s the fourth infected who’s been mysteriously killed in a month. They’re all killed by gunshot wounds, usually to the face, usually point-blank.” He rummaged in his bag again and pulled out what looked like a computer printout, which he slid across his desk. “Look at them. On top of that, they’re just kids.”

The computer printout was a collection of different little articles—and little was the key word, being at most four paragraphs long—about people dead by gunshot wounds in the area, going back to a little under three weeks ago. The first victim, chronologically, was a twenty-two-year-old named Patrick Farley, who lived downtown in a reasonably decent apartment building. Next was a twenty-year-old named Christa Hernandez, killed in a suburban housing estate, and last was twenty-year-old Melissa Prescott, killed eight days ago in a run-down complex about a mile from here. None of the articles specifically identified them as infected... but they probably wouldn’t. That was medical information, and if it wasn’t relevant to how they died, it would be left out so the surviving family didn’t sue for “defamation of character” or whatever bullshit reason a lawyer could cook up. But although the space of days was uneven, essentially there was one kill a week.

He glared at Eli. “How do you know they were infected? This goes no further until you tell me how you know.”

Now Eli rolled his eyes, as if he was being pointlessly difficult. “The coroner.”

“You know the county coroner?”

“He’s a friend of the family. My dad and his dad were hunting buddies; we’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Oh fun. The coroner was of privileged stock, or had the Winters family occasionally slummed in its choice of companions? Either way, this was a nugget of information Roan happily filed away. That could become useful. “So he’s been leaking illegal information to you?”

“Don’t be a butthead, Roan. Don’t you hear what I’m saying? Someone is murdering infecteds.”

“Have you been to the police?”

Eli clicked his tongue in exasperation. “Of course I’ve been to the police, but you know how they are with us. Hell, you should know better than anybody.”

“How they are with ‘us’? Rich-boy pricks who deify themselves?”

Eli glared back at him, and he supposed the look was supposed to be intimidating, but Roan actually had to swallow back the urge to laugh. Oh yeah, he was shaking; he was so scared he just might yawn.

“I know you hate me, Roan, but I had no idea you were such a self-loathing asshole.”

“Excuse me?”

“You hate being infected, don’t you? You probably think they got what they deserved.” Eli snatched back the computer printout angrily, and Roan half-expected him to ball it up and throw it in his face.

Roan’s own anger was tempered by puzzlement. Did Eli actually think they were “brothers” now, because they all shared the same illness? “Infection is a disease, Eli. It’s not a divine gift, like you claim it is.”

His eyes flashed with resentment. “See? Self-hating. I pity you.”

“This is a police matter, Eli, and I only get involved in police matters if they ask me to.”

“Really? They asked you to get involved in the Henstridge case?”

Roan made sure to keep his eyes and expression stony. He wasn’t

going to give in to anger; he wasn't going to give Eli anything that might suggest he was getting to him. That was not a pleasure he deserved. "That wasn't a police investigation. They weren't looking at him at all."

"Which is why I'm here. For all your obvious faults, you're a better investigator than that bunch of idiots that call themselves a police department. Besides, I thought you'd want to help your people out."

"My people?" He rubbed his eyes, and was pretty sure he could feel a headache coming on. "Which 'my people'? Are they gay? Or Scottish? Oh, wait, are they crossword puzzle aficionados too?"

"Now you're just being a smart-ass."

"I'm told that's what I do best."

"Don't you even care that someone's killing these kids?"

He let his hands fall flat on his desk, fixing Eli with a look that was just slightly frosty. "I care when anybody is killed. But I can't interfere in an open police investigation, or I risk getting my license yanked. You may not like the cops around here, and God knows a lot of them are putzes, but they're not criminally inept. Usually. So if this is what you want to hire me for, I suggest you take your man purse and go, because I don't care how big a check that is."

He scowled. "It's not a man purse, it's a messenger bag."

"Whatever."

Eli's eyes narrowed to evil slits, making his brow furrow and showing a hint of his true age. He must not have had a Botox treatment recently. "Actually, what I want to hire you for is a matter a little closer to home." He rummaged in the man purse once more, and this time he pulled out a number of things, mostly paper, but Roan noted a black and translucent CD-ROM case as well. "The church is being threatened."

"Threatened?"

"Bomb threats, arson threats, vandalism." He picked up a manila folder and shoved it over to him, and Roan glanced inside to see copies of crudely made letters, mostly sporting bad spelling and poor grammar, threatening harm to the *fucking pussies* and *godless hethens*. What was a *hethen*? Heathens, he knew, but that was just stupid. He wanted to find the person who wrote it and shout "Spellcheck, moron!"

“It’s picked up very recently. Phone calls, mass e-mails, graffiti, eggs and dog shit thrown at the church, car windows smashed, tires slashed. Now look what we found in the mailbox this morning.”

It was the local section of the paper he’d shown him just a minute ago, only over the small column about Ashley Cryer’s death was written, in red ink, *Your next*. It looked like Magic Marker-style ink; it had soaked into the newspaper like blood—surely the desired effect, even though the author had never heard of contractions. “You turn over the original to the cops?”

He nodded. “For all the good it’s going to do.”

“If it’s an open case....”

“Oh come on, Roan, you know how the cops feel about us. They ain’t doing shit.”

He sighed, tapping his knuckles on the edge of his desk. Talking to Eli wasn’t like beating your head against the wall, it was more like having your head in a vise, and the sides were closing in a few centimeters every minute, just slowly enough that the pain seemed to sneak up on you. “Again with the all-encompassing ‘us’. Are you coming out of the closet? I mean, with that hair cut—”

“Give this whole jaded P.I. attitude a rest, would—what about my hair?” he suddenly exclaimed, touching it as if afraid it might have slipped off and hit the floor. Had he forgotten to fasten the chinstrap this morning?

Roan dry-washed his face to hide a laugh that was just itching to get out. When he was sure he had completely squashed the urge, he took a deep breath, and faced the poor little rich boy cult leader. “If this is an active police investigation, I can’t help you. Is that clear?”

Eli sat forward, almost leaning over his desk, a certain desperation flashing through his toilet-water blue eyes (colored contacts—Roan was honestly surprised that he hadn’t put in the ones with the cat-shaped pupils, because he just knew a guy like Eli would have them). “All they’re doing is amassing a file of threats and notes. They don’t take it seriously at all. They actually said they thought we’d get a lot of things like this.”

“Frankly, so did I.”

He frowned deeply, making more lines appear on his otherwise frat-boyish, vaguely Eurotrash face. “What I want you to do is find evidence,

enough that the cops—who are sitting on their fat, cat-hating asses—can arrest the fuckers who are doing this.”

“Does this mean you have a suspect?”

“Of course I do.” He tossed another manila folder on Roan’s desk, and inside was a two-toned flyer, which had, in bold letters that took up most of the middle of the page, the words *Humanity First*.

“Is this an Earth First offshoot?” Roan wondered aloud, scanning the rest of the flyer. It seemed to be about meeting other people interested in keeping humanity free of “mutagenic and cross-species diseases.” It was a very subtle way of saying “kitty-free.” “Ah, the vanguard of the anti-cat league. Don’t tell me—they want to pile us in sacks and drown us in the river.”

“He’s been trying to create his own Internet empire. He’s not doing too badly; the anti-cat sites have been spreading like wildfire over the Web.”

“He?”

“Reverend Harold Marber.” Eli rolled his eyes when he said “Reverend,” as if the title itself was a joke. It probably was.

“Oh boy, he’s a religious freak? Does he hate gays too? I bet he does; they always do.” It was an awful thing, but he felt a slight, vicarious thrill; he did so love shutting down the religious hypocrites. But the problem was, there was one sitting right across from him.

“The rhetoric’s been getting more open, more hateful. He’s been recruiting downtown; I’ve heard he’s even had his people trying to get kids from the high schools.”

“And you haven’t?” he riposted with sarcastic cheerfulness.

Eli did not like that one bit. If looks could kill, Paris would have been scraping his brains off the wall of his office this afternoon. “He’s encouraging violence. We don’t hurt anyone; we never have and we never will.”

Roan gave him a challenging, disbelieving look before shuffling through the papers, finding more flyers, one with a contact phone number and Web page address, and a couple of computer printouts, including a page displaying a column titled *Twenty Five Ways To Kill A Cat*. Cute. Oh, and here was confirmation: an article stating that a “queer” fucking a cat

led to the disease. Eli had probably made sure to include that little inflammatory tidbit just to get his blood boiling. “If being an obnoxious idiot was a crime, there’d be no room in prison,” he pointed out, closing the file.

Eli pulled out the check again, and slapped it on the desk. “Give me a week. Investigate Humanity First, see if they’re behind the violence like I’m sure they are; get proof and take it to your cop friends. That’s all I ask.”

“What if I don’t find any proof? What if I discover they’re just a bunch of mouth-breathing troglodytes?”

Eli shrugged, his head twitching to the side. It was a kind of reluctant shrug; he felt beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was right, comfortable in his complete smugness. How was the weather up his own ass? “So you don’t. I’m not asking you to fabricate anything or entrap anyone. I just don’t want any of my people hurt.”

His people? Did he mean people at the church, or was this an all-encompassing, royal “people,” all the infected? He didn’t ask, because he was afraid he’d be unable to keep his gorge from rising if Eli actually told him the answer. He tried not to do a double take when he glanced down at the check.

It was for ten thousand dollars. Roan was careful to count the zeros, roughly certain he was seeing one that wasn’t there. No, it was there all right. “This is a bit more than my standard fee.”

Again he shrugged, but it was far more nonchalant. “You get what you pay for. I want the job done right.”

Taking this prick for ten thousand sounded really good. But this was Eli and he couldn’t trust him, and frankly, ten thousand dollars for him was nothing; Eli probably spent that much on aftershave yearly. (The Ferragamo was thick enough to make his eyes water.) Still... wouldn’t it be fun to see if he could dig up some dirt on this Marber dickhead? And wouldn’t it be ironic if he dug up some dirt on Eli using his own money? That was just too rich a prospect not to enjoy.

“If I do this, standard client protocols are in effect. Which means you don’t tell me what to do, you don’t interfere in my investigation. I’ll give you status reports, but that’s it. I work independently and autonomously, and I’m working for you personally, not the church. Is that clear?”

Eli sat up, a child happy with long-denied attention, and fought hard not to smile. “Absolutely.”

Obviously Eli believed all of what he’d told Roan: he believed his people—but mainly himself—might be in danger. The problem was, Eli had a tendency to believe every piece of bullshit that plopped out of his mouth. What kind of religious leader would he be if he didn’t? There was something else going on here, something being held back or omitted, but with such skill it was almost unnoticeable. Almost.

As Roan pulled the standard forms out of the drawer, Eli added, “Your people will thank you for this, Roan.”

His people? Infected gay men with lingering kitty traits? Now *there* was a party that everybody would want to attend.

As Eli signed the forms, Roan wondered how long it would take him to find the *real* reason Eli had hired him.

3

Less Than Zero

AS SOON as Eli left, Paris came in, so curious he almost looked pained. Roan had no choice but to tell him what Eli wanted to hire him for, and showed him the files.

“I assumed they got a lot of threats,” Paris said, making that assumption unanimous to everyone but Eli himself. When Roan told him he had taken the case, it looked like Paris was considering throwing his desk over. When Roan showed him the check, it calmed him down, but made him deeply confused. “What the hell is this? A payoff?”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” he admitted. He called up the Web page of Humanity First as Paris slowly sank into the chair Eli had just vacated, flipping through all the printouts. The Web page was just what the printout suggested. The front page seemed almost reasonable in its assertions that infecteds were getting too much of a “pass” for their crimes in kitty form; but the more you explored the site, the more hateful homophobic shit you found, including that “kill a cat” list and the open speculation that fags liked bestiality and had started all of this. There was a “calendar” of meetings in various areas, and a chat room. Roan signed up for the chat room using one of his anonymous e-mail addresses (he had a couple, ones he could use for cases and easily discard), and decided on the user name “Catkiller68” (why use subtlety when a sledgehammer would do?).

“You’re really going to investigate them?” For some reason, Paris sounded slightly queasy at the prospect.

“And Eli, as much as I possibly can. Can’t hurt.”

“But how can it help? I don’t care about Eli, but these Humanity First fuckheads could be dangerous.” He seemed genuinely concerned, and Roan was touched. He still wasn’t quite used to someone caring when he did something stupid.

“If they are, I want to know so I can pass it on.”

Paris really wanted to argue with him, Roan could see it in his eyes, but as Paris grimaced at his own thoughts, it was equally clear that after a moment’s debate with himself that he had given up on the idea. There was no point in a debate and they both knew it; he wasn’t going to drop the case and return the check just yet.

“So how are you going to start?”

“There’s an informal meeting tonight down in the rec room of a church on State Street,” he noted, checking the online calendar. “I think I’ll wander by and be a dirtbag for a while.”

“Are you *insane*?” Paris exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “You can’t just walk in there!”

Roan looked up at him in genuine confusion. “Why the hell can’t I? I’m not wearing a scarlet letter, I don’t have a big L tattooed on my forehead. I’ll cover the lion mark on my wrist and pretend to be rabidly hetero—I’ll fit in just fine.”

Paris continued staring at him in bug-eyed shock. “If they find out—”

“How are they going to find out? And even if they do, it’s not like they’re going to tear me apart like fresh bread; it’s not like I’m even human. They’re welcome to start some shit if they want, but there’s no way in hell they’re finishing it.”

Paris fixed him with a stern look, his clear blue eyes remarkably cold, and shook his head slowly. “You and your macho bullshit.”

“It’s not macho bullshit. Give them Uzis and I still wouldn’t be afraid of a bunch of redneck punk-ass bitches like that.” Okay, yeah, that did sound a little like macho bullshit. But he really wasn’t bothered by a bunch of impotent men who could only feel powerful when beating on other people; they were weak little bullies, limp dicks who didn’t want a real, hard fight. The ones you needed to worry about were the ones who relished a bloody, messy fight, but they were few and far between.

Paris sighed dramatically and rubbed his forehead like Roan was giving him a headache. After a moment, he said, “Fine, I’m going with you.”

Few things left Roan speechless, but this did. He needed a few seconds to find his voice. “What? No fucking way—”

“You can’t stop me.”

“The hell I can’t.”

Paris put on his unyielding face, the one that usually prefaced a huge, pointless argument between them. He sometimes wondered if he’d infected Paris with his own asshole stubbornness. “I’m going.”

Son of a bitch. He wanted to tell him to stop being difficult, but he could just imagine the apocalyptic fight that would ensue, and there was no guarantee that getting Paris mad enough would keep him out of the meeting tonight. So he considered the pros and cons, and how much he cared about Paris and really didn’t want to fuck this up. Goddamn, the things you did for love. At least he knew, from the endless parade of cheating husbands and wives that came through his office, that straights had it no easier at all. “Okay, fine, if you want to come along, be my guest. But remember, you’re utterly charmless, and if you can be uglier, it’d be a help.”

“I have great experience playing straight,” Paris pointed out. That was true enough. He looked at him with almost absurdly kind eyes now, as if he knew the pride Roan had to swallow to make this compromise. Roan was trying very hard not to let that get to him. A stupid fight was almost better than gratitude. (And what was wrong with him that he thought that?)

“But we have to watch it. We’re just friends, that’s it. If anyone gets an affection vibe off us, we could be in deep shit.” While that was perfectly obvious, it was actually more insidious than you’d think. There was an unconscious body language that people who’d been together for a while or people simply into each other projected, as subtle as being turned toward another or as obvious as a casual, lingering touch. Roan knew he himself would have to watch out for such things if Paris came with him; they had to be together but always completely parallel, physically, emotionally, and in all other ways and behaviors. They were two straight guys who liked each other but otherwise had no interest in each other. Something like that was usually easier said than done, but at least Paris had the experience of pretending to be straight and passing for a great deal of his life; he knew how to play the game successfully.

Paris flashed him a brilliant, cocky smile as the phone started ringing in the front office and he turned toward the door. “I’ll try not to give you a blow job in front of everyone.”

“Well, if the mood strikes you, far be it from me to stop you.”

Paris blew him a kiss as he ducked out to the front, closing the door behind him. How were they going to ugly Paris up? Without prosthetics, that was going to be difficult.

He picked up the phone and punched in a number he hadn't used in a while. He wondered if he'd be as welcome as a heart attack. After two rings, the phone was answered and a woman's clipped, professional voice said, "Sergeant Murphy, homicide."

"Dropkick Murphy, how's it hanging?"

She chuckled faintly. "Angus Podgorny. Why am I not surprised somehow?" Sergeant Darinda Murphy was also known as the "lesbian cop in homicide," the most accepted openly gay member on the police force. She never got the shit he got, and he knew why: straight men just accepted lesbians easier. Maybe because they often seemed like "one of the guys," or perhaps—and most likely—they weren't afraid the lesbians were going to rape them in the shower. (That would probably be filed under "fantasy" for some guys.)

He called her Dropkick after the band, the Dropkick Murphys, which she had never heard of, but she liked the nickname because it was different from the usual nicknames she was given, which were generally Rindy or the Dyke. In response, she called him Angus or Angus Podgorny, a Monty Python reference—supposedly the first and only Scotsman to win Wimbledon. People generally looked at them funny, but at least it was deserved. "Hey, does that mean you were thinking of me? How's Kim?"

"She's good. We just renovated our kitchen, and now I don't have any idea where anything is." Kim was a nurse over at County General, and had been Dropkick's partner for the last seven years. Roan had met her a couple of times, mostly on the job, and she seemed nice enough. Neither she nor Dropkick were butch or overly feminine; no bull dykes or lipstick lesbians here. They were both just normal, average, as if deliberately going out of their way to subvert stereotypes. "How's Paris?"

"A willful little snot."

That made her chuckle once more. "All you men are like that. So why the call? Somehow I have a feeling that you're not just wanting to shoot the shit."

"You caught me. I was wondering, since you're the hotshot on the squad, if you and Dubois had the kitty-killer case. You know, the idiot going around shooting infecteds."

He heard her chair creak, and since she had a much nicer chair than Sikorski, he knew that meant she'd sat forward. He could picture her leaning her elbows on her neat desk, her stylishly bobbed chocolate-brown hair falling forward and obscuring at least one of her equally brown eyes. She dropped her voice to an angry whisper as she hissed, "Where the fuck did you hear that? Who the hell is your leak, Roan?"

"I heard it from a guy who has a leak in the coroner's office. And has apparently spread it to the Church of the Divine Transformation."

She let out a breath between her teeth, a slow whistle like a deflating beach ball. "Fuck. Tell me you're joking."

"No. As far as I know, they haven't acted on the info yet, but who knows what they might do with it." If nothing else, it was fair warning. "So, are you on the case? What's the deal? What's the connection between the kids?"

Again the creak, and he could imagine her pinching the bridge of her nose, which she did when she was trying not to get angry or impatient. "I'm not discussing an active case with you. I can't believe you're even asking."

She didn't deny being on the case, which meant she was on it. He was glad, because he knew she was a good cop. Dubois wasn't too bad, but he just didn't know enough about him; Jon Dubois seemed to avoid him whenever possible, which meant he was either one of those guys who had no problem with lesbians but couldn't tolerate a gay male, or was a closet case who didn't like to be reminded of what he could have become if he didn't fight his sexuality all the way. "I'm not asking for anything damaging, and I'm not going to discuss this with anyone. You know me."

"Yeah, I do. That's the problem. I don't need you butting in."

"I'm not going to." He wasn't sure if he was lying or not. "Is it one killer or one group of killers? Is the church the common denominator?"

She sighed heavily, and he waited for her to decide whether she wanted to tell him anything or just hang up on him. After what seemed an eternity, she finally said, quietly, "It looks like the same weapon was used in all the killings, and everyone was taken by surprise. This is all off the record, capice?"

"I've got you, Murph. This is just between us."

"Two of the victims had been to the church, but the other two, as far as we can tell, never went. We have no common denominator for the

victims at the moment, beyond their illness.”

Holy shit. The cops had nothing. In a homicide, the first twenty-four hours were crucial: if you didn’t identify a suspect in that time, the odds got increasingly worse that you ever would with every hour that passed. Usually the first person identified within that twenty-four-hour span was also the actual killer; it was cozy how that worked. “Is it a professional?” he wondered.

He heard her tapping a pen on her desk. That was another nervous habit of hers. “There are no indications of that.”

With cops, it was often *how* they said something, not what they said. “It hasn’t been ruled out.” She tapped her pen at a more rapid pace, and he felt his heart sink. No. “You haven’t ruled anything out, have you?”

“I can’t talk about this,” she replied, the strain obvious in her voice. There was nothing more frustrating than a case that seemed like a zero-sum game right from the beginning. This was fucked-up.

“If I can help at all...” he offered, wondering why there were no witnesses willing to come forward about the shootings. Were they really supposed to believe no one saw anything? Okay, no one ever did at Wildwood, but what about the other places? And come to think of it, why was Eli sitting on the information that all the killed were infected? Did he just learn it this morning before coming into his office, or... was there some other reason he wasn’t holding a press conference and accusing the police of indifference? This was starting to seem a lot less straightforward and far more messy.

She snorted derisively. “If we need a bloodhound, I’ll call you.” After a moment, she realized how harsh and bitter that sounded, and added, “Shit, I’m sorry Roan, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Actually he was fairly certain she did, but he let it go. “That’s not all I’m good for.”

“I realize that, but you’re a civie. Stick with your cases and leave us to ours.”

“I’ll look into the kids, see if I can find a connection.”

“Roan, I just said—”

“I know the cat community,” he interrupted. “People will talk to me more readily than they will to a cop.” This was doubly true if he sent in Paris to do the job.

She sighed, but he heard the concession in it before she ever said a word. “Fine, ask around. But that’s it, okay? Let’s not have a repeat of the Henstridge thing, okay?”

“What, you think I want the suspect to come to my house and try and kill me?”

“Not that.” He heard her shift once more, and she lowered her voice. “You didn’t make any more friends around here by breaking that case.”

“‘Cause he was a cop.”

“And because you made the investigative unit look bad. He wasn’t even on the radar until you mentioned his name. Do yourself a favor and try not to get arrested between now and next year.”

He scoffed, although he knew she wasn’t joking. “Thanks for the heads up. I’ll see what I can find and call you back.” As soon as he hung up, though, he wondered where he was supposed to start. Well, where did any decent detective start? With the victims’ backgrounds.

By the time he had to give it up and do some other work, he had the home addresses and workplaces of all the victims, although he’d already found a tenuous connection between them: all lived away from their families, save for Christa, who lived with her great-aunt. But her parents and siblings lived in Mission Viejo, California; Patrick’s family lived in Cleveland; Melissa’s family lived in Richmond, Virginia; and Ashley’s family lived in Corpus Christi. Was that significant? The church and very liberal social policies had brought an influx of infecteds to the city, as it was seen as more “kitty friendly” than most, and he knew that scared a lot of people, although kitty crimes hadn’t gone up. A lot of the influx was kids, runaways who couldn’t hack it at home or simply weren’t wanted. It was kind of sad when you thought about it. But it also meant there was a social network for the kids themselves, and he wondered how he was going to insinuate himself into it.

He put together an action list, places to hit and people to interview, and he wondered if he could get permission from Murphy to visit one of the crime scenes, but he figured he’d wait until tomorrow. Right now, he didn’t see her being amenable to it.

The meeting was at five-thirty, so he wrapped things up and told Paris they were closing up early. He was hoping that Paris would change his mind about going, but oh no, he was determined to see this through. Why was he attracted to the stubborn? Life would be so much easier if he

could somehow tolerate the naturally submissive.

Back at the house, he went through the closet and found the stash of “undercover clothes” at the back. Following people, especially in crowds, you couldn’t draw attention to yourself; you had to be as inconspicuous as possible, as average and unnoticeable as the scenery. He kept a wardrobe of things he normally wouldn’t wear just for the various situations where he might have to tail people, and sometimes he did find himself at a loss. Luckily nowadays, most of the time, you could fit in to any situation with a T-shirt and jeans.

And that’s what he settled for: a plain blue Gap T-shirt that looked well-worn (because it was—he bought most of his undercover clothes at the Goodwill) and faded Levis that were just a little bit too big for him, along with dirty Nikes that looked like he’d spent the day tracking through the mud. He topped it all off with a gimme cap that covered his hair and had the symbol for the Toronto Maple Leafs on it. He enjoyed this, because it allowed him to get a suspicious look on his face and say, “Didn’t you take me to a Leafs game?” This was a very obscure reference to a Kids In The Hall sketch, and while it amused him endlessly, Paris had only the vaguest idea who the Kids In The Hall were and had never seen the sketch he was referring to. It made him feel so very old and so very geeky. He had to get the DVDs one of these days, if only to torment Par with them.

Paris went with a more quasi-frat-boy look, wearing a basketball jersey (What was the significance of the number 32? He had no idea, but he wasn’t about to admit it.) and the jeans he sometimes wore while working on his cars, which meant they were a bit torn and grease-stained and looked authentically like jeans worn by someone who didn’t give a flying fuck about fashion or good taste or laundry. Paris also gathered his hair into a tight ponytail, making him look like a guy who hadn’t gotten the message that the nineties were over—the only way he could have looked less fashionable was if he wore moon boots and a skinny tie. He still seemed a bit too handsome, but they were just going to have to live with that.

Par glanced at his cap, and grimaced. “Oh no, not the Leafs game joke again.”

“Tonight I’m straight; I’m not making that joke.”

He glanced at his watch. “I give it five minutes.”

“Very funny.” He had to dig in his top dresser drawer to find his

leather cuff watch, the one with the wide band that hid his Leo sign tattoo quite handily, and snapped it on. He added a worn brown leather jacket before they left, and then belatedly worried that he was too color coordinated, but fuck it.

On their way to the church, they decided on fake names and backstories. It was unlikely that anyone would ask, but it was always good to have them ready just in case. Roan had decided on Chris McDonald, a recently unemployed corporate drone who'd once been mauled by a cat (hence his hatred of them). Paris was Kevin Stiles (apparently the name of this prick he hated in high school), a house painter who had an uncle killed by a cat. It wouldn't actually be hard for them to dredge up some anger toward cats, because it wasn't like they loved being infected. If they were perfectly honest with themselves, would they have actually wanted this? Would they want to have to deal with this fucking disease and all the baggage that came with it? Of course not, which was why the people who deliberately chased it, the ones who wanted to get infected, always puzzled them. It wasn't quite like the Gothic horror romances said, and he thought the trans-porn, even as cleaned up as it was, would send that message loud and clear. Becoming something else was not fun, it was not painless, it was not Buffy The Vampire Slayer. It sucked, it hurt, it lowered your life span dramatically, or in the case of surviving tiger strain infectees, chopped it down to almost nothing.

So anger and discontent wasn't hard to imagine; it was understandable. But mass slaughter? That was an impossible pill to swallow.

They parked a block over from the church in a Safeway parking lot, because a restored and souped-up bright blue metallic '69 Mustang was a very memorable car (see, if he had a "normal" gay boyfriend, this wouldn't even be a consideration). If they were going to keep this up for a while, they'd probably have to borrow Randi's Saturn or get a rental; God knows Eli's check gave them more than enough cash to even buy some anonymous piece-of-crap car just for these kinds of situations. But as Paris would surely point out, what was the fun of a normal piece-of-crap car when you could have an unusual piece-of-crap car?

The church was a typical one. Not a converted house like Divine Transformation, this was a "proper" one: small, with a starkly peaked roof leading up to a steeple, the lawn neatly scalped, with an old-fashioned wooden sign that hadn't even been graffiti-tagged yet (or if it had, it had been cleaned up well). It looked like the kind of church you'd see in a

Currier and Ives Christmas card, only there it would be frosted with snow and have a horse-drawn carriage out front. Lights inside made the leaded windows glow, and the small parking lot off to the right side of the complex looked reasonably full.

Churches always made him feel strange. They were places for other people, places where people were married and buried, places where he was an odd and unwelcome guest. He couldn't walk into one without immediately wondering when he was going to be thrown out. There were few places where his alienation became so acute it was almost a physical pain, but churches were at the top of that small list. He didn't get them, and no one who went to one ever seemed to want anything to do with him. People's devotion to them would always remain an abstract puzzle for him.

They paused, and Roan took a deep breath. "Ready to go into the lion's den?"

They were standing a regulation six inches apart so they couldn't even accidentally touch, although when Par looked at him, it was with a wry, weary affection. They were alone out here, so it was okay. "I wish it was a lion's den. I'd feel more comfortable."

Actually, come to think of it, so would he. But if they wanted to learn anything about Humanity First, they had to see it for themselves. Hearsay was nothing next to witnessing it for yourself.

"Cowards die a thousand times," Roan replied, going to the second to last refuge of scoundrels, the cliché. "Brave men only once."

Paris stared at him, raising an eyebrow. "You suck as a motivational speaker."

He could only shrug. "I'm more accustomed to discouraging."

Paris shook his head and started toward the front door of the church. "See if I ever take you to a Leafs game again," he muttered.

He laughed, he couldn't help it, but it felt good and was probably necessary anyway.

The real tension was just about to begin.

4

Cry for a Shadow

THE church's rec room was a sizable, perfectly rectangular room that reminded him a bit of a basement apartment, only with dimensions too small to live in. (A New York basement apartment?) The walls, unlike the rest of the church, were cool, industrial drywall that was supposed to be white but was really an off-cream color now bleeding toward sickly gray. The floor was concrete, but they'd tried to soften it with threadbare industrial carpeting of gold-flecked brown that was so unattractive if you blurred your vision and looked at it, you could almost believe someone had vomited all over the floor. There were two dozen metal folding chairs set up facing a small, impromptu dais, and a folding table in the back of the room holding a large metal coffee urn, plates of stale cookies, and neat rows of Styrofoam cups. It looked like a room where an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting might happen, and judging from the pin-ups tacked to a corkboard, that happened every Friday night. The Narcotics Anonymous meetings were on Wednesday.

A little over a dozen chairs were already taken, so he and Paris took chairs in the very back row near the snack table. Unpleasantly harsh florescent lights buzzed overhead like angry insects, and he was glad he'd brought his coat, as there seemed to be a chill breeze, although it was perfectly unclear where it was coming from. The strong coffee scent almost covered up the sharp, lingering smell of carpet glue.

Paris slumped down in his chair and put his feet up on the back of the empty chair in front of him—rude, but a very straight male thing to do (God, he was good at this; perhaps being bi helped.)—and chewed gum nosily as Roan scanned the existing crowd. They all seemed to be in their twenties and thirties, white males (with the exception of a single woman on the far left), the perfect demographic for frustrated violence. But they also looked very normal, the guys you might wait in line at the supermarket with, the guys you would pass on the street without a second

glance; no one looked like an extra from *The Road Warrior* or a foaming at the mouth Jerry Springer guest (except that guy in the front row with the buzz cut—he had a swastika tattoo on his exposed right bicep, only it had the unsure construction and spidery black lines of a prison tattoo).

A couple more people came in, and at five-thirty-six, a pale man with prematurely graying hair and small square glasses came in, wearing a blue cable-knit sweater and chinos and holding a sheaf of papers to his chest like a prized object. Just his wardrobe and demeanor marked him as a speaker, not a crowd member. God, he looked like the middle manager of a paper company in Slough on casual day.

At the dais, he made a show of neatening papers that were already neat, and cleared his throat before speaking in a voice that managed to be soft and loud at once; the consonants timorous, and yet full enough to fill the enclosed space. He introduced himself as Tim and welcomed them all—not counting Paris and Roan, there were nineteen people here—and much like a group therapy counseling session, asked if there was anyone who had a story they would like to share about “encounters with infecteds.” Roan felt like crossing his arms, but since that could be interpreted as a defensive or hostile gesture, he didn’t.

It was the woman who stood up first, and really, that didn’t surprise him. She was a medium-sized, stout woman with stringy brown hair the color of mud and surprisingly bony hands, her face a knife blade of anger and pain. Something haunted her and twisted her, something that made her look about fifteen years older than she actually was.

In a voice that grew more strident as the tale went on, she told the story of her daughter, whom she said was “preyed upon” by “fucking cats” (she never said cats without the “fucking” modifier first), who convinced her that being infected was a good thing, and infected her. She didn’t survive her first transformation, and this woman felt it was murder, but the cops said if her daughter voluntarily sought to get infected there really wasn’t anything they could do. Even if they figured out who infected her, it wasn’t assault because she had sought it out. (If you infected someone without their knowledge, that was legally considered assault, unless you had the tiger strain, then it was considered attempted murder.) Her growing rage seemed to galvanize the crowd, bringing them together in a way they hadn’t been.

Roan felt bad for her; it was an awful thing that had happened, and her grief had not only aged her but warped her, turning her into this

jagged, fragile person who clung to hate in lieu of hope. She was probably the most dangerous person in this room, although he was certain only he and she knew that.

People started speaking up after her, with the lamest complaint being a cat damaging one man's property and the insurance company raising his rates because of it, and one of the most harrowing being the neo-Nazi in the front admitting that he came upon a cat gnawing on his girlfriend's younger brother (the boy lost his arm).

In the cacophony of people talking over one another, Paris added with convincing anger, "One of those damn cats deliberately infected my roommate in college just to get revenge on the guy who infected her. He went fucking nuts and no one's seen him since." It was a change to the backstory—which only mattered on a consistency level because they'd told no one their stories yet—but Roan fought to keep his expression neutral, his posture and feelings a studious blank.

The anger was convincing because the anger was genuine; Paris had been talking about himself in the third person. Paris did seem to split his life into two halves, before infection and after, and sometimes he talked about his "then" self as if that was indeed a different person. He was. In Paris's own words, "that Paris" was selfish and pleasure-obsessed, vain and extremely manipulative, something he couldn't quite imagine this quick-witted, sweet, frustrating man being (okay, the manipulative part tracked, yet he tried to use that only for good). But Roan sometimes wondered if Paris still mourned everything he had lost. How could he not? He wanted to sympathize, and he tried very hard, but Roan knew he could only do it in a sort of abstract way, as he'd never lost himself. He was born with this disease; he didn't know life without it. But Paris did; Paris had had a good life, an enjoyable one. He had been popular and loved and a golden boy, one destined for great things even though he was probably going to fuck and manipulate his way there; his life was set. Then he was infected, and his life imploded. Roan was born in rubble and grew up in the craters; he didn't know what it meant to have a home, a life beyond this. It must have been devastating to have something to lose and then lose it all in one fell swoop.

He wanted to touch him, just put a hand on his back and let him know that he understood his pain even if he couldn't quite share it, but he didn't dare; he couldn't here. So he allowed himself to cross his arms over his chest and slumped slightly to the opposite side, adopting a posture of

impatience and boredom. If he couldn't communicate anything to Paris, he could at least send out a message to the room.

Tim managed to get control of the group, and started to explain that Humanity First was trying to channel this "discontent" (ha!) into action on the political stage; they felt that the infected were not getting equal rights but "special" rights, ones that allowed them to terrorize and kill normal people with little fear of punishment. Paris leaned over and whispered so quietly Roan could barely hear him over the muttering of the crowd, "Those fucking cats want to get married and not get fired 'cause they're trans-species abominations... or am I thinking of gays? Which ones are the butt fuckers again?"

Roan covered his mouth with his hand, pretending to scratch his jaw, and bit the inside of his cheek until the urge to laugh passed as Paris offered him a stick of gum, a lame cover for him being so close to him, but Tim was holding the room and no one noticed. Roan took the proffered gum, and murmured under his breath, "I can't take you anywhere."

Looking at him directly so no one else could see him, Paris mouthed, "You love it and you know it," and raised his eyebrows in a mock-suggestive manner before slumping back in his chair and assuming a blank, almost surly look on his face. Paris was such a natural actor it was frightening—but which part was the act? He chewed the gum and wondered.

Tim started handing out pamphlets that looked hand-stapled and seemed to be the Humanity First manifesto, although cleaned up a bit, not so rabidly zealous. The ready-for-prime-time version. But Tim was saying that they were always looking for volunteers to be more "proactive in their communities" and had a sign-up sheet up front for those interested. He exchanged a glance with Paris to make sure they were on the same wavelength—they were—and waited until almost everyone else in the room was standing before they got up as well.

Roan waited until almost everyone else who was going to sign up did; this included Paris, who even managed a brief chat with the neo-Nazi.

How did he do it? Seriously, how? Roan had an almost unquenchable urge to sucker punch anyone who had a racist tattoo; he just wanted to smash their heads into walls until they left dents. There were so many good reasons for hating people on an individual basis that mass, generic hatred seemed idiotic. Hate a person for who they were, God

knows he did, but for what they were? Moronic and lazy.

As Roan printed his fake name and address (he gave the address of his old apartment building, but his current cell phone number), he scanned and memorized the names and phone numbers of the other people on the list (he skipped “Kevin Stiles”; he’d given Randi’s address as his own), making a note to get the only female name on the list. Her name was Karen Hammond.

It was unlikely anyone in this room had committed violence against infecteds or would, but the most likely person to do something was Karen. Yes, she was a woman in her late thirties to early forties—it was hard to guess her age, considering how weathered her face was—and demographically not the most likely to commit violence. But what the demographics never included was how rage and the need for revenge—not a desire, a *need*, a physical ache that begged to be sated—could push the most timid person over the edge. Karen radiated rage like a low-level electrical current; she hated because she didn’t dare feel anything else. It was almost a smell, something like flop sweat, sour adrenaline, and slagged metal. Killing some dirty cat would probably dull her pain, but not for long; there might not be enough people for her to kill to make her feel even remotely better. He felt for her, he really did, but he also knew that she was a potential suspect.

He waited until they had left and turned the corner away from the church before pulling out his small notebook and scribbling down the names he could remember. Unless you had perfectly eidetic recall, your memories were bound to screw things up the more time passed.

He and Paris didn’t speak until they got back to the car. Thunder rolled in the distance, and Roan could smell the rain coming in, but they reached the car just as it started coming down, fat drops as warm as blood. Once they were inside, the rain started sheeting down, pounding on the roof of the car like an angry mob.

“That was really weird,” Paris finally said, staring out at the rain streaming down the windshield. The water seemed to obscure everything now; they could have been at the bottom of a lake. “Do you think we’re going to get in?”

Roan nodded. “I’m sure there’s a vetting process, but as long as we keep to the script we should be able to get inside without a problem.” After a moment, he said, “You changed your backstory.”

Paris shrugged a single shoulder, continuing to do everything but look at him. It was forced nonchalance, and Roan wasn't buying it. "It seemed better, more honest somehow."

He did what he'd wanted to do back at the church. He touched Paris's face, trailing his fingers lightly over his cheek. "I'm sorry."

Paris looked at him finally and seemed startled. "About what?"

"What happened to you."

For a long moment he just stared at Roan, something like panic flashing through his eyes as the percussion of the rain filled the car with noise. Paris finally decided to say something, but he cut himself off, grimacing painfully, and then leaned over, burying his face in the side of his neck. Roan put his arm around him as Paris broke down into huge, wracking sobs, the kind that you couldn't hold back and felt like they were punching their way out of you. He didn't know what to do or say, so he just held him, resting his head against his, and let him cry, stroking his back and occasionally saying soothing things that meant absolutely nothing. His heart broke for him. Maybe Paris was as far from a saint as you could possibly get, but he didn't deserve what had happened to him; no one deserved that. No one deserved to have their life destroyed or their body ravaged by a virus that killed you a little bit every passing month and very nearly robbed you of your sanity.

Tears soaked his shirt, he could feel them sliding down his neck, and through the window of water he saw a brief, bright flash in the sky that was soon followed up by a grumble of thunder that seemed so close it felt like it shook the car. Paris was clinging to him desperately, shuddering as he tried to fight back the tears, but they came out of him anyway. He had no idea Paris had so much pain in him. He was always the guy with the joke, the smart remark, turning everything into a comedy routine, but what kind of detective was he that he couldn't see that was a deliberate choice on Paris's part so he didn't have to deal with any of this shit? Roan was so concerned with the "big" stuff he kept missing the little stuff. He should just turn in his license now.

The storm raged inside and out for about ten minutes, during which the lightning and thunder seemed to grow closer and then went away, surging past like an inconstant tide. Paris finally managed to get a hold of himself, probably just running out of tears, and he sniffed and shifted uncomfortably, embarrassed by this violently emotional display. He leaned

back against the seat and looked out the passenger window at the water sluicing down the glass, wiping tears and snot from his face with his forearm. Roan wanted to tell him he shouldn't be embarrassed, that he shouldn't feel bad for finally letting it out, but he wasn't sure how to say any of this. So he just started the car and drove away.

They rode home in silence, the rain gradually letting up, going from a torrent to a milder cascade, but visibility remained piss-poor and the gutters on the side of the streets filled up fast. The water was spilling onto the road, and he supposed it was a good thing they were getting off the street, as everybody around here seemed to forget how to drive in the rain and needlessly freaked out about it. Either they had outpaced the thunder and lightning or it had gone in the opposite direction.

Since Roan was already drenched from Paris's tears, he didn't care about getting soaked, which turned out to be a good thing because he was a drowned rat by the time he got in the house. Not that he was complaining, they needed the rain after the long, abnormally hot summer, but he hated feeling clammy.

Paris had his back to him; he was just standing at the base of the stairs, water dripping from his hair and pattering on the floor, and he seemed to have the frozen, distracted air of someone who suddenly isn't certain why they'd come into a room.

He waited a very long moment, slipping off his coat and hanging it on a hook parallel to the door, adding his dripping cap afterward. "Par?" He wondered how upset he still was. The grief process, especially when you were basically mourning your own broken life, could be a weird one.

Paris slowly turned to face him, his eyes red rimmed from tears and his hair plastered to his face in spidery wisps, and Roan saw this look come into his eyes. It was need, almost fury, and he wasn't sure if he was going to kiss him or hit him as he approached.

Luckily Paris went for the kiss, but it was hungry and violent, so raw it caught Roan off guard. Paris snaked his hand under his wet shirt, pulling it up and peeling it off of him as he briefly broke away. He tossed the shirt aside and then took off his own, throwing it aside just as heedlessly. "Let's go upstairs," he said before kissing him again, pressing him back hard against the door.

Did he have a choice? Of course he did, but as Roan felt the hard, smooth muscles of Paris's back move beneath his warm, damp skin, he

didn't think he had the willpower or desire to remind Paris they were still technically on the clock. Besides, Paris probably just wanted to forget, to escape, and Roan didn't think that was such a bad idea.

He just wished he knew what it was specifically that Paris was trying to forget.

THEY had dinner around ten o'clock that night, both too tired and too ravenous to call for delivery, so they just nuked some leftover Chinese food they had in the back of the fridge. It wasn't moldy or furry, so Roan figured it was good enough.

They were still both damp, but at least it was from the shower, so they were warmer. It continued to sheet down outside; in the far corner of the kitchen, you could hear the gutter gurgling as it attempted to deal with the deluge. He wondered if he should clean the gutters, and then wondered if he had ever cleaned the gutters. He was new to this whole house owning thing—that was his excuse and he was sticking with it.

Par was sitting on the end of the couch watching *The Wire* on TV, dressed in black silk boxers with little red lipstick prints all over them (he loved that kind of tacky shit), feet propped up on the edge of the coffee table, eating mint chocolate chip ice cream directly from the carton. There was a spoon in the carton for Roan too, as Paris had figured there was so little left that there was no point in getting bowls, and he supposed he had a point. (And how lucky was he that he'd found someone else who liked mint chocolate chip ice cream? So many people hated it, and he had no idea why; that shit just rocked.)

Roan sat next to him, handing Paris his cup of tea. Beer and ice cream didn't exactly go together, but Roan had felt like one anyway. For a technically short day, it had felt like a long one. He propped his feet up on the coffee table too, and noticed goose bumps on Par's legs. See, that was why he was wearing the flannel pajama pants with the little cats all over them (Par's idea of a joke): you couldn't be damp and eat ice cream and not get cold.

After a few minutes of silence, Paris finally said, "I'm sorry about... y'know, what happened in the car. I don't know where that came from."

"You have nothing to apologize for," he replied. He wanted to tell

him he knew where that came from, but didn't mention it. Par knew too, he just didn't want to admit it.

That just settled in the room for a moment, long enough for Roan to grab his spoon and help himself to some ice cream (yeah, it tasted really weird with beer), before Par added hesitantly, "I guess I don't like to talk about it. It just seems like... it's like it all happened to someone else, you know? It doesn't even seem like my life anymore, just something that happened to somebody I'm not sure I know."

"You can always talk to me about it, you know. I mean, I know my experience isn't exactly similar, but I can listen."

Paris glanced at him with a weak little smile. "I know. I guess it's like you and the whole cat traits thing; it's just not easy to talk about." He had to bring that up, didn't he? Oh well, fair enough. He put his hand on Roan's chest and rubbed his thumb underneath his collarbone. "As this is, I'm sure."

Paris wasn't caressing his chest—he was tracing the scar across his torso, the one that ran from his shoulder to the hollow of his throat, the one he never talked about. Oh, there was the one on his face too, but it was small and of all of his scars it had faded most with age. This one hadn't; this one would dog him forever. "Someday," he said lamely. It was all he could offer right now.

Par nodded and seemed to accept that for now, letting his hand fall away. Enough time had passed to signal the change to a more comfortable topic. "That meeting wasn't anything like I expected. It was like group therapy."

"That's the processed, user-friendly face of Humanity First. The real group, the more rabid side, won't be visible until you go deeper. Kind of like their Web site."

"Or Divine Transformation."

"Exactly. It's a cult buffer system."

The telephone rang sharply, not so much startling Roan as annoying him. Everybody knew not to bother him during *The Wire*—who the fuck was calling now? He let it go to the machine.

The voice that responded to the message was heavily muffled, not professionally distorted but still very hard to understand. "Ask Elijah

about Melissa Prescott. He knows more than he's said."

A cold shock stabbed through him, and he exchanged a surprised look with Paris before scrambling to the other end of the couch and groping for the phone. He grabbed the receiver and asked, "Hello? Wait—" But all he got was the drone of a dial tone; they'd already hung up.

Caller ID said the number was blocked, so he hit star sixty-nine to dial the number. But it rang and rang, at least twenty times, before he finally decided to hang up. Son of a bitch.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Paris asked. "Was that a prank?"

It was possible, but they'd have to know that Eli (Elijah) had hired him, and was concerned about the killed infecteds—and that latter information was not common knowledge.

Who the hell could know that much?

5

A Prayer for Broken Stones

ROAN didn't sleep well at all that night. He must have awoken three or four times and stared at the ceiling in the dark, listening to the rain hit the windows like thrown pebbles, the wind occasionally surging and slapping tree branches against the walls like waves against a ship. It wasn't the noise keeping him awake, though.

It made perfect sense, didn't it? Why Eli had not gone public with the news. If he was tied to one of the victims in a close way, he could fall into suspect territory. But then he would have to have been very close to Melissa Prescott to be so scared that his natural inclination toward shallow displays and PR blitzes would be curtailed. After the phone call, he told Paris he'd talk to Eli about it tomorrow, but Par seemed to think he was included in this. He wasn't, not yet, but he wasn't going to argue with him about it. There was nothing to argue about. He trusted Paris with his life, his business, all of it, but he wasn't really a detective. He was, to use his own term, his "guy Friday." Roan had to go this one alone.

While Paris was brushing his teeth, Roan did a quick bit of checking. Melissa Prescott wasn't what he would call gorgeous (okay, yeah, gay guy, but he knew attractive when he saw it, no matter the gender), but she did look young—extremely young. She was twenty years old, but with her perfectly round face, full apple-hued cheeks, pale blue doe eyes, and shoulder-length cascade of crimped honey blonde hair, she could have passed for fifteen or sixteen.

Eli had a thing about barely legal girls, didn't he?

Melissa was his type all the way, with the added benefit that she was actually legal. Could she have been one of Eli's many girlfriends? Part of his little "harem"? Now that the possibility had lodged in his brain, it seemed to fester, unwilling and unable to come out. Who was the other one of the four who went to the church? If it was Patrick, okay. But if it was Ashley or Christa....

Those girls? He looked at their pictures too. They both looked younger than their ages; they both could've passed for sixteen. They both could have been Eli's type.

He always fell back to sleep, although he was never quite sure how. Finally the alarm went off, set to radio instead of that annoying buzzer, and he woke to the very loud swells of some bombastic classical music, lots of strings and deep wind instruments building to a crescendo (which included a gong; you always needed a gong), and he slapped the alarm in irritation, rolling away from the warmth of Paris's side. Paris made a half-conscious noise and snuggled deeper into his pillow, not bothering to open his eyes. That was the thing, the habit; Roan got up when the first alarm went off, and Paris usually didn't bother getting up until the snooze alarm went off. So Roan sat on the edge of the bed and simply switched the snooze alarm off. Yeah, Paris would probably be pissed off when he woke up and realized it, but he could always claim it was an accident; there was some benefit of the doubt there.

He took a quick shower, got dressed, and went downstairs to start the coffee. The smell would probably wake Paris up eventually, and he'd figured out he'd been ditched. He left a note on the fridge: *Following something up. We're closed today—enjoy your day off.* He filled a travel mug with coffee and got out of there.

It was still raining, but some of the more dramatic weather had let up. It was pissing down steadily now, the wind almost nonexistent, the sky a gunmetal gray that made him feel like he was looking up at the hull of a battleship. He noticed the actual time, and stopped at a coffee shop about a half-mile from the church, where they knew him fairly well.

It was a small place, one of those that sprung up to try and compete with Starbucks, and did it by promoting its "bohemian" atmosphere and dedication to local artists. As he sat at a small table by the window, eating some kind of pastry that didn't have enough blackberries in it, he saw the fliers for a "poetry slam" night (people still did that?) and an open mic night. Every time he saw one of those, he always wondered what would happen if he signed up for one, got up on stage, and started ranting like this one vagrant he knew when he was a beat cop. Everyone at the station knew him—they called him "Saint Dude" (when asked for his name, he claimed it was Dude)—and he had these wonderfully elaborate, incoherent rants about topics as varied as the conspiracy surrounding aluminum foil, the secret cabal of cattle kings who really ran the world, the saltpetter in

pretzels, how the CIA was fitting house cats with 3-D imaging systems for spying on people, and the way the local television station was beaming microwaves directly at him to disrupt his brain. He was a schizophrenic who hadn't had meds in years, but the sad thing was there wasn't much they could do for him. They never got a positive ID for him, never found any family, and the local loony bin was so overcrowded they were actually booking rooms in advance. Unless he was an obvious danger to himself or others, they had to leave him out on the street, and they did, because Saint Dude was never violent. He eventually was hit by a car and died, but his rants lingered on in the minds of those who were treated to them. If only he could have taken his meds, he might have been a hit blogger by now, or a commentator on Fox News. He was a genius before his time.

Figuring he'd wasted enough time, he went back out into the rain and drove to the church, parking directly out front and putting on his fedora before getting out. In his trench coat and hat, he felt like a hard-boiled detective in some stylish '40s film, and it was as silly and sad as all hell, but it usually made him feel better. Not today, though; today he just felt a bit foolish. But at least the hat kept the rain out of his eyes.

It was still too early for anyone to be manning the CCTV cameras, so he was forced to knock on the door. He almost pushed the doorbell, but then he remembered that the last time he'd heard it, it played "Year of the Cat." If he heard that, he might be forced to beat the shit out of Eli, and if he was going to go to jail on assault charges, he wanted it to be for something more meaningful than that.

Rainbow answered the door, trying to be cheerful but unable to hide a slight wariness. "Oh Roan, what a surprise."

Was she ever going to say, "What the fuck are you doing here?" She was just too nice, wasn't she? "Don't worry, I'm not here to cause trouble. I have to see Eli about the job. Can you tell him that?"

Her eyes squinched in curiosity, but she glanced off to one side as if looking for directions from the stage manager, and said distractedly, "Um, okay, just a moment." She left him out on the porch, rain dripping off the brim of his gray blocked felt hat (luckily it was waterproof), but he didn't wait too long before she opened the door again and looked at him with wide-eyed surprise. "Come in. He says he'll see you." That really seemed to be a shocker, but he expected that reaction from her.

She led him down a hallway he'd never been down before, narrow and lined with small framed cat prints hardly bigger than photos, and

behind a heavy oak door was an old-fashioned-looking study full of polished cherrywood and dark red and gold upholstery, where books by the foot lined the side walls and a picture depicting a fox hunting party in the woods set the general tone of a stuffy, old world, British-style library. A plush oxblood-colored carpet ran from wall to wall, and there was a heavy oak desk that made up the centerpiece of the room, where Eli sat talking on the phone, motioning Roan in, and throwing Rainbow a reassuring look, the tacit approval to leave them alone. Roan sat in one of the burgundy velvet upholstered wing chairs, and looked to see if any of the books had ever been moved or read. Nope, didn't look like it. He hated designers who used books for aesthetic purposes only, and he hated even more pretentious boneheads who went along with it. There was a huge picture window behind Eli, but gauzy curtains the color of marigolds had been pulled against the gloom, so the only thing visible was the meager light bleeding through. The room spoke of old money and power, and he couldn't have felt more out of place.

Roan took off his hat and waited for Eli to finish his call, which he finally did. "You couldn't possibly have found out something so soon," Eli said, as soon as he put the receiver down.

"What was your relationship with Melissa Prescott?"

Eli was a bit like Paris in that he was a natural actor. Shock flashed through his eyes, but his expression remained stony, and he cocked his head to the side curiously. "I beg your pardon?"

"Let's not do this shit, okay? If you want me to work for you, I need full disclosure or I'll walk. The police have asked me to find a connection between the four victims, and I'm starting to wonder if the connecting factor's you. Talk to me or talk to Sergeant Murphy in homicide." He was overstating his case slightly—there was no way to make Patrick fit into the equation since Eli was straight (no matter what his haircut and man purse would have you believe)—but scaring the shit out of Eli was the best way to get him to spill his guts.

The Ferragamo turned sour with fear as it oozed through his pores. He could hide the visible response, but not the physical one that coursed through his body. "You are fucking unbelievable. Do you really think I would hurt anyone? Not to mention why the fuck would I hire you if I'd killed all of them? Why would I be that stupid?"

He shrugged. "Guilty conscience?"

Eli glared at him, eyes like lasers, and shook his head. “Un-fucking-believable. Melissa came here a few times, I talked to her once or twice, she seemed like a good kid. I was horrified to discover she’s been murdered.”

“So that was it? Melissa was a random church visitor that you just happened to remember?”

His eyes, as clear and brown as Scotch today (he loved his contacts), narrowed in disgust. “I do make a note of remembering my people.”

Especially the young women whom he had a sexual interest in? Roan could buy that. But at this moment in time, he didn’t quite. “Who was the other church visitor of the victims?”

Eli opened his mouth, shut it, and then tried again, eyes briefly darting down to some papers on his desk. “I-It was Patrick Farley. He came here once or twice, but he never stayed long.”

Which screwed up his theory, but it wasn’t a fatal flaw. “So why did you have to consult a cheat sheet for Patrick but not for Melissa?”

Eli’s right eyelid twitched, and he watched the muscles in his jaw work as he ground his teeth, biting down hard on some ugly comment. “What is it you want from me, McKichan?”

“The truth. You were fucking around with Melissa, weren’t you?”

“No.”

“She was one of your girlfriends.”

“I said no.”

“And I don’t believe you. You’re shit scared; I can smell it.”

That startled a derisive laugh out of him. “You can smell it? Holy fuck, stop the presses! We gotta conviction on scent. Jesus Christ, the cops buy that shit, do they, Scooby?”

Roan stood up and put his hat back on, making a point of flicking the raindrops on the carpet. “I’ll refund you your money less one day’s work. Expect a visit from Sergeant Murphy this afternoon.” He turned and walked for the door.

As he expected, he’d taken two steps before Eli exclaimed, “Wait! I hired you! You can’t quit.”

He glanced coolly at him from over his shoulder. “I just did. See you

in the funny papers.”

Roan had his hand on the brass doorknob when Eli snapped bitterly, “What the fuck d’ya want me to say? I did a consultation with her, all right? We didn’t date; it wasn’t a big deal.”

He turned to face him, but didn’t take his hand off the doorknob, which he made sure Eli saw. “You slept with her?”

Eli was on his feet, his face twisted in an ugly scowl. He didn’t look so Eurotrash handsome anymore. “How the fuck is that relevant?”

“It is if I say it is. Yes or no?”

He glowered at him, clearly loathing every single fiber of his being, and it was all Roan could do not to laugh. Ooh, Eli’s hatred just made him tingle all over. Was that wrong? “Yes,” he grated through gritted teeth, not so much sitting as collapsing back in his plush leather desk chair. He added snappishly, “Do you want photos? Diagrams? Videotape?”

“Do you have them?”

Eli’s hateful look continued, his eyes nearly glowing like embers. Man, some people just had no sense of humor.

Roan turned to face him, digging his hands in the pocket of his coat. “How serious was your relationship with her?”

“It wasn’t. Didn’t you hear me? It wasn’t a big deal.”

He almost said “trick,” but that was a gay term that didn’t translate to the straight world; in the straight world, a trick was something either a magician or a prostitute did. “A one-night stand?”

Eli fidgeted in his chair, squirming with discomfort. “Yeah. Happy now?”

“How close to the time of her death?”

“What?”

“A couple days before, a week, a month? You didn’t want this getting out, Eli, so I’m figuring the timing was bad.”

Eli rubbed his face, and Roan weighed the possibility he was hiding his expression as he concocted a lie. Moderate to extreme. “About a month ago.”

“So, since she was killed roughly two weeks ago, that meant you slept with her two weeks before her demise?” Eli nodded, face still hidden

in his hands. Any personal relationship with the victim would get him added to the potential suspect list, but honestly, it wouldn't be a big deal, not in a case like this. The shootings seemed so random—save for the infected connection and the general ages of the victims—that all looks at boyfriends and girlfriends would be perfunctory and shallow, unless there was known violence in the relationship. Maybe it was an ego thing; maybe he lived in fear of having the cops come in and rummage through his life, especially after his near miss with the court on the assault charge.

Maybe, but Roan still had the feeling he wasn't getting the whole truth here. And then there was the informer, the person who had squealed on him. Roan had listened to the recording with Paris several times last night, and while neither of them could recognize the voice, they decided that the caller was either a woman or a man with a higher-pitched voice. It had to have been someone from here, the church, someone who knew that Eli had hired him and was concerned about the killings. Most likely someone from within Eli's inner circle... but why blow the whistle on a one-night stand? Eli probably had dozens of them a month. Either it was more than Eli was saying, the informer had some issues with Eli that were just now boiling to the surface, or a combination of both. It had occurred to him that the informer could be someone who had soured on Eli, turned against him, and Roan wondered how far that disappointment and anger extended. To murder? Was that why Eli was supposedly next? There could have been a couple of different things going on here, and that was a problem. "Did you infect her?"

That made Eli look up at him sharply, horror naked on his face. "No! Fuck no, she came here infected, I didn't... I didn't! She was a cougar strain, okay?"

That was easy enough to check, so it was unlikely he was lying about that. But judging from the smell, the size of his pupils, the tiny beads of sweat gathering at his hairline, the rapid beat of his pulse in his throat, Eli was still lying about something. His relationship with Melissa was more than he was saying, wasn't it? But even under duress he wasn't willing to give it up. Why? Was there something damning about it, something that would make him more suspect than he already was? "Do you have a current serious girlfriend?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You're still being evasive. I'm just trying to figure out why."

He exhaled sharply, holding his hands open on his desk and

attempting an innocent look that didn't quite fit his face. "I swear to you I am not. I had a fling with Missy, yeah, but it was just the once, and it was no big deal. I don't even think she liked me that much."

"Bad in the sack, huh? You should ask Paris for tips—he's a real dynamo."

His eyes narrowed once more, and a more comfortable look of barely veiled disgust and hostility settled in his features. There was the Eli he knew and loathed. "Is this what I hired you for? To be a complete prick to me?"

"Hell no, I'll do that for free." He opened the door but never looked away from Eli's face; he wanted him to know this wasn't over. "But as soon as I figure out why you hired me, you may wish you had found someone else." He left, closing the door behind him, and figured Eli was probably having the shits about that right now.

IT WAS as easy as hell to find out the name of Eli's current girlfriend. He simply went up to Rainbow and asked her if she knew where he could find Sandy, Eli's girlfriend. She looked at him with great puzzlement, and said that Eli's girlfriend was named Mia. He made a show of being embarrassed, and after blaming the early morning and a lack of sleep, asked what her last name was again. Not realizing this was complete entrapment, she volunteered that it was DeSoto, and when Roan asked if she was around, said she usually didn't show up until around six or so. Poor Rainbow—she was so trusting, so friendly. He felt like a complete fuck taking advantage of that, but it did make his job easier.

In the car, he added the name Mia DeSoto to his extremely tiny list (so far) of people who were potential suspects. He definitely needed to talk to her as soon as possible; she was the favorite to be the informant. Hell hath no fury like a woman cheated on.

Since he was in the neighborhood, he stopped by Melissa's apartment to talk to her neighbors, but most weren't home and the ones that were had nothing of value to say. No one was home at the time of the shooting, and no one knew much about her, as she was one of those who "kept to herself." He stopped by the Starbucks where Ashley Cryer had worked, and he got a chatty barista named Matt who was a tall, wispy kid in a canary yellow T-shirt as tight as a second skin, with sterling silver

rings all over his face (nose, eyebrow, earlobes), a shock of electric blue in his spiky golden blond hair, and three loops of barbed wire tattooed on his left wrist. He was happy to talk to him—and give him extra foam on his mochaccino—as he'd liked Ashley and was devastated by her death; he couldn't figure out who would ever hurt her. Matt was also flamboyantly, obviously gay, as well as extremely impressed that he was a “real-life” private detective. He agreed to meet Roan later, after work, at the Café D'Ante to talk about “Ash,” but before he left, Matt leaned over the counter and whispered. “I'll bring her key.” Her apartment key? Jackpot. Thank God for the flamboyantly gay best friend.

He got back home to find the GTO out of the driveway (Paris had finally put the engine back together and reinstalled it last week; he just felt it had some bodywork left to do) and a note stuck to the front door: *Went to the store, be back soon. P.S.: You're a putz.* Okay, yeah, he'd figured Roan had ditched him. He wondered what he'd have to do to make it up to him. A scalp massage would probably make him forget all about it. (In attempting to treat his own migraines, he'd learned quite a lot about scalp massages, and according to Paris he gave great ones. It was kind of a shame that the scalp massages didn't work for his own headaches, but at least it gave him an odd skill he could seduce men with.)

As soon as he'd checked the answering machine (there was nothing of note), he called Kevin, his trusty, closeted inside source in the police department. He could have called Dropkick, but he doubted she'd give him this kind of information. Kevin could. “Detective Robinson.”

“Hey Kev, can you talk freely?”

There was a pause as he checked. He could hear typing in the background, people talking; it was a noisy day at the vice unit. “Kind of,” he finally said. “How are you?”

“Oh, copasetic. I know it's not online, but I need you to check the autopsy report on Melissa Elaine Prescott. She's one of the murder cases being worked by Murphy and Dubois.”

“What?” he exclaimed a bit too forcefully, and then lowered his voice to a hiss. “An active case? Are you mental? How do you expect me to do that?”

“Says the computer whiz. Oh come on, Kev, I have the utmost faith in you. Besides, I don't need a detailed report, I just need to know if there were any signs she'd engaged in sexual activity shortly before her death.”

When he and Paris had Randi over for dinner a couple weeks back, he'd managed to cajole the nervous Kevin ("What if someone sees me at your house?") to come too. Kevin had the most attractive skin color you could imagine; it was a kind of burnished chocolate (his eyes also matched), but otherwise... he looked like a nebbish, the poor guy. He was almost barrel-shaped—not fat, just stocky, broad at the chest and shoulder but a little soft in the middle—and his round face seemed to be set in a permanently hangdog expression, like he was the saddest guy on planet earth. (Which may have been the truth; hard to say, he was just so reserved.) He remained fairly quiet through dinner, which wasn't a big surprise, especially since Randi and Paris were both so gregarious that they held the floor the entire night.

But Kev hadn't reacted to Paris like he expected. He glanced at him like, "*Oh wow, look how attractive that guy is,*" but that was it; he didn't fall in rapt, instant lust like nearly every person who met Paris. He acknowledged he was too damn good-looking and just seemed to move on. Maybe he didn't like white guys, Roan didn't know. In fact, he knew next to nothing about Kevin; save for privately outing himself to him, Kevin never talked about personal stuff. He talked computer shit, cop-shop gossip, maybe small talk like the weather and sports, but almost nothing else. He was so far in the closet that not even his personality peeked out very much. Again, this made Roan feel very bad for him. What must it be like to be that tightly wound?

But it seemed to bring home the fact that, while he knew Kevin, he didn't actually *know* Kevin at all. He had no idea what his ultimate motivation was. He couldn't quite believe that Kev helped him so much because he was gay and he was keeping his secret, but what other motive could he possibly have?

Kevin sighed heavily, and Roan knew he wanted to say no, but he wouldn't. He never did. "If I'm caught and fired, you have to make me a partner," he hissed, then put him on hold.

While he waited, Paris came home, coming in the door juggling two paper bags (Paris always insisted on paper whenever possible, because he hated those "fucking plastic bags"—this was another strangely passionate hatred of his, like SUVs) and a twelve-pack of diet cherry Pepsi. Upon seeing Roan on the couch with the receiver glued to his ear, Paris fixed him with a stern gaze, almost mocking but not quite. "How deep is the shit I'm in?" Roan wondered aloud.

Paris thumped the bags down on the counter, let the twelve-pack drop to the floor. He held his hand up level with his chin.

"Crap. I don't suppose dinner and a movie is going to cover this, huh?"

He shook his head and started unpacking the groceries. "Nope, not even buying me something frilly."

"Damn it, that was plan B."

His look wasn't quite forgiving, but he seemed to be thinking about it. "So what did you dig up without me?"

"Eli was fucking Melissa Prescott."

He made a dismissive noise, shaking his head in disbelief. "And I call myself a man whore. Eli should give lessons."

"No. Apparently he's crap in the sack."

Paris fixed him with a curious, slightly sardonic gaze. "And you know that how?"

"He said so."

"He just admitted it? Were you holding him at gunpoint or something?"

"No, just slamming his testicles in a desk drawer."

Paris chuckled faintly, and Roan knew it was okay. If he could make Par laugh, he couldn't be *that* mad at him. "And you didn't think to capture this on film? We could've had it on YouTube by now."

"I know, I'm a complete idiot."

"You said it, not me."

Par finished putting the groceries away and then walked over to the stereo, sipping from a can of Red Bull. Watching him move in his slightly baggy blue jeans that just barely hovered below waist level and his royal blue T-shirt that wasn't tight but still showed off his arms and the long line of his back to great effect, Roan wondered how Kevin could not have fallen in lust with Paris. Was he insane? Had he *seen* his ass?

Paris crouched down and flipped through some of their CDs; they had a whole bunch of them, and it was easy to tell whose were whose. Roan had the punk and the crunchy guitar stuff, while Paris had a lot of electronic, current "alternative" stuff, and the occasional questionable pop

rock CD. Sometimes they found a common ground—Roan could tolerate Franz Ferdinand and Interpol; Paris could tolerate Pansy Division and Nine Black Alps—but many times they clashed. “Keane or Orbital?” Par asked.

“Door number three.”

“Pick one or I choose.”

“Oh fuck. Can’t you choose—”

“No,” he interrupted, punching the button on the CD player and opening the tray. “You’re running out of time.”

“This is a reflection of how mad you are at me, isn’t it?”

Paris didn’t answer, he just put in a shiny silver disc and hit the close button, putting the CD case back in the rack before Roan could see what it was. “I guess you’ll find out,” he finally replied, turning the sound down until it was barely audible, giving him some peace for his call. It was the opening strains of “Under The Iron Sea” that drifted down from the speakers set high up on the walls, and Roan figured that meant he had forgiven him. If Par was still really pissed off, it’d be Orbital thumping down at him.

Kev came back on the phone with a huff of breath, as if he’d just sat down. “You do shit for my blood pressure,” he accused.

“But you didn’t get caught, did you? What did it say?”

“Nada. No sign of any... uh, you know.”

“Nothing out of the ordinary at all? Nothing of note?”

“No, just death via gunshot wound to the head.” There was a pause, and Roan suddenly wondered if he had gotten a copy of the report and was looking at it at his desk. He was in vice: that was fucking risky, to look at a homicide file there. Wait a second: where the hell did he get it from anyway? “She had some damage to her back teeth that was consistent with bulimia; you know how all that stomach acid damages the enamel. Although morning sickness probably didn’t help.”

Roan sat forward, only doubting what he’d heard because Kevin was talking so softly. “What?”

“She was about three weeks’ pregnant at the time of her death.”

There it was—what Eli was trying to hide. A perfect motive for murder.

6

The Latest Plague

ONCE he'd ended his phone call with Kevin, Roan told Paris what he'd learned about Melissa, and he was shocked. "Does this mean he could've done this?"

Roan rubbed his temples, closing his eyes as he thought. "No. What it does is explain why he hasn't gone to the press about this. All he needs is someone to mention he knocked up one of the victims—a fact he conveniently never mentioned—and he's under the police microscope. But come on, Par, you know Eli; he doesn't do his own dirty work. He strikes me as the type of guy who'd faint if he got a paper cut."

Paris sat near him on the sofa, turned to face him, one leg bent under him casually like he was on Oprah's couch. "Yeah, but he has motive and people who will do anything for him. He's a good suspect."

"Yes, but he'd never have hired me if he was guilty. No matter what he thinks of me as a stinking faggot, he knows I'm good at my job. I doubt he'd give me the satisfaction of nailing him to the wall."

"So why did he hire you?"

Roan leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. It was a good question, but at least he thought he had an answer for it. "To clear his name before they can drag him through the mud; find a genuine suspect. Of course he doesn't tell me this because he's afraid I'd balk at helping him."

Paris touched his hair, stroking it back from his temple, an almost unconscious affectionate gesture. Paris was a very touchy-feely sort of guy, which Roan had had to get used to, since he'd never really been. Now he almost liked it. "Ten thousand dollars wouldn't be enough?"

"To save his ass from the fire? No."

"As long as you're not bitter."

He gave him a sharp look, which just made Paris grin. Looking at him closely, though, Roan noticed a strain around his eyes, a tightness in his jaw. Was he still mad at him, or was it something else? “Got something on your mind?”

“Other than you being an asshole?” he replied, but with some humor. His grin faded as he sighed, considering whether to tell Roan or not, and ultimately decided to go ahead. “Actually, I got a weird phone call today.”

“Weird how?”

He propped his elbow up on the back of the sofa, resting his head on his hand, tilting his face at an angle best described as rakish. “Remember when I talked to that reporter about the Hatch case?”

“Yeah. Did he call back?”

“No. He just put my name in the article, and the article is apparently available online. My sister found it somehow, and she was able to use the online phone directory to find our number. She left me a message.”

“Oh?” Roan kept his tone casual, but he knew this was important. Paris had had no actual contact with his family since he’d been infected; he occasionally sent a postcard to let them know he was alive and okay, but never left a return address or told them where he was or what he was doing. They didn’t know of his infected status either, and Roan honestly had no idea why Paris kept his distance from them, since he’d told him he got on well with his family. “Which sister?”

“Annie—Antigone. She wanted me to call her back.”

He stroked the left side of Paris’s jaw with his thumb, feeling rough but almost invisible stubble. Paris leaned into his touch. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess I don’t have a choice, do I? She knows where I am. And she’s pushy enough that if I don’t call back she’ll just show up on our doorstep one day.”

“So call her and let her know you’re all right. That’s probably all she wants to know.”

He scoffed. “You don’t know Annie. She’s a lawyer, and she’s pushy as hell. She’ll want to know why I’m here, why I’m working for you, and where I’ve been all these years. I’m not sure I want to tell her, and sadly, she knows when I’m lying. She’s immune to my charm.”

He wondered what the subtext was here. “Do they know you’re bisexual?”

Par licked his lips nervously and avoided his gaze. “I never exactly told them. If they asked around at college, they may have figured it out....”

“If it makes it easier, just forget me. Tell her we’re friends and leave it at that. I won’t be offended.” Yeah okay, so maybe this made him a hypocrite, since he wasn’t crazy about people who decided to spend their entire lives in the closet, but he’d actually hoped Paris would reconnect with his family before the tiger strain burned him out. Paris wouldn’t admit it, but Roan suspected that he missed his family, and if they had to lie about their relationship so he could be with them again, so be it. He was willing to take that hit for Par.

Paris’s eyes snapped back to his instantly. “What? No. I love you and I’m not ashamed of that. Besides, my family is a bunch of intellectual lefties; we had a cat named Che Guevara when I was a kid. I’m also pretty sure my Uncle Ben was gay, and no one cared.”

“You haven’t mentioned him.”

“Oh, he was a painter. He used to come to holiday gatherings with his “friend” Travis, who was a literary agent with a great love for Brooks Brothers suits and Berlioz. They seemed like an odd pair since Ben was so freewheeling and Travis seemed so mainstream, and I couldn’t quite guess how they’d come to be such good friends or why. But in retrospect I can see it was just a case of opposites attracting.”

“Like us?”

Paris smiled at him. “Are we that opposite? I kinda think we’re a good fit.”

“And neither of us owns a Brooks Brothers suit.”

“A point in our favor.”

They were starting to digress from the point, though, and he could feel the low hum of attraction between them as Paris placed a hand flat against his chest. If they didn’t watch it, they’d be tearing each other’s clothes off within ten minutes, and while that was always a great deal of fun, he had to go meet Matt at Café D’Ante soon. And besides, he wanted to go out and see if he could go by Patrick Farley’s place beforehand, maybe run by Christa Hernandez’s place and see if he could talk to her

great-aunt. Maybe last night they had been able to call an early end to the work shift, but there was no way he could justify it to himself two days in a row. Although part of him loved the idea of itemizing a bill for Eli and including notations for *Fucking*. “What are you afraid of?” he asked Paris, aware that this would probably short-circuit this slow-building, comfortable lust between them.

It did, quite rapidly. Paris let his hand drop away from his chest and broke eye contact, glancing at the stereo as if appealing to it for help. “You know what I’m afraid of, Ro.”

“Telling them you’re infected.” Par sighed heavily, which was an answer. “If they’re a bunch of intellectual lefties as you say they are, they’re not going to care.”

“I’ve disappointed them enough. I don’t want to disappoint them further. I mean, I know they’ll act cool about it, they’ll say they’ll support me, but I know it’ll break their hearts.” He grimaced and rubbed his face, and Roan suspected he was trying to hide the tears building up in his eyes. “I’ve done that enough. I’d rather just die suddenly and have them find out once I’m gone that I was infected. That way I wouldn’t have to pretend I didn’t notice how horrible I made them feel. That’s cowardly of me, isn’t it?”

“A bit.”

That made Paris look at him in surprise. Maybe he wasn’t expecting honesty. “Would fudging the truth have really killed you?”

“I have a reputation to uphold.”

Paris shook his head and rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’d be really pissed at you if I didn’t know you were right. No, wait, I’m pissed at you anyway.”

“I think I’ll take that as my cue to leave.” He slowly unfolded himself from the couch and stretched, some exhaustion from so much broken sleep making itself known in his tired limbs. If those forays late at night had proven anything to him, it was that he could make that disappear as soon as he started moving around. He gave Paris a gentle kiss on the forehead before walking away.

Paris watched him with narrowed eyes, but if he had been really angry at him, that vein on his neck would have stood out. He was more annoyed with him, which was bad enough. “Anything I can help with, or

am I supposed to do some light filing and just sit here and look pretty?"

"I'd hope you'd call your sister. Really, I'm not doing anything thrilling, just seeing if people are home and willing to talk to me. I still have to make the connection between Eli and Cryer and Hernandez, which may be impossible."

Paris's brow furrowed in confusion. "Huh? I thought you said the church wasn't the connection between the four victims."

"Right, the church isn't. But I have this feeling Eli is. He may be the cult leader, but he is separate from the church. I bet the police didn't even bother to break them apart."

"Is this a gut feeling?"

"Kind of. But Eli goes out and has coffee; he goes out and eats." Ashley worked at a Starbucks, and Christa worked as a waitress at a trendy sushi restaurant called Kaisou, all within three miles of each other, and all within five miles of the church. "They were his type, and I know for a fact that he's been to Kaisou. He was fucking Melissa, and Patrick was a church attender; if I can tie Eli at any point to Ashley and Christa—"

"You have the link between the victims," Paris concluded, nodding at the logic of it all. "But, wait, doesn't that make Eli a suspect again?"

"It could. Or it really could mean he is the next victim. Someone's obliquely working their way down."

"Oh shit. No wonder he was freaked out enough to hire you."

"And yet he's not freaked out enough to tell me the whole truth. Funny how that works."

Paris suddenly smiled slyly, as if he'd just had a funny thought, and of course he felt compelled to share it. "A leopard doesn't change his spots, Roan."

"Oh God, that's horrible. I'm calling the pun police on you."

He raised his eyebrows suggestively, and lowered his voice to a seductive tone as he purred, "Shall I assume the position, Officer?"

Roan shook his head and snickered, waving to him as he walked to the foyer and grabbed his coat and hat off the hooks by the door. "Call your sister, man whore. I'd love to meet her sometime. I bet she has a ton of embarrassing stories about you as a kid."

“Thank you for giving me another reason not to do it,” he replied cheerfully.

Roan actually hoped he did call, and he thought that, fears and sarcasm aside, Paris would eventually. If he cared for his family as much as he seemed to, he’d reach out to them, even if he did omit certain facts about his existence.

After all, life was short—and for some people, much shorter than seemed fair.

CHRISTA’S great-aunt lived in a quaint little clapboard house that could have been made of gingerbread and iced with lemon frosting, but no one was home save for one of those little yippie dogs that could only shake and pee, so after scaring it off to the other end of the house by growling at it through the door, he wrote a note asking her to please call him and arrange a good time for them to meet, as he wanted to talk to her about Christa. He left one of his business cards folded inside the note, and slipped it through the mail slot in the door.

He had a bit more luck at Patrick Farley’s apartment, as he encountered a neighbor who was willing to talk to him. His name was Juan, a young Hispanic man with long, shaggy black hair who smelled of cheap aftershave and cigarette smoke, and who had Korn blasting on the stereo the whole time he was talking to him. He was the neighbor across from Patrick, and had talked with him several times, including lending him some quarters for the laundry room. He knew that Patrick went to the church, but he didn’t know he was actually infected; he assumed he was a “wannabe,” although he didn’t look like one of those “Anne Rice-lovin’ motherfuckers.” (Roan loved that description; he was going to have to use that sometime.) He was at work at the time of the shooting—Juan worked for a pest extermination service (which explained the aftershave; it wasn’t bad cologne but lingering traces of insecticide)—but he came home and found his body. He was digging out his apartment keys when he’d noticed Patrick’s door was slightly open, and he knew that wasn’t right, especially in a place like this. He knocked on the door and attempted to open it all the way, but something was blocking the door, and then he smelled “it”—presumably blood and shit, the pungent, awful smell of death. He saw blood on the floor and an outstretched hand, as well as a big mess that

looked like “spilled lasagna” (presumably the remains of Patrick’s head). He called 911 and was careful not to touch anything else, because he figured a non-white guy finding a dead white guy might give the cops “ideas.”

He’d only known Patrick in a casual sense, but he didn’t think he was a bad guy, and he hoped the cops found the *pendejo* who did this. He was actually shocked the cops hadn’t arrested anyone yet, as he figured they were extra speedy when the murder victim was an “all-American white guy,” but maybe the fact that he was “one of them” (infected) made them drag their feet. Juan also said, as far as he knew, no one disliked Patrick, he was pretty friendly and pretty quiet, and he couldn’t think of anything especially suspicious around here in the days leading up to the shooting. Roan left him his card on the off chance he remembered something else, and he said he’d call if anything occurred to him. Roan actually believed him.

The sad thing? Patrick had been dead forty minutes by the time Juan found him—meaning that if anyone else had seen the open door, they hadn’t checked; or if they had, they hadn’t called it in because they hadn’t wanted to get involved. Roan knew he was overly cynical at times, but the world seemed extra callous nowadays, with people too concerned about their own asses to risk involvement in anything that might get them in trouble. Juan was actually one of the good guys, but he probably didn’t know that.

The rain had let up to a dismal drizzle, although the sky was so dark it seemed like dusk when that was actually hours away. He found one of the last parking spots in the sprawling lot beside the Café D’Ante and went in, bracing himself.

The Café D’Ante was one of those places that tried so hard not to be pretentious they were actually pretentious, a casual but trendy place that just tried too damn hard to be something it both was and wasn’t at the same time that it was irritating. It had lots of windows to let in light (on any other day but today), potted plants to give the place an air of life, and lots of little round tables covered with tablecloths as white as snowdrifts. The hostess who greeted him far too eagerly was a perky young brunette who was probably a former cheerleader, and wore a black satin vest, which all the servers had on as their “casual” uniform. He told her he was meeting someone, and when he started to describe him, she said, “Oh, Matt.” So that’s why he picked this place—he was known.

She led him to a window table at the back, where Matt waited, looking frighteningly eager. He'd changed from his yellow T-shirt and walking shorts to designer black jeans and a pale blue muscle shirt that wasn't quite as tight and showed off the other tattoos on his arms: he had a "bracelet" of black tribal marks encircling his right upper arm, and a dark red kanji on his left shoulder. It looked like there was a small red and blue mark peeking beneath the neck of his shirt, but he had no idea what that tattoo could have been.

Roan had never really liked blonds, his tastes had always run toward darker men (his last three boyfriends—Connor, Diego, and Paris—all had black hair, their one common denominator); but there was something appealingly open and attractive about Matt's face, well-scrubbed with solid bone structure, a firm jaw and sharp cheekbones, his eyes large and golden hazel. In about ten years he'd probably be really handsome. He wore a cologne Roan didn't recognize, something woodsy and smoky, and beneath that was the scent of soap and shampoo. Had he gotten cleaned up extra-nice for him? Oh no.

Matt's face lit up in a bright smile. "I brought the key."

"Great, thanks." The waitress hovered nearby, and he just ordered coffee. He was hungry, but he wasn't eager to face pumpkin ravioli with vodka aioli, or whatever pretentious "fusion" food they served here.

Matt was Matt Skouris, a nineteen-year-old city native who grew up in the fairly tony suburb of Harmon Hills. He admitted sheepishly that he was a high school dropout who had only recently got his life back on track, which made Roan guess he had a drug problem. Matt won some points for admitting that as well, saying he'd been dropping Ecstasy and hitting the amphetamines (speed and coke) pretty hard since he was fifteen and discovered the party circuit. He was eventually forced into rehab by his parents and had been totally clean for eight months, but it wasn't always easy.

Matt had ordered an appetizer, some kind of bruschetta thing (small pieces of toasted bread with some tomato mixture on it) and it smelled good enough that his stomach rumbled nosily. Matt clearly heard it and offered him some, and he didn't refuse. It was pretty good.

Matt also told him he wasn't actually Ash's best friend, and that she had probably barely considered him a friend at all. It wasn't that he didn't want to be, but Ash had been very aloof and nervous, he supposed because of the way people treated her when they discovered she was infected.

She'd given him a copy of her apartment key after an incident in her building involving an "invasion" that left three people tied up in their apartment for a whole day. It was a drug-related crime (of course; it was the Wildwood) but since she lived alone and far from her family, she had liked the idea of having someone around who would be willing to check up on her if she suddenly didn't show up one day. He felt a drive to be nice to her because she was infected, and he knew what it was like to be singled out and treated badly because you were different.

Matt was very animated. He used his hands when he talked, and talked almost a mile a minute, but that might have been due to his complementary lattes from work. He had clearly traded amphetamines for caffeine, and while surely his blood pressure was better for it, he still got a nice buzz.

While Roan was chewing on a bruschetta piece, Matt leaned over the table and seemed to study him intently. "Too bad you aren't gay," he said.

Roan almost choked on a tomato chunk. "Excuse me?"

Matt rested his elbows on the table and put his chin in his hands, just staring at him like he was the best-looking dessert behind the glass counter. "You're the most gorgeous guy I've ever seen in person."

He glanced behind himself to make sure he was talking to him. "Huh? Me?"

"Yes silly, you. Oh my God, you're not telling me you don't know how attractive you are, are you?" Roan wasn't sure how to answer that, and was going to steer the conversation back to Ashley, but Matt gasped dramatically and continued. "Oh holy shit, you don't, do you? Will you marry me? I mean, right this second? I know a chick who's like a Unitarian minister or some shit like that."

"Um, Matt, why don't we—"

But Mr. Caffeine kept on going. "How can you *not* know? You must look in the mirror to shave, unless you got electrolysis. I know this drag queen who had it done to his face, and he says it hurts a little bit but it's totally worth it 'cause you don't need to shave for a long time. Even when you came in to the Starbucks today, I noticed you right away; I even whispered to Shanaia to let me have you, since we tag team the front counter. You have the most gorgeous eyes I've ever seen. Are they really that green? I was thinking contacts, but usually you can see contacts, y'know, if you stare hard enough you can make out the edge of the plastic.

But I don't see any edges. And your eyes kinda go down a little at the corners, not Asian, more really European, like the French, 'cause a lot of French people have eyes like that. They're like cat's eyes, y'know, really striking. And they must be, 'cause noticing a guy's eyes is like eighteenth on my list, but on you I just saw them and that scar and that jaw of yours and I was like 'Please God, let him be gay and into me.' You just look so... I guess rugged's the word I want, but not exactly, y'know? Something like that. You just look strong and manly without being too butch or a muscle queen, you exude testosterone, but not in a caveman way, you're like regal, and I just want to bury my hands in your hair. You don't dye it, do you?"

Finally he paused, and Roan took a breath for him. Just listening to Matt made him feel like he was hyperventilating. "Umm, no, I don't. And technically I am gay, but I have a boyfriend, so thanks for the interest. But no thanks. Can we get back to—"

Matt's eyes widened so dramatically he wondered if the passing waiter had kicked him under the table. "You *are* gay? You're fucking with me, aren't you? You're totally teasing."

"No, I am. But I'm in a relationship, and this really isn't relevant to the case. If I show you a picture of someone, can you tell me if they've been in the shop or not?"

"Oh sure. You're honestly gay? Y'know, I have the best gaydar—I can't believe I missed you. So tell me about this boyfriend of yours—is he cute? Please don't tell me you're one of those hotties who ends up with a guy who looks like a troll. 'Cause I've seen that so often, and I don't get it at all. I mean, who needs a sugar daddy that badly, y'know?"

If he said "like" or "y'know" once more, Roan was fairly certain he was going to punch him. No, no he couldn't, he hadn't given him Ashley's key yet. With a sigh, he dug the picture of Eli out of his pocket, and said, "My boyfriend is the best-looking guy I've ever seen. Now, can you tell me if this man is a regular at the Starbucks?"

Matt took the picture eagerly, but reared back slightly as soon as he saw it. "Don't tell me this guy is your boyfriend."

Roan rubbed his forehead. Motor-mouth Matt was starting to give him a headache. "No, that's the man I was wondering if you've seen in the Starbucks."

"Oh. Yeah, he's in now and again. He's no rabid regular, but he

comes by at least weekly, usually Tuesday or Sunday.”

He stared at Matt somewhat skeptically. Could his memory be that good? “You know him that well?”

Matt nodded, handing the picture back. “Venti espresso con panna half-caff with a shot of mocha syrup.”

Okay, now he wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or scared. “Do you know all your customers that well?”

“No, just the ones I like or hate. Isn’t that weird?”

“Which one is he?”

He clicked his tongue in disgust. “Hate, darling. He seems like a kinda skeevy bastard, y’know? And he never tips. I hear he’s famous, like some kinda local celebrity, but I dunno. He used to make eyes at Ash, but she never noticed and claimed I was making it up. But I wasn’t! I mean, I know what a guy looks like when he wants a piece of that, I’ve gotten it enough in my lifetime, and it doesn’t matter if they’re gay or straight, the look’s the same. Nobody knows a man like another man, y’know?”

Wasn’t that interesting? Eli had an attraction to Ashley that wasn’t reciprocal—and she died anyway. It could be coincidence; it could mean a hell of a lot. Unless Matt was mistaken, like Ashley had seemed to think... but Roan actually thought, dramatic overstatement aside, Matt probably could nail lust in a man at fifty paces. He struck him as a “party guy,” the type who’d happily give you a blow job in the back of your car ten minutes after you met him. Not to be disparaging, but... okay, yeah, there was probably no way that couldn’t be disparaging. But if he’d just shut up for five minutes, he might be an okay guy. “Was he in Starbucks the Tuesday before she died?”

He shook his head, making his five consecutive earrings jingle. “No, he was in Sunday. Along with his regular espresso he bought a double chocolate muffin. I know, ’cause I served him; Ash was busy fighting with a jammed napkin dispenser.” Despite his appearance and his magpie chattering, Matt would have made one of hell of a witness on the stand. Gossipy as all hell, he saw everything.

Sunday? Ashley was killed on Monday. Holy shit, there was no way in hell that was coincidence. But which way was this going?

Was Eli actually the killer, or was someone hunting people around him?

7

Pattern Against User

MATT gabbed for a solid ten minutes, but Roan was too busy thinking to pay attention.

Okay, so he had a connection between Eli and Ashley, but it was a casual (circumstantial) one at best. Something wasn't right, but he didn't know what. He couldn't see all the pieces of the puzzle, and it was annoying him more than Matt's ceaseless prattling.

Finally—and as politely as he could—he asked for Ashley's key. Matt gulped down his third glass of Coke (no wonder he was so jazzed) and stood up, digging in his pants pocket. "Sure, let's go."

Roan glared at him, but he seemed oblivious to it. "I'm going alone. By trespassing on a closed crime scene, we're committing a crime."

Matt found the key and pulled it out. It was alone on a key chain that doubled as a bottle opener. "Not if you're with me. I have her key, and I'll just say I'm like checking on her plants or something. You're simply with me."

He almost admired his gall. "No way in hell they'll buy that."

Matt made a "tsk" noise and rolled his eyes. "Yeah, they will. If we get caught, let me do the talking. I'll so annoy the shit out of them they'll agree to anything to make me shut up and go away."

Now Roan did briefly admire his gall. "You know?"

"What, that I talk too much? I have ears, sweetie, how could I not know? Sometimes even *I* have no fucking idea what I'm talking about; it just comes gushing out, y'know? I call it diarrhea of the mouth." He jingled the key, and pulled his black motocross-style leather jacket off the back of his chair. "We goin'?"

Roan paid the bill even though he'd hardly had anything, simply

because he figured baristas just couldn't make that much. Matt had walked here—he lived with a roommate in an apartment four blocks away—so they took the Mustang by default.

It was unlikely they'd get caught; that was just an excuse to try and escape Chatty Cathy in the passenger seat (and yes, he kept rattling on, although Roan tuned him out). But just venturing into the Wildwood seemed like a risky proposition, and he wondered how Ashley had managed it on a daily basis. She was either very brave or very desperate.

The Wildwood looked exactly the same as it had the last time he'd been here, two years ago, on a domestic violence call. It was a square, six-story apartment block with brick facing that had faded to a sickly brownish gray and was crumbling like rotted teeth. Gang tags were the only true spots of color, warped letters and numerals as bloated as waterlogged corpses, their meaning cryptically elusive to most people. All the first-floor windows either had bars or were simply boarded over.

If defeat looked like anything, it looked like the Wildwood.

"Wow, this looks like a crack house I once went to," Matt commented, following Roan into the piss-soaked "lobby" of the building. He didn't ask, because he really didn't want to know.

Inside the Wildwood it was murky dark, like they were submerged beneath a polluted lake, and the smell of urine, cooked food, spilled beer, and the sickly sweet and sharply chemical smell of crack rendered the hallways into a pungent, unpleasant stew. Roan had cinnamon gum in his coat pocket and popped a stick in his mouth, using its overwhelming smell and taste to block out everything else. It was mostly successful.

Ashley had lived on the third floor, third apartment on the left. Yellow crime scene tape still crisscrossed the whitewashed door, although someone had scrawled on it, in thick black ink, *Kitty fucker*. That warning was probably the only reason the tape hadn't been broken—who was going to touch anything a kitty fucker had touched and possibly contaminated with their infected blood?

Matt—who had been blessedly silent since they'd entered the building—carefully unlocked the door and they both went in, ducking under the tape and being careful not to break it. Inside, Ashley's apartment was even darker than the hallway, and the smell of blood and death was so overpowering that Roan rocked back on his heels. Son of a bitch, no one had cleaned it up yet, had they?

Matt must have smelled a bit of it, as he cupped his hand over his nose and mouth, but his eyes widened as he saw the metal shutters that blocked out every scrap of light. “Whoa.”

“She was infected,” Roan explained. “If you’re going into your transformational phase, you have to block the windows, otherwise you’re liable to jump through them or die trying.”

“Oh. I didn’t think she was kinky. She never struck me that way, y’know? She actually seemed kinda lonely.”

Roan’s eyes had adjusted to the dark, although he pulled out the small Maglite he always carried with him. (Essential P.I. tools: cell phone, digital camera, flashlight, notebook, a laptop if you could carry it and had a Wi-Fi connection, and maybe a gun, but only if you were really paranoid.) He could have turned on a light—no one was going to see it from the street as long as they kept the shutters down—but he didn’t want to lose what he had of his “night vision” right now. Also, if he could keep Matt from seeing the huge rusty-brown stain on the cheap, yellowish industrial carpet, he felt things would go better. “No friends, no boyfriend and/or girlfriend? Sounds lonely.”

“Yeah.” Matt fumbled something out of his coat pocket, and Roan didn’t really see what until he snapped it and a bright but icy-blue glow emanated from it. It actually lit up the area around Matt quite well.

“Do you always carry a glow stick?” he wondered, kind of amused. Somehow it figured a party guy like Matt would just happen to have a glow stick handy.

“Naw, I just remembered the last time I wore this coat, I was at Panic. Hey, if you’re gay, how come I’ve never seen you there?”

Panic was *the* hot gay nightclub in town, and he was sure the little bit of black script at the base of the glow stick identified it as coming from there. “I’m not into the nightclub scene. It’s too... techno for me.”

“Oh man, you’re missing out. You need to come down, if only to see this guy who shows up like every other coupla weeks. Don’t know his name, but we call him the Hottie down there, ’cause he is. I mean he’s fucking gorgeous; you’d cut off your left nut to be with this guy. He has guys lining up three deep to dance with him, and ten deep to buy him drinks. He always comes with this fag hag, she looks like a young Margaret Cho, and he’s just the world’s biggest cocktease, y’know? He’s

got great moves, he's cute, he looks like he's got a rippin' bod, but he always says he only comes to dance and ain't interested in hooking up, y'know? It's as frustrating as hell, but God, it's worth the sexual frustration just to watch him for a couple of hours."

Hearing this description, Roan suddenly wondered how small a gay subculture it was. "Is he about six-foot-three, two-ten, with black hair and blue eyes?"

Matt nodded eagerly, eyes showing his happy surprise. "Hey, you've seen him? Isn't he just to die for? You wouldn't think such a solid slab of man meat could be as graceful as he is, but wow, he's just all kinds of lust-bait. And that ass! God, I just want to grab him and—"

"That's my boyfriend."

Matt stared at him levelly, the blue light casting bruised shadows on his face. "You're shitting me."

"No. I sort of doubt there's two gay guys in town that match that description." And he couldn't imagine Randi being thrilled with that "Margaret Cho" comment. In fact, he could imagine her "Oh, I bet you think all Asians look alike" rant, as he'd heard her give it to a clearly embarrassed man in the parking lot at work once. A shrinking violet she wasn't.

Matt held his gaze for a long moment, attempting to judge his veracity. "Holy shit. I always wondered who could land him, and now I know: another hottie. Makes sense, y'know. Uh, does that mean I have to stop talking about him?"

"I'd appreciate it."

"Damn, he was distracting me from the smell." He moved the glow stick around, lighting up spots of the small, austere apartment as well as leaving brief blue trails in the air, and asked, "So what are we looking for exactly?"

"*We?*"

"I'm not totally useless. I got a great head for, uh... remembering things. In fact, I can remember this one time when—" He froze, looking down at something that had been caught in the narrow scope of his light. As he bent down for a better look, Roan already knew what he'd just discovered—that huge, dark stain. "Is that, uh..."

“Yep.”

He looked down at it a moment, transfixed, then slapped his hand over his mouth, the color draining from his face with a frightening rapidity, and he dropped his glow stick as he turned and bolted into the small bathroom. Since he didn't have time to close the door, Roan could hear him vomiting quite clearly. See, this is why he preferred doing things on his own.

The apartment was tiny, enough so that Roan figured Ashley must have been a small cat, perhaps a cougar, to keep from breaking out of here. The living room and kitchenette were separated only by their floors—the living room had the carpet, while the thin strip of floor that marked off the kitchen was cheap, peeling linoleum with an alternating square pattern. The walk-in-closet-sized room on the right was the bedroom, and the tinier spare-closet-sized room straight ahead was the bathroom where Matt was puking up his lunch. He figured it was a good thing the lights were off, as the apartment would probably be more depressing if he could see it clearly.

He crouched down to pick up Matt's glow stick, which had rolled toward the base of the avocado green refrigerator, a relic from the '80s if not the '70s. It was close up that he noticed a thin magnet advertising a pizza place was stuck to the fridge's bottom metal grill, and he caught a glimpse of an edge of white paper on the floor, wedged between the fridge and the kitchen cabinet. The magnet must have been holding up the paper and both had slipped down.

He pulled out the paper and wasn't surprised to find it was a business card with the logo “New Horizons” on the front, and on the back there was a handwritten note about an appointment with Doctor Johnson, which was at three-thirty next Wednesday. There was an appointment she was never going to make.

He'd heard of New Horizons; it was a hodgepodge of services for the infected, one of those liberal social policy compromises that made this city so attractive to the infected. They probably had a ton of Doctor Johnsons that worked out of there, but he thought it would be worth checking out. It was just a shame that it didn't say what kind of doctor Johnson was: a dentist, a GP, a psychiatrist, hell, maybe even a nutritionist (they had a whole bunch of odd services available, some very questionable).

Matt had finally stopped retching, and turned on the taps to rinse out his mouth before he came out. Roan had tucked the appointment card in his pocket and picked up the glow stick, which he handed to Matt as soon as he rejoined him. "I'm sorry about that," he said sheepishly. He still looked quite pale.

"It's okay. But you see why I didn't want you to come here? She was your friend; this has to hurt."

"She wasn't my friend. I wanted to be friends, but she so was scared. I didn't get it at all."

"What was she scared of?"

He shrugged, grimacing slightly. "I dunno. Being infected? Trusting people? She musta got screwed over pretty badly."

So he wasn't talking about a specific person. Too bad; that would have made his job easier.

A cursory search turned up nothing of note, nothing as interesting as the card from the New Horizons center. Matt remained oddly quiet and trailed behind him, embarrassed about barfing and afraid of what he might find if he wasn't careful. The kid really shouldn't have been here; he felt kind of bad for him.

They left, and Matt remained strangely cowed. By the time they left the building, the sky remained gunmetal gray but the rain was no more than a cool mist, the kind that drenched you even better than a downpour. They had to walk over to the next block, as there was no way he was parking the Mustang around here, and it was then that Matt asked, "What's his name?"

"Whose?"

"Your boyfriend, the Hottie."

"I thought we weren't talking about that anymore."

"Oh c'mon, I'm dying of curiosity over here. Also, it'll take my mind off things."

He weighed precisely how much he should care with the possibility that it didn't really matter. He was honestly surprised that everyone at Panic didn't know Paris by his first name by now. Then again, maybe he never said so he never got stalked. "I'll have to check in with him first. He

might go out with a pseudonym.”

“Come on, dude! That’s so not fair. But hey, why don’t you ever go out with him, y’know? Why is he always out with the fag hag?”

“She’s his best friend. Also, he usually goes out with her when I’m busy.” There was no point in telling him, when he was in the transitional phase of his virus. Matt could know he was “in the tribe,” but he didn’t need to know he was infected. He didn’t need the sympathy. “And as I said, I hate the club scene.”

“Why? You’d be a hit.”

“You’d be surprised how little I care about that.”

He grinned broadly, an expression that lit up his face and seemed to bring some color back to his cheeks. “I bet I wouldn’t.”

Yeah, perhaps not.

The next block over had lots of sad little shops: a corner store, a barbershop, one of those cheap teriyaki places that just seemed to spring up out of nowhere, a liquor store with extravagantly barred windows, that kind of thing. A downtown neighborhood too poor to qualify for strip-mall status, but still losing a monumental amount of business to the strip malls and big box stores in the neighboring outskirts and suburbs. Almost anyone who had the ability to shop elsewhere did, so these shops were dying a slow, crumbling death, usually reflected in their dirty windows and scabby facades. Only the liquor store would probably survive.

He’d parked the Mustang beside the curb in front of the teriyaki place, the only open slot when they drove up, but as they came up the street he realized the car was sitting kind of funny in the back. He stepped out onto the curb as they approached, and checked out the side of the car that faced the street. Just as he feared, the back tire had been slashed; there was a deep, long gash he could put his fingers in.

He felt the shadow of Matt behind him, and he whistled low. “I’d say you ran over a nail, but I don’t think so.”

“Slashed with a knife. Somebody really hated this tire.” Or him; hating him was clearly more likely. But that raised a couple of troubling questions.

Okay, now he was being paranoid again. It was probably just a bored kid who got a kick out of vandalizing other people’s rides; he should

probably consider himself lucky that the asshole didn't key the car—that really would have pissed Paris off.

“Gonna call triple A?”

He shook his head, standing up and attempting to brush the grime on his hands off on his pant legs. “I got a spare in the trunk.”

Matt stared at him in wide-eyed shock. “You can change a tire? Really? I can barely pump my own gas.”

Roan stared at him in open disbelief. “I’m sorry, but no one is that femme.”

He let out a breathless laugh. “I am, seriously. I only had a car for a year before I sold it for coke, and at that time I’d had my license suspended anyways, so I didn’t think losing it would be a big deal, y’know. I haven’t had a car since.”

Roan dug out his car keys and sifted out the trunk key. “You’re saving yourself a lot of money.”

“Probably, but I’ve saved more being off the coke, y’know. It’s kinda expensive... well, the *good* stuff is. I mean there’s a lot of shit stuff on the market, people who put in too much filler, y’know, shit that doesn’t do anything....”

Roan had pretty much tuned him out at this point—he really didn’t want to know how you quality shopped for cocaine—but he’d just moved around to the trunk when he heard a loud but well-tuned engine, purring like a panther. Why the hell did it strike him as odd?

Roan didn’t know, and wasn’t sure he would ever know. Something made him turn and look, and he saw a dark green Jeep Grand Cherokee speeding down the street, so clean it almost shined, and he glanced down at the license plate to see that something had been inserted into the frame—Paper? Masking tape?—something that totally obscured the plate. Its windows were also tinted, not so much dark as complete ebony.

That was his only warning.

He was already moving up to the sidewalk, glad he’d decided to wear his SIG Sauer for the walk to the Wildwood, when the person in the passenger seat opened fire. Roan had already shoved Matt brutally aside, throwing him down behind the Mustang, as he pulled his gun and took aim even as he threw himself behind the car.

Time slowed to a crawl, and he could see everything with crystal clarity, even though he didn't think he should have been able to. The gun barrel was sticking out of the open passenger window, and the person behind the gun was a dark blur. Were they wearing a ski mask? He saw the flashes from the muzzle, heard the shots (which were always less than impressive; they were loud, but not quite the cannon blasts you usually heard in films) and heard glass breaking as the gunmen sprayed bullets wildly, shattering some of the windows of the Mustang and a window of the teriyaki joint. He also felt something hit him in the upper left side of his chest, but he didn't know if it was shrapnel or what; it was more force than pain. He squeezed off two shots of his own before the Mustang obscured his view, and he knew they hit. He saw one shatter the passenger window and another disappeared in a dull thunk of impact, and he was sure it'd hit the door.

By the time he hit the pavement, the impact jarring his body, he heard the squeal of acceleration, the skid of tires on a wet road, and the Jeep tore around the corner, causing a car at the intersection to blare its horn at him. His shoulder hurt, and his left arm felt numb.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Matt shouted, on his hands and knees on the sidewalk, eyes wide and wild with fear. "Who the fuck was that?!"

"No idea," he admitted, rolling up to a sitting position. Just moving made it feel like some muscles tore in his chest, and his back felt damp from the pavement. Had he landed in a puddle? That would figure.

"God," Matt panted, sitting back on his haunches and putting his hand on his chest, like he was having a heart attack. "You saved my life."

He put the gun back in his belt holster, hidden beneath his jacket. They could come back for a second pass, but he was fairly certain he'd hit the gunman, or at least scared the fucking shit out of him. "No, I didn't. They were shooting at me."

"What? Why? And how fast can you move? How'd you get your gun out that—oh shit." Matt had suddenly stopped talking, looking horrified and staring at him.

"What?" He looked down at where he was staring just as Matt suddenly grabbed his trench coat and threw it open.

Okay, now it was easy to see why. He had a neat little hole in his shirt just above his left pectoral muscle, and pouring from it was an

interesting amount of blood, which had already soaked through the left side of his shirt. No wonder he felt damp. Shouldn't it hurt more? It just felt a bit bruised. The first time he was shot it hurt a lot more, but he was younger then. Maybe age desensitized you in some fashion.

Matt exhaled like he'd been holding his breath, and said, "Okay, good, completely missed the heart. But the trajectory might've—"

He grabbed Matt's hand as he reached for his shirt. "Get away from my blood. I'm infected."

Matt stared at him, the shock still naked on his face. "Huh? You mean..."

"Yeah, I'm one of those kitty fuckers too." He'd unconsciously grabbed his cell phone, and had already punched up 911. It was strangely automatic, almost like when he was a cop and you always reached for your radio. Same difference, really. As soon as the 911 dispatcher picked up, he said, almost cheerfully, "Hi. There was just a shoot-out on Brazil Street, and apparently I was shot in the process. The gunmen are gone, so don't worry about sending out the tactical squad. I'm on the sidewalk in front of the teriyaki place." The woman tried to get a word in edgewise, but he knew exactly the kind of information she needed, so she didn't need to go through her script. "I'm Roan McKichan, a private detective—you might want to pass this on to the cops, as several of them will get a good laugh out of it. The wound's not serious, I don't feel that bad, but there's a lot of blood, and I'm infected, so warn the EMTs coming in. The gunmen were in a dark green Jeep Grand Cherokee heading northwest down Elmore, and no, I didn't get a plate, it was covered, and I have no idea who they were, except they didn't like me very much. I may have hit one of them with return fire; I definitely hit the Jeep. I think that about covers it, so let the EMTs know they should check behind the Mustang that's had the shit shot out of it." As he cut the connection and dropped the phone back in his pocket, it occurred to him that what had happened to the car would break Paris's heart. He could probably fix it, but it would take a while, and glass was always a motherfucker to replace.

"How can you be so calm? You must have balls of steel," Matt said, shucking off his coat, and before Roan could comment on that, Matt pulled off his own shirt. He quickly wadded it up and pressed it up against the bullet wound. He took a breath to say something, but Matt cut him off with, "I don't have any open cuts on my hands, I'll be fine. You need to keep pressure on it to slow the bleeding."

There were so many things he wanted to ask, but he settled on, “How do you know so much about bullet wounds?”

“I don’t. I mean, I know about wounds in general. My mother’s a doctor over at County.” He grimaced sheepishly. “So as you might imagine, my coke habit was pretty embarrassing for her.”

“Teenage rebellion is embarrassing for everyone.”

He shrugged his naked shoulders, which were surprisingly bony, and now his skin was pimpling with gooseflesh since he was exposed to the cold drizzle. But now Roan could see the tattoo on Matt’s chest, the one that had been peeking up slightly beneath his neck. It was a spectacular Chinese phoenix design, a stylized bird with a swan neck and broadly spread wings, its tail almost dragonlike, the feathers reproduced with such loving detail that they almost looked like they would be soft to the touch. It was a riot of color—red, blue, green, yellow, and black—and covered most of the center of his upper chest as it sprawled out in flight, its long, slender, feathered tail curving around his pierced left nipple.

“That’s gorgeous,” Roan blurted. It was; it was one of the most beautiful, detailed tattoos he’d ever seen.

Matt glanced down, as if he wasn’t sure what he was referring to, and again shrugged as Roan finally heard sirens screaming off in the distance. “I was really into body modification there for a while. This was the first part of a sequence of tattoos that was going to cover my entire torso like a shirt, y’know. But I found out that, once you’re sober, tattoos kinda hurt. Also, without downers, I didn’t have the patience to just lay there and get stuck by needles for hours on end.”

“I bet.”

Matt studied him closely for a moment, and said, “You’re a lion, aren’t you?”

This kid was just full of surprises, wasn’t he? “How do you know that?”

He smiled warmly at Roan, proud he’d guessed it right. “Like I said, you’re regal.”

“Lions aren’t regal. From what I understand, they’re lazy, sexist bastards.”

“You can’t believe everything you hear on Animal Planet, y’know.”

A very familiar ambulance screamed to a stop next to the curb one car removed from them, and it had barely stopped before the back doors of the rig burst open and a familiar EMT jumped down, holding a medical kit as big as a pro fisherman's tackle box. "I just knew it was you," Diego exclaimed, bustling over. "We hear about an infected who's been shot in a firefight, and I said to Steve, 'Holy shit, Ro has finally snapped.'" He was crouched down next to him before he even noticed Matt, and at Dee's slightly stern look, Matt withdrew his shirt and backed away from them, giving Dee room to work. He ripped open Roan's shirt for a better look at the wound, and scowled at it, like he could frighten the bullet out of his chest. "Oh man, what are we gonna do with you?"

"Buy me body armor?" he offered. Dee's harsh glance suggested he didn't find that funny.

The first cop car finally pulled up, and he asked Dee quietly, "Call Paris for me, would you?"

Dee's expression softened as he nodded. "Of course."

And he thought Paris was going to be heartbroken about the Mustang. Oy vey, he didn't even want to imagine how he was going to react to this.

8

Meantime

PARIS knew he should have called Annie, but he felt like he should be useful first. He had a job to do, right? Okay, technically it was Roan's job, but he was his partner. Kind of. In a way.

Oh fuck it—okay, he was looking for an excuse to put the call off. Roan was the strong one, not him. He did the facing up to things, while Paris was more than happy to wade deep into denial and do some fly-fishing. That was why Ro was the Rock of Gibraltar and he was the sissy boy who had a nervous breakdown as soon as he'd realized he was infected and had probably killed (and ate) someone. What he'd always hoped was that he'd get some of Ro's strength by osmosis, that he'd finally grow a fucking spine. Had he? He didn't really know; he suspected he'd have to ask someone else, although that wasn't a good sign. And what irony: he was a tiger. A big, strong tiger that wasn't afraid of anything, unlike its Human counterpart, who was a bit more of a pussy.

Ro had given him his user name and password into the special database that apparently was exclusive to investigators, and Paris knew why after first getting into it—it was fucking scary. The sheer amount of shit you could find on people! He'd once started a search on himself and stopped, because it freaked him out a bit. And he was Canadian! He'd assumed the database would only cover him since he'd been in the States, but oh no, this database went over the border. He'd almost searched Roan, but then thought better of it.

Roan had left behind notes from the Humanity First group therapy/bitch session, and he decided to make himself quasi-useful by investigating the woman that gave Ro such a bad feeling, Karen Hammond.

She was only thirty-six, which shocked the hell out of Paris; he had been sure she was in her forties. Man, she looked really shitty for her age. Was she a heavy smoker or drinker? That kind of info wasn't in the

database, but nearly everything else was. She lived in a trailer park in a really sad suburban outskirt known as Frederickson, and she owned the trailer (and had for the past eight years) but not the land she was residing on. Twice divorced, she had four kids: Noah, 20, Lacey and Joshua, both 18 (fraternal twins), and Kaitlin, 14, deceased (the dead, cat-chasing daughter who had made her so vengeful). She'd worked at the Rite-Aid down on Hauser for the past eight months. Karen had some minor arrests on her record, ranging from driving under the influence (he knew it—drinker), misdemeanor assault, a domestic violence charge that was dropped (pressed by her second, soon-to-be-ex-husband; she'd scratched his face and hit him with a coffee pot), public nuisance, and some neighbors of hers once got a restraining order on her when she lived down in Redding. She wasn't an emotionally stable person, that was pretty obvious, but he could almost hear Ro saying in his head, "*None of this adds up to serial killer.*" Which was true and fair enough. (Ro was going to make him an investigator if it killed him.) It did make her a good suspect, though. She was a troubled woman who really didn't have much to lose, and wasn't averse to resorting to violence. But again, that Roan voice: "Not enough."

Now what? He input the names of a couple of other people who had been there and whose names Ro had made a note of, but none of them were nearly as interesting as Karen. One guy, Vince Hempstead, had quite a lengthy juvenile record, but that meant next to nothing, especially since most of those were for vandalism and shoplifting. Karen still remained the most viable "potential" in the crowd.

He switched the CD to Thom Yorke and went to grab a Pepsi when the phone rang. Inwardly he cringed, sure it was Annie again, but when it went to the machine, he got a surprise. "Paris, it's Diego. If you're there, pick up, it's an emergency."

Diego was calling for *him*? Weirdness. It wasn't that they didn't get on okay, because they did; Diego was cute and smart, although a bit type A, and he really didn't get how he and Roan could've had a relationship, no matter how brief. Roan was very much a type B, in spite of his personal intensity, and it just seemed like a recipe for disaster. Being smart and gifted with a cutting wit were about the only things Roan and Diego had in common; from thereon in, it was just conflict.

He just had a sudden awful feeling about this and darted over to the phone to pick it up. "I'm here. It's not about Ro, is it?"

He sighed heavily, and Paris felt his stomach just drop to the floor. Oh God no. “Look, he’s okay,” Diego began, which wasn’t the most heartening way to begin a conversation. “He got incredibly lucky, which is actually par for the course with him, but don’t tell him I said that; I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Paris wasn’t sure he could speak for a moment. “What the fuck happened?”

“He was shot. He—”

“Shot?” It felt like someone had injected liquid nitrogen straight into his circulatory system. “What? Who shot him? Where was he shot? Is he... are you at County?”

“I am. I told you, Paris, he’s fine, he never even lost consciousness. Which is creepy when you’re trying to examine a wound and your patient keeps criticizing it—”

“I’ll be right there,” he said, trying to remember which coat he had the GTO keys in.

“He’s in stable condition,” Diego said, in his low, steady paramedic voice. It was the professional one he used to calm the upset and panicked, and Paris mildly resented hearing it. He wasn’t panicking yet; he thought he was holding in the hysterical scream quite well. “He lost some blood so they’re going to keep him here, but he’s being a total dickhead about that. Maybe you can talk him into staying overnight before he tries storming out of here, dragging an IV stand.”

“I don’t think even I’m that good,” he replied, and told Diego he’d see him in twenty minutes—fifteen if he could open up the throttle. Only after he hung up did he realize that Diego never told him where Ro had been shot, or how much blood he had lost. Christ, now his imagination was just going to run wild.

He went up to the bedroom to get his jacket, the one with the GTO keys, but before he even knew what he was doing, he was crouched in front of the dresser, opening the lowest drawer. There, beneath some folded shirts that Roan only kept around as “schlep clothes” (where Roan had picked up so much Yiddish he wasn’t sure, although he *had* said that when he was a teen he’d dated this “nice Jewish boy” he met at a Cramps concert), was a small cherrywood case, too long and flat to be a jewelry box, although it was nice enough. Inside was the “spare gun,” the Beretta Cheetah (yes, that was its actual name—Roan thought it was kind of

funny), along with a spare ammunition clip. He didn't need the clip, though, as the gun was fully loaded, the safety on. Buried among the shirts was a belt clip holster; hanging in the closet was a shoulder holster rig. Where you wanted the holster depended on what situation you were going into, what you could conceal, what you were more comfortable with. Paris had never liked the shoulder holster, although it looked quite manly on Ro.

He knew how to shoot. He had an air rifle and pistol as a kid, although he'd never used them for much beyond target practice and mild vandalism (he was never into killing anything, not even animals, which may have been why waking up covered in blood and bits of skin was such a shock). Roan had also walked him through the basics on the Beretta and the SIG Sauer, on the off chance he ever had to use them. Paris had paid attention but hated the idea, as he wasn't a fan of guns—real guns, ones that could kill so easily and indiscriminately.

But now he clipped on the belt holster and snugged the Beretta inside before retrieving his jacket and heading downstairs. Someone had shot Roan; the very idea turned him to solid ice. He wanted the fucker to come back, to show his face, because Paris had a surprise for him. Shoot his lover, would he? Two could play that game, and Paris was willing to bet he was a better shot.

But as he headed out, all he could think was the killer had come calling. And he wondered if he should pay a visit to Eli, and see if his alibi held up. He wondered what he'd do if it didn't.

HE HAD just reached the hospital when his cell went off, Franz Ferdinand's "Michael" startling the shit out of him. He grabbed his phone and turned it off, not caring who was calling or why. Right now, he only had room in his head for Roan.

Even though it wasn't nearly hospital "prime-time" hours (pretty much any time after sunset, according to Diego), the waiting room seemed unbelievably crowded and noisy, and he cringed slightly at the intrusion on his perfect fear and perfect rage. He had to ask the nurse at the desk twice what room they were keeping Roan in, and then had to clarify he wasn't asking about Joan. Part of him just wanted to barge off and find him himself, but this was a huge hospital and he had no doubt that he'd get lost easily.

She was telling him these weren't visiting hours when Diego showed up in his dark blue paramedic's jacket, waved at the nurse, and said "He's with me," before grabbing him by the arm and pulling him off down one of the corridors.

"Thank you," Paris told him, as soon as they ducked into an elevator.

"I figured you might need the help. It's a zoo around here." Diego said it so casually it was almost impossible to tell it was a lie, but it was. Once again, he was being kind.

Paris always felt big next to Diego. He wasn't short, he was just so thin; he was so type A he seemed to have a super metabolism, one that burned up the calories almost as fast as he could put them in, although he imagined his job probably helped as well. He was a good-looking guy, with café au lait skin and large, dark eyes, curly black hair cut short and tight to the scalp (which flattered his delicate bone structure, and boy did he know it), so it was easy to see what Roan saw in him, but it was also easy to discern why it didn't work. He seemed to hum with energy, even standing still, and he knew those type of people got on Roan's nerves after a very short period of time. "How is he doing?" Paris asked. "What happened?"

"Again, he's fine. He must be fine if he's still being a stubborn asshole. And from what he told the cops, it was essentially a drive-by."

"What?"

"Somebody shot at him and this kid he was with on Brazil Street, barely slowing down to do the job. Roan put a couple rounds in their vehicle, though, and they took off. They shot out a few windows and put some holes in his car, but Roan only caught a single bullet, which was damn lucky. Those guys had an automatic or something."

"Where was he shot?"

"Upper left quadrant of the chest." Diego held up his hands in a warding-off gesture even as Paris took a breath to speak. "It totally missed his heart, it was a couple inches off. It passed through him on a straight-line trajectory—which is good—and the worst he got out of it was some torn muscles and blood loss. He will be fine. He'll recover. Although they want to get him into surgery to repair some of the muscle damage and he's refusing. God knows why. I think Roan just likes being a stubborn butthead sometimes."

The elevator's slow ascent stopped and the doors opened with a faint chiming sound, disgorging them on a floor Paris vaguely recognized as a sealed part of the ICU. Because Roan was infected and his blood was full of a contagion, he had to be kept in a special wing.

Paris's head was spinning with all this information, his heart trip-hammering, and he followed Diego out, feeling numb. The bullet missed his heart by a couple of inches? Jesus Christ. (He didn't care about his pacifist stand at the moment—if he saw that fucker, he was dead. He'd punch him until something in him broke, then he'd shoot him. Was he becoming very American, bitter, or some combination of the two?)

As they walked down the white tiled corridor with its rainbow of colored lines on the walls leading to various places, a lanky young blond kid who looked like one of the “junior cruisers” (his and Randi's term for the barely legal, extremely horny young guys who'd pretty much fuck anyone who smiled at them) who hung around the fringes of Panic—but was strangely wearing a doctor's pale green scrub top—stood up from the molded plastic chair he'd been sitting in, and started to say something, but he paused and stared at Paris in shock instead. “Oh Christ, you're even better looking in real light,” he breathed.

Paris glared at him. “Do I know you?”

Diego stepped forward, neatly inserting himself between him and the junior cruiser, as if afraid Paris might haul off and smack him. “This is Matt Skouris, he was with Roan at the scene, and coincidentally his mother was the doctor that treated him once we reached the ER.”

“I called and asked her to see him when they got here,” Matt said, almost meekly. “She's a real hard-ass, y'know, but she's a great doctor.”

“Why the hell were you there?” he snapped, feeling an inexplicable surge of anger toward this kid. Roan probably took the bullet for him, didn't he? Roan would do that; he would take a bullet for a complete stranger because that was sadly the kind of guy he was. He was a born protector.

Matt looked genuinely surprised and took a step back, as if he intuited Paris's rage level accurately. “Uh, I, um, went with him to Ashley's apartment. I had the key, y'know, I had to let him in—”

Paris nodded and gestured sharply for him to stop, as he really didn't want to have a discussion with anyone right now. “Yeah, okay, Ro said something about that.” He shifted his gaze to Diego. “Where is he?”

Diego pointed to a door on the left side of the hall, barely three meters away. He headed straight for it, and Matt called after him, “Um, nice to meet you...”

“Tell him to stop being such a fuckhead,” Diego added emphatically.

As soon as he was inside and the door slapped closed behind him, Paris found himself hammered by a sudden surge of emotion. He’d been okay up to this point; he’d held it together with what he felt was startlingly great aplomb. But now he was in a tiny ivory-walled hospital room that smelled of disinfectant and blood, with Roan looking unusually small and pale in a bed of starched white sheets and blankets, and he found it hard to breathe due to the sheer size of the lump in his throat. Somebody had tried to kill him; the killer had tried to add him to the list. Holy fuck. That was wrong on several levels, but the most basic one was that Paris was supposed to die first, not Roan. The tiger was going to kill him from the inside out, and Roan would survive because he always survived.

But before he could completely tear up, Roan looked at him, his eerie green eyes slightly glazed, and said, “Good, somebody who can get me the fuck out of here.”

This startled the tears back in his eye sockets. “What?”

Roan sat up, making the bags on the IV stands sway slightly as he threw his legs over the side and started to slide out of bed. “I ain’t staying here. I’m fine, they’re overreacting. Fucking doctors.”

Paris rushed to his side as he attempted to stand and almost fell over. He steadied Roan, accidentally hitting one of the tubes that connected him to the IV bags (one was filled with clear fluid, the other was filled with something that wasn’t), and held him firmly by the shoulders. “You are not going anywhere. Get back in bed.”

Ro glared at him. Although his usual fire was there, that odd glaze remained. Was he in shock? “Don’t baby me. I’m fine.”

“Fine? You were shot in the fucking chest! That earns you a time-out.”

He grunted in disgust. “It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Fuck you, Black Knight.” He grabbed Roan by the face and stared straight into his eyes, making sure he had his full attention before he spoke. “You are going to get back into that bed and tell me what happened. You are going to answer my questions, and then I’ll think about

getting you out of here. If you don't, I'm going to leave without you. Understand?"

He stared at him sullenly. "This is stupid."

"I don't care." He dropped his hands to Roan's shoulders and forced him to sit down. Normally he couldn't, but Ro was clearly not at his best at the moment. For the first time, he actually noticed that he was wearing one of those awful paper hospital gowns, and it made him look that much more pale. Shit, how much blood had he lost? "Humor me."

Ro rolled his eyes, but he sat back, slumping against his pillows. "Why'd you bring the Beretta?"

"What?"

"I can smell the gun oil on you. You're not planning to go all *Death Wish* on me, are you? 'Cause that's my job, not yours."

Sometimes that super-smelling thing could be such a pain in the ass. "What happened?"

He told him, in a slow but concise monotone. How could he remember so many details when he was being shot at? It was typical of him, but no less bizarre. So there were two killers, or at the very least an active accomplice—did that kick Karen Hammond off the suspect list?

While he listened, he casually brushed the hair out of Roan's eyes—his hair was growing out fast again—and noticed how cool his skin was to the touch. He let his hand trail down to the side of his throat, where he unobtrusively felt his pulse through his neck. It was a bit slower than usual, but reassuringly strong and steady. But his eyelids were heavy and kept threatening to close, even though Ro kept fighting it like the stubborn bastard he was. As soon as he was done telling the story, Paris kissed him gently on the forehead, and told him, "Get some rest. I'll go talk to the doctor and see when I can get you out of here, okay?"

His eyes narrowed angrily and he scowled, unnaturally pale lips twisting downwards. "No, get me outta here now. I'll sleep at home."

"Diego told me you need surgery and you're refusing it. Why?"

"I don't need surgery. I can repair my muscles myself."

Paris took a moment to try and make sense out of that, but failed. "With what? A staple gun?"

Ro stared at him in dazed disbelief. "No. If I can trigger a partial

change, the muscles will fix themselves.”

“Are you hearing what you’re saying?”

“Oh come on, Par, you know what happens when we change: bones break and reset, muscles tear and reattach themselves. It’s the trauma that eventually kills us all, right? If I hurt enough or get angry enough, I can get a partial change that I can control as long as I don’t go too far over the edge. But those fucks drugged me after I tore my IVs out—”

“You what?” He looked at Roan’s arm, and sure enough, where the tubes entered his skin, they were wrapped up with what seemed to be an excessive amount of gauze and tape.

“—and I have no idea what they gave me, but it makes me feel too good to be angry. Also, I tried punching the wound, but I seemed too ready for it, braced for it. It didn’t work. Oh hey, that gives me an idea. You punch me.”

Now he knew he was out of his goddamn mind. “What the fuck did they give you, angel dust?”

Roan slipped one arm out of his paper gown, and then realized he wasn’t going to get the other out with the tubes in the way, so he just ripped it down until he exposed a large, hand-sized rectangular gauze pad taped to his chest. There were tiny speckles of blood on it. “I know I can do it. Remember when I punched out the deadbolt? I can manage a partial change. I just need some stimulus, apparently—believe me, I have tried without it. It’s not enough. Just punch the wound, as hard as you can. It’ll hurt me for a second, but it’ll help me a hell of a lot more. Come on.”

“No! I am not going to punch you! Jesus...”

“Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about this, but you can see why, right? It’s not human to be able to change your musculature. But I can, and I can be back on my feet by tonight; I don’t need to be laid up for a week due to surgery. I need to get back out there.”

This was completely freaky, and yet the plea was obvious in Roan’s voice. What did you do in a situation like this? He certainly wasn’t going to hurt him. It had to be the drugs, right? Maybe he was serious about being able to trigger a partial change, but... for some reason, Paris found it hard to wrap his brain around it. What Roan needed to be was sober so they could discuss this. Paris sat on the edge of the bed and slid his arm around his shoulders. Roan needed to stop fighting the drugs and sleep,

and he knew exactly how to make it happen. He couldn't talk him into it, but he could trick him into it.

"I started investigating Karen Hammond. I found out a couple of interesting things," he said, launching into a slow, steady monologue in a quiet voice, and gently stroking the back of Roan's neck. Paris made sure he told him the truth but nothing actually interesting, and he took his damn time about it. It took a few minutes, but finally Ro slumped against him, the drugs overwhelming him. Took long enough. If willpower alone could blast holes in mountains, the Cascades would look like Swiss cheese once Roan was through with them.

A nurse came in, but she was a frightening-looking thing, wearing gloves up to her elbows and a thick surgical mask over her nose and mouth. He forgot they were treated like plague victims; it was easy to forget when you lived in your own little world, far from "normal" people.

She wanted him out of there, so he went, but he made sure Roan was asleep and still sleeping before he left, and once out in the hall he felt strangely drained. He slumped in one of the plastic chairs sporadically placed throughout the corridor, and he was relieved that Diego wasn't loitering out here. That damn junior cruiser was still here, but he was far down the hall, talking to a female doctor with short blonde hair the exact same color as his. Obviously that was his mother, and he caught a random bit of conversation. The kid was saying "—no, I'm not using again, that had nothing to do with this—"

His rage had cooled to a hard lump in his stomach, but he still felt like punching something (although not Roan). So he could trigger a partial change? Could he trigger a full one? That was the next logical step, wasn't it? Of course he'd never heard of anyone actually being able to do that, but then again he'd never heard of someone spending more time in cat form than human form until he met Michael Henstridge. The virus children, the ones with the viral DNA in their basic genetic makeup, were starting to change everything they knew about this disease, and they knew so little about it even after all this time. It was like they were rewriting the laws of physics as they went along.

He wondered what kind of experimenting Roan had done when he snuck out late at night, how far he had pushed the boundaries, and if that was why he was so scared to talk about it. Or if he didn't talk about it because Paris really wasn't one of his kind. He was, he was infected, but he wasn't really, because he started off as human and became otherwise.

Roan had always been a bit more than that.

He checked his cell, if only to get his mind off this topic, and after hoping it wasn't Annie calling him (his cell phone number wasn't listed, to his knowledge, but a lawyer had to have resources beyond the norm), he realized the message left was even stranger. "Hi, Kevin, this is Tim Barlow, from the Humanity First group the other night. I know this is last minute, but we're having a private meeting tonight at eight-thirty at 817 Roland Avenue, and we'd be glad to have you there if you can make it. No need to call back, just come on by, although if you can't make it there should be another one in a week or two. And also, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. As I said, this is a private meeting, personal invitees only. So... anyway, hope to see you there. Bye."

Okay, he hadn't been expecting that. He—no, sorry, Kevin Stiles, that prick from the lacrosse team—must have passed inspection, whatever that was. Or, considering the timing, it was a trap.

Could go either way, couldn't it? It was a meeting at a private household because potentially illegal activity would be discussed—or it was a setup because they'd figured out he was infected and wanted to find out how much he knew in a setting where they wouldn't be bothered by any pesky witnesses.

The hubbub from Roan joining the police force had flared and died years ago (and his resignation was never actually covered), but it was possible that someone had recognized him in spite of his pseudonym. And because he was an infected that dared to get close, they had him shot today, and now they were going to privately bring in his friend after fucking the hit up. He would be an easier mark up close and personal. Was that it? Did these fucks have Roan shot? Were they planning something similar for him?

Paris knew if there were any doubts that he shouldn't risk it, he shouldn't go, and if Ro were awake and not as high as the International Space Station he'd also give him an emphatic "Hell no, you don't go." But his rage flared anew, a burning warmth that actually felt good, and he realized he absolutely had to go. If these assholes had tried to kill Roan, he wanted to know right this goddamn second. If they wanted to try something with him, they were free to do so.

But if they expected him to go without a fight, they were in for one hell of a nasty shock.

9

Intolerance

PARIS was leaving the hospital when he saw a familiar face coming in. “So how’s our guy?” Sergeant Murphy asked him, pulling him aside in the lobby.

Darinda—or as Roan called her, Dropkick—was actually a fairly petite woman, he had to look down to face her, but built solidly enough that it looked like she could slap the cuffs on your average offender with no problem at all. She looked neat and presentable in an off-the-rack black suit with a no-nonsense ivory blouse and leather flats, her badge clipped to her belt and barely visible beneath her jacket. Her hair was cut in a shorter than average bob—her dark brown hair laced with the occasional silver—her open, friendly face unadorned with makeup, and her eyes burned with an intelligence that was fearsome. She was in her forties but looked good for it.

“He’s asleep. Diego said he was going to be okay, and considering how combative he was, I can believe it.”

“Combative?” She raised a delicately arched eyebrow, her hazel eyes bright with mischief. “Dare I ask what he did?”

“Oh, ripped out his IVs, attempted to storm out. They drugged him and he fought it for a very long time.”

She chuckled faintly, shaking her head. “That crazy Scot. He just never got over his childhood, did he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, just me doing a bit of amateur psychology. He spent his early life at the mercy of the foster care system, in state institutions, and it seems that he has spent the rest of his life making sure he was never at the mercy of other people ever again. Being in a hospital is probably a bad flashback for him.”

That made perfect sense, and he couldn't believe he hadn't thought of that. What kind of boyfriend was he? Then again, Roan didn't talk about his childhood much, or his past in general, except in the occasional brief anecdote. Paris didn't press him because it was clearly painful and uncomfortable for him. But part of him was a coward; he knew Roan had been at least physically abused; those scars he didn't talk about and the one he did (the one on the back of his hand, from a hot iron) were the obvious markers of a bad past. Did it go beyond that, though? He had a hard time thinking about Roan being hurt as a child, it made him feel sick with rage, and his mind shied away from the possible worst-case scenarios because he wasn't sure he could deal with it. But he knew there were times when Ro just couldn't bear to be touched, which could have simply been due to physical abuse, or it could have been a sign of past sexual abuse. If Roan didn't want to talk about it, though, he wasn't going to press it. But he knew why Ro had such a bone-deep hatred of wife beaters and child abusers; some grudges were just too personal to fade away that easily.

Murphy touched his arm, and it startled him. He didn't realize he had zoned out for a moment until she did. "Hey, you okay? Need a ride home?"

He shook his head, snapping out of it. "No, thanks. I was just... I hate that people seem to live to hurt him, both then and now."

"Well, he can more than take care of himself now. Also, sometimes you can't help but want to give him a smack." She smiled faintly, trying to make it a joke, and he tried to respond in kind, but found it difficult. She seemed to realize that now wasn't the time, and went back to a safer topic. "We found the Jeep used in the shooting."

That was a real surprise. "Already?"

"Oh come on, with the description he gave us? He remains a wet dream as a witness—he sees all, he remembers all, and getting shot isn't enough to stop him. We found it less than a mile away in an abandoned lot, set on fire. It had only been recently set alight, though, and only the front seats had burned by the time we put it out. We got forensics going over it, hopefully they'll be able to pull something we can use."

"No plates?"

Her lips thinned to a grim line as she shook her head. "Took 'em with 'em, so they're not complete idiots. But they forgot the VIN, so we're seeing if that gets us anywhere. I don't want to say I'm glad they went

after Roan, 'cause God knows I'm not, but I'm relieved they targeted the wrong goddamn person, and that's gonna cost 'em. I only wish it was our killer."

She was just full of surprises for him today, wasn't she? "How do you know it's not?"

"A major change in M.O. is the main one. This man—and I'm just assuming it's a man because they're generally your spree/serial killer; women are more your 'crime of passion' type—does like to shoot his victims, and he does like to take them by surprise, but he also likes to be right there, up close and personal, so he can savor the death. It's quite possible he even gets a sexual charge out of it. For him, this act is very intimate. A drive-by with an automatic weapon is a change in weapon, and a change in basic motive, and all of this ignores the fact that there was an obvious witness right there, that the victim wasn't alone even though the victim was alone in every other case. I think someone else shot Roan—two someone elses."

"But who? And why?"

She held her hands open in a type of shrug. "Well, big guy, I was hoping you could tell me. Has he gotten any death threats lately? Has he pissed someone off more than usual?"

"Other than the police department? No."

That made her grimace, but she conceded the point with a nod. "If you think of anything, let me know. And I'm gonna have a prowler give your neighborhood a pass through tonight, okay? Call immediately if you think you hear or see anything suspicious."

It was almost funny in an odd sort of way, yet he couldn't laugh. "You think they might come after me?"

"You work together. If they have a grudge against him, they could include you in it."

Paris wished they would. He wanted them to come after him, because he wanted very badly to beat the shit out of them before the cops showed up to haul them away. He knew if they could get Roan they could easily get him, but death just didn't bother him anymore. He didn't actively seek it out like he did before Ro, but he'd come to terms with it. It was inevitable, and after all he'd been through, it was difficult to see it as a scary thing for himself. "I'll be okay. If Roan was the target, you should

get the cops here to watch his room.”

A corner of her mouth quirked up in a bitter half-smile. “Oh yeah, he’d love that.” Okay, she had a point. “Actually, I’ll have people check in on him regularly, but cops are in and out of County all the time. This is where we drag those belligerent drunks who fight each other with pool cues and the assholes who get on the wrong side of knives. Those guys would have to be idiots to come after him here, and I really don’t think they are. I’d wager money Roan scared the shit out of them. They fired a couple dozen shots and only stuck one, and Roan fired two and hit both. How’d he do that, by the way? More of his amazing luck?”

Paris shrugged and shook his head. “Guess so.” She didn’t know, did she? She probably knew about the whole super-smell thing, but didn’t she know about his eyesight, his reflexes? He thought that’s why the cops were so happy to have him, even though he was one of the freakish infected. Maybe she knew, but wasn’t actually aware of how supernatural they actually were. They all thought of him as Human, and he was slowly realizing that that was demeaning to what he actually was.

She rubbed his upper arm in a comforting gesture, and forced a weak smile. “Sure you’re okay?”

She thought his zoning out earlier was him trying not to lose it, but she’d misinterpreted it. He wasn’t upset about that, he was angry at himself—furious that he’d missed the subtext of fear in Roan’s insistence on leaving the hospital. He felt like he’d failed him in some key way. “I’m okay, thanks. I’ve got some stuff at the office to clear up.”

That seemed to surprise her. “Are you sure you want to go back to work?”

“It’ll keep my mind off things, and believe me, I need that right now.” A bit of a lie, but he was always an excellent liar, and she never saw it. She was a good cop, an excellent profiler, and yet she couldn’t see through him. He wondered what awful thing that meant about him.

But he decided that was something else he wasn’t going to think about.

HE WENT home and killed time before he had to go to the “meeting.” He

couldn't call his sister, not now, and he couldn't eat either, even though he knew he should. He had about a week before he entered his viral cycle, and he needed to start banking calories now if he didn't want to look like a skeleton after his first change. Instead, he did a reverse directory search on the address he'd been given, and discovered the address led to a private home owned by Reese and Amy Campbell, two people he'd never heard of. A quick check of the database showed that all Reese had on his record was a variety of traffic violations; Amy was clean. He worked as the manager of a copy shop, while she was a manicurist, and perhaps not coincidentally, their separate shops shared a strip mall location.

Paris changed into a T-shirt that advertised a golf pro shop he'd never heard of, and slightly baggy, worn jeans that hid the belt holster quite well. He put the spare clip inside one of the hiking boots he was wearing, although he thought it was crazily optimistic that he'd ever get a chance to reload. *If* they were guilty; if they did this. Now he wasn't sure.

They were responsible for the killer, but not for Roan's shooting—or they were responsible for Roan's shooting, but not the killings. Or Dropkick was totally wrong, but he didn't think she was. Her profile of the killer sounded excellent, bulletproof logic, and it just served to remind him of what an amateur he really was. But there was something he was excellent at, something that he was sure neither Roan nor Murphy could do, and that was making people believe whatever he wanted them to believe. He'd spent his whole life perfecting the art of bullshit, and now here was a major test of his abilities. Time to see if he could still play with the big dogs.

He left a note on the breakfast bar saying where he was going, and added that Roan should check his cell's voice mailbox. In case he didn't come back, he wanted Ro to nail the bastards.

Although it was still drizzling, he decided to take Ro's motorcycle, as it was generally seen as a very macho, "straight" thing to do (apparently most people were unaware of the gay leather gangs), and his bike was a bit more anonymous than the GTO. Ro's bike was a Buell Lightning "City" model, a really beautiful bike with a four-stroke, fuel-injected, V-twin engine, chrome and black with translucent blue accents; this thing was fast and rough and kicked a hell of a lot of ass. It was also a fairly expensive bike, but Roan had got it on the cheap from a police auction; it was apparently among the ill-gotten gains of a drug dealer that got busted a while back. He used to have a Kawasaki, but was happy to sell the thing to

get this instead. It was definitely a trade up.

He put on his black leather flight jacket, zipping it up to avoid the worst of the rain, and then put on the full face helmet at the very last minute, as it always made him feel claustrophobic. But once he got going, the bike chewing up asphalt as he raced toward the city and out into the suburbs, he felt almost high. This was as close as he ever got to flying, and when he could really kick the engine into overdrive, it felt even better than that. It was freedom as well as an open flirtation with death, an adrenaline rush that could be a major turn-on. But the possibility that he was driving straight into hell killed any latent horniness.

The house of the Campbells sat in the center of a tree-lined block, a pale blue two-story house with egg-white trim and a struggling weeping willow in the front yard, an '03 maroon Toyota Camry and an '05 Range Rover in a color that could best be described as sewage sludge brown in the oil-stained driveway. This looked like a nice, quiet neighborhood, the kind where they might set a made-for-TV movie about the perils of alcoholism or infidelity or something. He parked the bike in the driveway, behind the sludgy Range Rover, and took off his helmet and carried it beneath his arm as he approached the front door. A helmet could actually be a pretty good weapon; you hit someone with it right, and you could break their nose as easily as snapping off a pop top.

The door was answered by a trim, petite brunette with shoulder-length hair and a reasonably attractive—if slightly overly made-up—face, dressed casually in a Budweiser T-shirt and tight jeans. Her storm cloud gray eyes quickly scanned him, took him in, and he saw a reaction in her pupils that suggested attraction. He made a mental note of that, in case he could string her along and take advantage of it. “Can I help you?” she asked, her voice betraying a hint of a Southern accent. Amy (Reynolds) Campbell was a thirty-four-year-old woman who hailed from South Carolina originally, and he knew that was precisely who he was dealing with.

“I’m Kevin Stiles. I was told there was a meeting here...?”

“Oh, of course, come on in.” She stepped back and held the door wide open, her face splitting into a warm but slightly wolfish grin. Once he was inside, she shut the door and he unzipped his jacket so he had more immediate access to the Beretta. “Ain’t you a cute one? Tim never mentioned that.”

“So how many people are here?” he asked, giving his voice just a little bit of nervous tension. If he was too relaxed, they’d be suspicious. But inside he was amazingly calm and centered: all ice. When you had decided on a course of action that could be irrevocable, it was bizarre what a weight it was off your shoulders.

“Just a few friends, that’s all. Tim said your story was really moving. Can I take your coat?”

He shook his head, and as she continued to look at him with that special glint in her eye, the one that suggested he could have her after one more beer, he gave her his best slow, sensuous smile, the one that without fail got him to at least third base. (Okay, the first time he used it on Roan it hadn’t worked, but that had only intrigued him.) “Naw, that’s okay. I picked a shitty day to take the bike out, and now I’m paying the price. I’m fucking freezing.”

Her responding smile was amused, which he thought it would be. Women were usually impressed when a man came right out and admitted he was an idiot, and he’d found making fun of his own mental shortcomings seemed to be a good way to get women into bed. It could work the same on a man too, although that was wholly dependent on the guy. “I’m Amy, by the way. Pleased to meet you. Why don’t I get you a beer? That oughta warm you up.”

“Thanks, I’d like that.”

She threw him a smile that suggested he could have a lot more before leading him into the living room, her hips swaying a bit more than necessary. She did have a nice ass, he had to give her that.

The living room was an uncomfortable mix of Ikea and Goodwill, with a mottled brown carpet that probably hid every kind of stain known to mankind and reminded him for some reason of the ’70s (although there was no way this house could be more than ten years old). The sofa was a large brown sectional that was probably older than the house, and on it were seated three men, all between the ages of mid-twenties to mid-thirties, and he recognized Tim from the meeting, now wearing little wire framed glasses and a beige V-neck sweater. He looked so much like a therapist it was insane.

The other two men were a study in contrasts. The youngest of the men was a string bean, tall and wiry, in a Hard Rock Cafe T-shirt and khakis, his curly brown hair tucked beneath a trucker hat advertising STP,

his eyes as shiny and empty as small brown mirrors. He was sitting on the edge of the couch, his knee bouncing up and down with nervous tension. Sitting at the opposite end of the couch was an average-sized man sprawled back comfortably, his stomach a small, round lump like he was smuggling a bowling ball, making his plain green T-shirt pull up and expose a small strip of skin with a few stray black hairs visible. His head was perfectly round, his skin betraying the slight flush of windburn, his scalp shaved and shiny as if waxed. His eyes were like small polished stones shoved deep in the clay of his face, and he was almost avuncular, although there was something about him that put Paris's teeth on edge.

Tim stood up as he came in, thanked him for coming, and introduced Jack Sprat as Brad, while Humpty Dumpty was Reese. (No wonder Amy was attracted to Paris.) He shook hands with them all, noting that Brad's hand was clammy although his grip was crushing, and Reese's barely registered at all. Tim had a grip like a wet rag. Everyone had a Rolling Rock, save for Tim, who had a bottled water.

Paris sat in a white leather love seat across from the sofa, which gave him a perfect view of everyone and an unblocked shot, and he set the helmet on the carpet. Amy came sauntering into the room with two bottles of Rolling Rock and handed him one, sitting on the other end of the loveseat and curling her legs beneath her. She was careful not to sit too close to him, but when her husband wasn't looking, he caught her giving him a certain look out of the corner of his eye. It was possible she was trying to play him, though; it was possible she was trying to bring him in or lull him into a false sense of security with the lure of her. Men were sadly simple—get them by the dick and you had them, gay or straight or other. But if she wanted to play the game with him, he hoped she realized she was tangling with a master of sexual manipulation; he wasn't as easy to get by the short and curlies as other men. He'd learned his lesson the hard way.

Tim did the talking at first, and it was almost like they were pitching Amway at him. They quizzed him on what he knew about Humanity First, and his story of infected horror. He elaborated his story this time out, about his college roommate, "Perry," who was deliberately infected and disappeared, never to be found, with the inclusion of his girlfriend, "Darlene," who was apparently sleeping around on him with Perry. She, too, got infected, and he said she died at her first transition. He played up the pathos, allowing himself to get genuinely angry (not hard—he just

thought of Roan lying in that hospital bed, and contemplated the fact that two of the fucks in this room might have done it) and even teared up a bit, although he never cried (too girly). He took several swigs of his beer, but he actually only allowed a few drops to get through his lips; he didn't want to let his guard down by a single iota, not until he knew the game.

Tim feigned sympathetic looks, while Brad seemed to get more wound up and anxious (judging by the increased bouncing of his leg), and Reese seemed perfectly impassive. Amy made sympathetic noises, but that was about it. Paris wasn't impressed. He added angrily, without prompting, "I hate those fucking cats. Everybody makes excuses for them—they're diseased, they're victims—but most of those fucking freaks got infected by their own stupid behavior. Since when do we give special rights to people who fuck themselves up and fuck other people up? We don't excuse rapists or killers, so why do we allow these freaks to do whatever they want?"

There were nods all around. "We should put 'em all in camps," Brad said, his knee still bouncing like he had a neurological disorder. "I don't care if we firebomb 'em after or just leave 'em to rot, but they ain't people and they shouldn't be around us. The fucking PC bleeding hearts, it's their fault the world's so fucked-up. If we locked the faggots up when AIDS started, it wouldn't have spread, it'd just have killed off the fudge packers like it was s'posed ta."

Amy sighed dramatically. "Way to make us sound nuts, Brad."

"Hey, Buchanan said it first, I'm just—"

"I don't care," she snapped, glaring at him with open contempt. "Just shut the fuck up." Although Brad had no accent, the way she talked to him and the slightest facial resemblance made him wonder if they were related. Brother and sister? Cousins?

Paris decided to play the "impatience" card now, as it would probably be expected at this point. "Is this the entire meeting? Just us? Seems a bit... small, doesn't it?"

Tim sat forward, resting his clasped hands on his knees, taking on the look of a marriage counselor about to tell you that learning to trust is the hardest but most rewarding part of any relationship. "You have to understand, Kevin, we have to be very careful about the people we let in. We want people who are committed to the cause, who want to be proactive. We have to be careful, because there are people who wish to...

sabotage us.”

He pretended to be confused, all the while thinking, *Yes, people like this fudge packer here.* “Sabotage you? For what, not liking cats?”

“It’s more than that,” Tim replied, clearly trying to think of some way to put it.

“You a cop?” Reese suddenly asked. It was the first thing he’d said all evening.

Paris’s scoff was genuine. “Do I smell like bacon to you? No, I’m not a cop. What the hell’s this about?”

He watched Amy, Tim, Brad, and Reese all exchange looks with each other, quizzical and demanding, and he had a feeling he was in. Which meant they didn’t shoot Roan, but that didn’t make him feel better. It just meant they were still in the running as the kitty killers.

Tim remained coy, which Paris suspected was his strength. They needed “young people like him,” full of “vitality and passion” (he was tempted to ask if he was coming on to him, but he knew no one in this room had a sense of humor), and they wanted to know if he was committed to bringing these infected “to justice,” no matter how it might seem to some people. (“Kitty fuckers.” Brad sneered. “They ain’t people. They’re like another species entirely.”) He pretended to take a moment to work out what they were really saying, then feigned shock at the idea before gradually settling into it, letting the anger come back as he almost accepted it. But he retained some wariness as he asked how illegal the things they were discussing were. Tim explained that they weren’t “illegal per se,” just things that people wanted to do but were afraid to do.

He found himself thinking of 1984, of Orwellian doublespeak as Tim calmly and rationally sold a vague bill of goods that could have meant anything from simple vandalism to all-out murder. This was Tim’s role: he was the clear-eyed, seemingly sane cult leader, the subtle snake-oil salesman who gradually suckered you in, as insidious as the more obvious and charismatic Eli. They were two sides of the same coin, with Eli never hiding the fact that he was a pure showman in it for the ego-stroking, and Tim hiding everything behind a plain vanilla exterior that belied something truly ugly lurking beneath the surface. He never would have pegged him for the ringleader; Roan hadn’t, either. But he was. Sitting across from him in this sitcom-bland living room, Paris recognized a fellow predator, someone who, in different incarnations, had probably

talked the susceptible into assassinating abortion doctors or burning down synagogues. He wondered how many he had suckered, and what he'd gotten them to do for him. Was murder still on the roster?

Paris pretended to be susceptible, to fall under the hypnotic sway of his low, metronomic voice and friendly Mr. Rogers demeanor. He didn't become an instant soldier for Tim's personal jihad, he still held himself back at arm's length, only agreeing to think about his proposal, but he said it in a way as to leave little doubt what his ultimate decision would be. And they bought it, of course, because Paris was still the king of all liars (although it was hardly anything to be proud of). Tim thought *he* was a snake oil salesman? He had no fucking idea. He let Tim think he was hypnotizing him, pulling him into the snare, while inside Paris quietly gloated over how easily Tim was falling for his trap.

By the time he'd left, Tim had given him a "special number," one where they could discuss these things more in depth, as well as his IM name in case he felt more comfortable speaking that way. Amy saw him out, holding his arm in an unusually friendly manner, and she let her hand linger longer than needed as she looked him in the eyes and gave him a smile that could only be described as lascivious. He was half-convinced it was an act, a honey trap, but he held her gaze longer than polite company would allow, feigning a response that she would expect. He could play the honey trap game too, and much better than her. They wanted him bad, and he suspected it was a setup. But a setup for Kevin—they needed a patsy quite badly, and he had been chosen. He was glad. Roan was great with the investigations, the motives, and the physical stuff, but this was where Paris shined.

It was dark when he went in, but it somehow seemed even darker out now, as if all the lights in the sky had been switched off, the moon hidden behind clouds as thick as cotton wool. He couldn't believe he hadn't run Tim through the database, but that was okay. If he was as slick as Paris suspected, he wouldn't have a record. Just like Eli, he got people to do his dirty work for him. He drove off, not sure where he was going to go, which he figured out on the road, watching the pavement dissolve beneath his wheels.

The hospital had an underground parking garage manned by rent-a-cops, and Paris parked the bike down there, to get it out of the rain and hide it from any prying eyes, then took the elevator up into the hospital.

Dropkick had been right about the police presence in the place. In

the busy lobby were two uniformed cops talking to the nurse at the front desk, with a handcuffed man between them. He had a swollen left eye and a huge gash on his forehead that was sending blood gushing down his face. He continued to rant drunkenly while the cops and the nurse talked over him. It was so noisy it was hard to tell, but it sounded like the drunk guy was going on about a moose.

No one noticed as he slipped by and ducked into one of the hospital's inner elevators, which he shared with a nurse and a man in a wheelchair. He got out alone on the fifth floor, the one with the isolated ICU, and was only mildly surprised to find the hallway empty and quiet. There was a male nurse manning the in-charge desk, but he was arguing on the phone with another nurse about the wrong chart being left behind. No one noticed Paris duck into Roan's room.

It was dark and quiet, the sounds of Roan's slow, deep breathing the only noise. He tossed his helmet on the room's only chair and went to check on him, putting a hand on his face and waiting to see if he stirred. He didn't; he was probably only a few steps out from a drug-induced coma. "You must have really freaked them out when you ripped out your IVs. You bled, didn't you? Never do that around normals—you know how they spaz." Of course he probably couldn't hear him, but this was the only time he could scold him without getting a smart-ass reply.

He took off his coat and the Beretta, wrapping the gun and the holster in the jacket before setting them on the chair. "We got him, babe. The ringleader, if not the exact triggerman. Can you believe it's the guy who looks like Doctor Phil's replacement? He wants me as an ideological suicide bomber. I attract all types, don't I?" He stepped out of his boots, and was relieved, as the spare clip had been poking him in the ankle for about a half an hour now. He bet it had left a dent. "No hard proof yet, but let me string him along for a bit. He'll give us enough rope to hang him with. I'm an angry and naïve young man, after all. I have no idea when someone's trying to play me. I just want revenge against those fucking cats."

Roan was sleeping on his side, which was good, as the hospital bed was quite small, so much so that Paris figured he'd have to balance on the edge. Which was okay, because he didn't expect to be comfortable at all. He wasn't here for himself.

He climbed carefully onto the bed and put his arms around Roan, which was again uncomfortable, but he didn't care. The smell of his hair

was instantly comforting. “You’re safe,” he whispered. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” Roan didn’t wake up, but he settled back against him, and Paris took that as forgiveness of a sort. He couldn’t turn back time and redo earlier, but he could stay here and let him know he wasn’t alone.

He’d failed him once. He wasn’t going to do that again.

10

Under the Flesh

APPARENTLY some nurses just had no sense of humor at all.

Paris got woken up by a very angry nurse who wondered what the hell he was doing here—did he think this was a hotel? She really didn't appreciate his response. "If it is, your room service sucks."

He was probably lucky he didn't get shot full of Ebola.

He took the opportunity of the rampaging Nurse Ratched to go home and get some clothes for Roan, as well as swap the bike for the GTO. He also took the opportunity to grab a quick shower, change his clothes, and pick up some breakfast (which was a Red Bull and a nuked breakfast burrito—also known as the breakfast of champions). The rain was supposed to taper off, but of course it was now bucketing down with renewed enthusiasm, and he discovered the hard way that a couple of roads were closed or so badly flooded that they were all but impassable. It was like fall in Vancouver, only the rain was a bit warmer here.

Once he got back, he encountered Diego in the lobby of the hospital. He looked exhausted, with dark crescents beneath his eyes and a sort of ashen undertone to his otherwise brown skin. He was in civilian clothes—a bronze shirt, olive drab pants, and a red leather jacket that was stylish and yet helpfully announced to everyone that he couldn't possibly be gayer—and Paris assumed he'd been working all night and was just getting off shift. He had Roan's coat, the one he'd been wearing when he was shot. Ro was adamant about keeping it, and Diego hung on to it, even though, as he pointed out, those bloodstains would never come out. Paris took it and thanked him for it, and Diego put a friendly hand on his arm as he told him, "I never thought I'd be jealous of Roan, you know, but... he's lucky to have you. Don't let him forget it."

He must have known he'd spent the night. He was tempted to say it was a kind of penance for fucking up so badly earlier on, but who was he

to deny himself an ego stroking? “I never do,” he told him, flashing a brief, brilliant smile. His arm was still a bit numb from having slept on it wrong, but he could live with it. After all, he’d had a lot worse. For instance, waking up after a transformation, feeling like his skin was full of broken glass. And when he actually deigned to move, it was even worse.

To think he used to be afraid of going to the dentist. Pain really became a relative thing when your whole body was broken down, remade, and then broken down again, all in the course of a night. It also gave him a new appreciation of powerful painkillers.

When he got up to Roan’s room, his bed was empty, and the IV tubes had been tied together like a couple of balloon ribbons and balanced on top of one of the bags. There was a small trail of blood leading to the bathroom, the door of which was closed. “I got some clothes for you,” Paris announced loudly. “But I’m not giving them to you if you’re just going to bleed on them.”

The door opened, and Roan came out, looking not only frighteningly awake but much better than before; he looked like his normal self. “Thank you. I didn’t think I could take wearing paper much longer.”

Paris visually scanned him before handing him the pile of clothes. His arm wasn’t bleeding; there was still fresh blood on it, but no wounds, no marks that showed where the needles had been in his arms and yanked out. He suddenly had a sneaking suspicion about what Roan had done in his absence. “Did you...?”

Roan took the clothes and tossed them on the bed as he shucked off his paper gown and started getting dressed, quickly stepping into his boxer shorts. “Hurt myself? Yeah, finally. I’m ready to go home.”

He allowed himself a moment to enjoy Roan’s torso before noticing the bandage still on his upper chest. He’d noticed lately that his arms were getting more toned, his abdomen more solid, but Paris had never thought that this was some result of Ro attempting partial transformations to develop his own musculature. It seemed dangerous somehow, although he wasn’t sure why. “This is all a bit... weird, you know.”

Roan nodded, but Paris noticed he wasn’t meeting his eyes. “I know. I’m sorry I just sprung it on you. I just... it’s not easy to talk about.”

“Or do, I imagine.” Before Ro could put his shirt on, he reached out and touched the bandage on his chest. Ro finally met his eyes, and at

Paris's unspoken question, he nodded an assent. He grabbed the edge of the gauze and yanked it off in one quick motion, revealing that the wound that should have been there was completely gone. His skin was unblemished, unmarked—there wasn't even a scar.

Roan winced, and let out a delayed yelp of pain, grabbing his chest. "Jesus! I should have just ripped the bandage off."

Paris smirked, about to accuse him of being a wimp when he looked at the bandage—there was still some old blood on it—and noticed the chest hairs clinging to the tape. "Oh, ouch. At least you're not a bear. That really would have hurt."

"It's bad enough as it is." He rubbed the red spot on his skin, which faded away quickly enough.

If Paris had seen the bullet wound, the ragged hole torn in his chest, he supposed he would have been really freaked out, but since he'd never actually seen it, there was a distance in the fact that Ro was uninjured. But the needle marks... wouldn't there have still been holes from the intravenous tubes? How come there weren't? That was skin, not muscle. He healed that as a side effect, huh? A minor scratch compared to the torn fibers of his sinew.

The thought still struck him as surreal, and he started catching Roan up on what he'd missed, just to distract himself from the thought that the lion was insinuating itself into Ro more and more. Would there be a point when the two were inseparable, a hybrid entity, neither cat nor human? Was that even possible? And what would happen to him if that actually occurred? People wouldn't accept it; they barely accepted him now.

Roan agreed with Murphy's sentiment that the shooter was probably not the killer they were after, although he felt they were lower on the intelligence scale. He didn't seem bothered by it, which bothered Paris, but he figured Ro would react like getting shot and nearly killed was no big deal at all. Paris waited until he was pulling his shirt on before telling him about going to the Humanity First meeting, and how Tim Barlow was emerging as the ringleader. He wasn't pleased that he'd gone in on his own, but he was surprised about Tim, or as he called him "the Mormon middle manager." (Actually, he did kind of look like that.) He wanted him to be careful going to any further meetings, and whatever he did—be it a phone call or an in face meeting—he wanted him miked up so they could record it all. That was such a good idea he didn't know why he hadn't

thought of it last night, but then again, he had actually gone there prepared to kill or be killed. Not really something you wanted to save for the scrapbook.

Roan hugged him, slipping his arms around his back and resting his head in the crook of his neck. "You have to stop doing these things, you know," he murmured. "I do the stupid shit around here, not you."

"Nope, I'm an idiot too. Can't stop me."

He sighed, his breath warm against Paris's throat. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Can I offer suggestions?"

He scoffed, but it was mild, and for a moment they just stood there, not moving. Paris slipped his hand under Roan's shirt, just to feel his skin. It seemed almost unnaturally warm, but he couldn't quite tell. Transformations played holy hell with everything: metabolism, blood pressure, balance, body temperature. Would even a "partial" transformation have some effect on him? How could it not? Was he killing himself just a little bit every time he tried this stuff?

"I should be kicking you out for yesterday," Roan finally said.

"Sorry about that. But you did need the sleep."

He didn't acknowledge that, he just let it go. It was a few seconds before he said, in a whisper, "Thank you."

He didn't think he was thanking him for making him sleep here; he was fairly certain he was thanking him for staying, Nurse Ratched be damned. "I love you. No matter what, don't forget that."

Roan looked up at him, almost smiling. "You know a statement like that usually prefaces something horrible."

Paris tried on a lazy smile that had the added benefit of being genuine. "Since when am I a usual person?" He kissed him, glad that he was up and around and in one piece. If he didn't think of the "why" of it, he was remarkably okay with it. Roan's stubble felt like fine sandpaper against his skin, but so far it was at the almost erotic level. In a couple of hours, if he didn't shave, it'd be at the truly painful stage. It was a thin line.

They were interrupted by the door to the room opening and a chirpy

voice proclaiming, “Knock-knock! I know the food around here sucks so—okay, busy, be back.”

They broke away from the kiss to see the junior cruiser backing out the door, a paper coffee cup and a small brown paper bag in his hands. Roan fixed him with a remarkably hard glare. “You’re still here?”

The junior cruiser—Matt—stopped, halfway in and halfway out the door. “Um, no. I mean, I just thought I’d drop by. Hey, why are you, like, out of bed?”

“Because I’m leaving. Is there something I can help you with?”

Matt came back in the room, looking slightly chastised but no worse for wear. He had changed the color of the streaks in his hair—they were now purple, matching his T-shirt, which also had a tribal pattern on it that seemed to mimic one of his arm tattoos. Now that was coordinating your outfit to a scary degree. “I, uh, brought you some breakfast.” He held up the coffee cup and bag. “I didn’t know what you liked, but I got you a mocha macchiato and a decent breakfast sandwich, deli as opposed to Mickey D’s.” Matt’s blue eyes shifted nervously between Roan and him, as if he knew he didn’t have a shot in hell at this, but he was far too committed to back out now. (Also known as the Iraq war strategy.) “Are you sure you’re cleared to go? ’Cause you weren’t looking good yesterday.”

Roan sighed, and must have felt a bit bad for the kid, because his look softened. “I’m okay, really. I heal fast.” He went toward Matt, and Paris didn’t move his hand from his back, just let it fall away as Roan moved. Did he feel the slightest twinge of jealousy? It was funny, because he did, but in an odd way. He was jealous that Matt wasn’t crushing on him—he was so accustomed to men and women alike looking at him with lust that he came to expect it, and it stoked his ego nicely. But the funny thing about Roan’s admirers were they never settled for lust; they fell straight in love with him, and Paris felt he should know, since the exact same thing had happened to him. And Roan always seemed perfectly oblivious to it. For instance, he didn’t seem to realize that his friend Kevin, the vice cop, was so completely in love with him that it was insane, but Roan just didn’t see it. That was probably for the best, though, because he’d probably feel weird dealing with him, and it wasn’t like Kevin was ever going to come out of the closet and admit it anyway. Also, poor Kev didn’t have a shot with Roan—Ro just didn’t go for the closeted—which just added to the general tragedy of his situation.

Roan took the bag and the coffee, and said, "Thanks, I appreciate it. I'd appreciate it even more if you run interference for us so I can get out of here without being hassled."

Matt seemed to brighten at this. He wanted to feel useful to his new object of obsession. "Sure, yeah. You leaving now?"

"In about five minutes. Think you can get us clear?"

"Oh, no prob. The staff is used to humoring me 'cause of my mom, and this one time when I was usin' and I mixed some X with some meth and was really freakin' out, y'know, they had to strap me down to a gurney. They thought my heart might, like, explode or something." He must have noticed the look Roan was giving him, because he stopped his ramble with a visible effort. "Ya got five, then I'm gonna tie up the front desk."

"Thanks, Matt." He gave him a weak little smile, which Matt returned with a hundred times the intensity, and as soon as Matt was gone, Roan shook his head dismissively. "That kid is the most annoying person I've ever met. Yap yap yap."

Paris chuckled knowingly. "But puppy has such a crush on you."

He groaned in disgust. "That's your job, Par. They're supposed to crush on you and leave me the hell alone."

"Ah, but I didn't save him from a bullet yesterday and act all macho."

"Is it too late to turn back time and take it back?"

"Yep. But next time he starts chewing your ear off, just tell him to give you a blow job. Either he'll be offended and storm off, or he'll give you one and at least that'll make him shut up for a few minutes."

"Why didn't I think of that? You're a genius."

Paris tapped his temple with his index finger. "Sharp as a razor."

Roan gulped the coffee and wolfed down the sandwich in four bites, proving that even a partial transformation could speed up your metabolism, and then they attempted to clean up the blood on the floor (it was the only polite thing to do). The rough paper towels in the bathroom were about as absorbent as cement blocks, but the napkins in the sandwich bag proved to be just the thing.

Matt did his job well; they left the hospital without even being noticed, and on the drive home, Roan dug a card out of his bloodstained coat. He found it at Ashley's place, an appointment card for New Horizons, and that was the lead he was going to follow next. He thought Paris should try and get Tim on IM, and save all the IM messages from him. "Try and arrange a meeting, maybe agree to meet him at a bar after work," Roan told him. "Go in wired. I'll sit out in the car and listen in."

"Set me up with an earpiece and you can feed me lines," he suggested.

"And not make you crack up laughing? The temptation will be too great. Besides, you don't need lines fed to you—you're too good."

"Wow, was that a compliment? I'm touched."

Roan scooted over, putting his arm around his shoulders and leaning against his arm as Paris navigated the rainy, dreary streets. His weight was comforting and familiar, even if his skin did seem to have a little too much heat within it.

"I know I don't say it a lot—well, seriously anyways—but I do love you, you know. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me."

For a long moment there was silence, just the rain beating a constant tattoo on the car and the windshield wipers slapping out a counterpoint, and Paris basked in the warmth of this admission. Oh, he knew Ro loved him; he'd let him into his life, which was a big thing. Roan seemed to be happy with the idea of being a hermit, a crotchety curmudgeon who viewed all of humanity's weaknesses with distance and a jaundiced eye.

But after a minute of sappiness—which was probably a minute too long for Ro—he added, "But don't let it get to your head."

Paris laughed—he'd just been waiting for him to say something like that—and Ro laughed as well. They were probably the best-matched pair of weird fucks that life had ever coughed up. The fact that they managed to find each other was probably a minor miracle.

They'd have to enjoy it while it lasted.

NEW HORIZONS was a dreary-looking rectangular building that looked

like it was made of cement, although up close you could see the stucco on the façade had simply corroded to the color of old asphalt. Inside it was actually neatly appointed, the walls brightly whitewashed and the lightly tinted windows letting in filtered light, realistic-looking fake palms adding a sense of life to the lobby. The furniture was sparse and industrial, lots of bare metal and cheap molded plastic in cheap plastic colors, although the moon-shaped desk at the far end of the room, just before the building dissolved into heavy security doors and mazelike hallways, looked both fancy and slightly out of place.

“Hello, may I help you?” a bright, cheerful voice asked, betraying just a hint of an accent. Roan knew it came from the direction of the desk, but he didn’t see anyone behind it until he was six feet away, and then he saw her, although he had smelled her musky perfume at about twenty feet.

The receptionist was a young woman of Indian extraction, hidden so low behind the desk because she was in a wheelchair. She was also extraordinarily lovely, with sloe eyes, sensuous bow lips, and dusky skin, her deep black hair long and lustrous, so clean and shiny he had an almost undeniable urge to touch it. She was the type of woman so beautiful he could almost entertain the idea of being straight... well, for a couple seconds at least, as long as he kept looking at her from the neck up. Still, he bet some evangelical preachers would consider that a victory and proof that he could be “cured.”

“Hi, I was wondering if Doctor Johnson was in?”

She turned to her computer, a flat screen model that was still a couple of years out of date, and tapped the keyboard. “Which Doctor Johnson?”

He was afraid that would happen. No, he had no choice but to tell her the truth and hope it was enough. He showed her the card he’d taken from Ashley’s, and his own little laminated detective license, small enough to be shoved in his wallet beside his driver’s license and the folded square of his concealed weapons permit. He explained that Ashley had been murdered and she seemed to be one in a sequence, and he was trying to establish a connection between the victims for the police. He just wanted to know something about Ashley, as all he’d been able to establish from the people who worked with her at Starbucks was she was an intensely private and lonely person.

The woman—whose name turned out to be Tanika—seemed

fascinated that he was a detective, and scrutinized his license in a way that suggested as much wariness as awe. Oddly enough, she didn't know Ashley had been killed. Apparently she didn't read the paper, and Roan was able to guess that Ashley's death hadn't made the five o'clock news. And while normally a pretty young white girl getting inexplicably killed would headline, the fact that she was an infected living in a notorious tenement block had probably sunk her. Not that the news people would come out and say being a freak meant she deserved to be shot in the face, but no one was interested in a kitty death unless it was a bloodthirsty cat that was killed by heroic cops.

She did seem to think his name was "kind of familiar" though, although she couldn't place why. He told her he had been in the papers a few years back (had she read papers then?) when he was accepted into the police force, and that's when she gasped, her large eyes growing wider. "Oh my God!" she squealed, sounding inexplicably like a Valley Girl for a split second. "You're that infected cop, aren't you?!"

He cast a suspicious glance around the lobby, making sure the only thing New Horizons had on its walls was a framed health department poster and a corkboard full of colorful flyers. If they had a shrine devoted to him somewhere, he was compelled by good sense and decency to destroy it.

He confirmed that he used to be the infected cop, and she was suddenly looking at him with renewed admiration, almost giddy, like he was a celebrity or something. She did babble for a moment, something about him being a pioneer, and he wondered if he should mention he was asked to turn in his badge because he'd lost his temper and put a belligerent wife-and-child-beating son of a bitch in the hospital, which pretty much disqualified him from "hero" status. But she seemed so pleased to meet him now it would have been like kicking a puppy to tell her the ugly truth, and besides, maybe now she'd be inclined to help him. It'd been hard to tell she was infected under that cloying perfume, but yes, she was, which was why she was seemingly excited by who and what he was. He had no idea that there were infected out there who liked him—he thought they thought he was a "sellout," if they thought of him at all.

Although she prefaced her statement by saying that all clients here were confidential, she did seem willing to bend the rules a bit, since there had been a murder and all. (She didn't know Ashley; she couldn't recall ever meeting her.) By accessing Ashley's records, Tanika discovered that

the doctor he wanted was Doctor Randolph Johnson, a “personal therapist” who wasn’t in today—he only came in on Wednesdays and Sundays. She wasn’t allowed to give out his home address and said so, but she did write his phone number on the back of a New Horizons card and gave it to him. He simply wasn’t to tell him where he got the number, which was easy enough.

For some reason—maybe morbid curiosity, maybe yet another sneaking but random suspicion—he asked if she could confirm if other people had been clients here, no matter the services. She said it was a breach of the confidentiality agreement and couldn’t, but she still had that eager look in her eye, the one that told him there wasn’t a *Law & Order* spin-off she’d missed. So he asked her if it would be okay if he just tossed off a couple of names, and if they had been clients here, she could simply nod once or shake her head. She was amenable to that.

Roan told himself he’d say one, and if she indicated no, he’d just move on to Johnson. But when he said Patrick Farley’s name, Tanika checked her computer and nodded, and his gut clenched in sudden anxiety. It couldn’t be that simple, could it?

It was. They had *all* been clients here: Patrick, Christa, Melissa, Ashley. And wasn’t that what New Horizons was for? It was a social safety net for the infected who had been cast out or run away from their old lives. It was some meager attempt to make up for the family these people no longer had. It was either this or the church.

According to Tanika, there were no hard-copy files of clients: it was all confined to the computer, and it was secure; it couldn’t be accessed by just anyone. He asked if they’d had any problems with viruses or firewall breaches in the last year or so, and she admitted that they got hit by a virus a couple of months ago that had destroyed a lot of data, but they had backups and were able to replace everything after the virus was wiped from the system. She wasn’t willing to tell him how many clients they had on file, but she conceded that it was around “two hundred.”

He thanked her and left, his mind spinning as he retreated to the GTO to get out of the rain.

That virus hadn’t just destroyed data, had it? It had stolen it. He thought there was a connection between the victims and Eli, but save for Melissa, it was superficial at best. Either he was in this up to his eyeteeth, or someone was actually attempting to frame him for this. And while Roan

could sympathize with wanting to fuck Eli up, this wasn't the way to do it.

He called Dropkick. As soon as she realized it was him on the phone, she asked, "What the hell are you doing out of the hospital? You were really out of it yesterday."

"They doped me like Keith Richards. I'm fine now. Look, I have a connection between the victims, but the news gets worse."

"And you're back working too. You do know what a 'break' is, don't you?"

"Something other people take. This is serious, Murph."

She sighed heavily, letting him know tacitly that he was lucky she put up with him. "People are dying, Roan. Of course it's serious. What have you got?"

"The victims were all clients of the New Horizons center, which had its database breached two months ago. I think the killer pulled the names and addresses of all the infecteds they served to that point—all two hundred of them."

She sucked in a sharp breath, and he knew why. There was a killer out there with all the information he needed to hunt down and kill a major cross section of the infected population.

And they still had no idea who he was. Things could be worse, but it would be hard.

11

Just Got Wicked

MURPHY had to go, as she was soon to be busy hitting up the IT people who worked for New Horizons, in hopes that they got something useful when they worked on the besieged computer system. Roan honestly wished her luck, because he'd bet Tanika's obliviousness that it was an actual attack was a shared belief.

This was horrible. This killer, if he stuck to his usual pattern, was due to strike within the next couple of days, but the list of potential victims was far too big. Even if Murph got the list of clients at New Horizons—unlikely without a court order, as the infected were naturally wary of cops—there was no way they could figure out who might be in the pool of most likely victims before the killer showed them. What they needed was a miracle, and he knew they didn't exist, no matter what various churches said.

Sikorski called him before he got back on the road. The VIN of the Jeep used in his shooting was traced to a Jeep that had been stolen off a car lot a couple hours before. They were reviewing security tapes, hoping they caught the guys responsible for the theft and therefore the shooting. He wondered why Gordo was calling him, since he was on the kitty crime beat, and that was when he was informed that they were treating this as a kitty hate crime for the lack of any other motive. "Of course if it turns out to be a gay hate crime, that'll get flipped to another department," Gordo said. "Or if they shot at you because you're a P.I., that'll just get chalked up to public service."

Very funny.

Of course, Roan had a problem with the term "hate crime": was there any such thing as a "love crime" or even a "like crime"? Yes, it was just semantics, but it annoyed him. A lot of things about being a cop had annoyed him, actually; it was a shock he'd lasted as long as he had.

Paris called, sounding giddy, like he'd had two Red Bulls too many. It took a while, but he had finally got Barlow on IM, and gotten him to agree to meet him at a place called TJ's Pub at seven-thirty tonight. They hadn't discussed anything of note, mainly because Par felt he had to reel him in slowly; being far too gung ho and anxious to jump into the kitty killing would be a huge warning sign that he was being set up. Roan agreed with that, as anxious as he was to get on with all of this. Par knew people; he had an almost intuitive grasp of their limits, what they could abide and what they couldn't. He had no doubt he could play Barlow like a finely tuned violin, and that it would be fun to hear. Although on the other hand, it would be frustrating, because Roan liked to think that, when it got down to it, he was an excellent liar when he put his mind to it: you had to be if you were a private investigator, as it came with the job. But Paris made him feel like a rank amateur, like he hadn't the slightest idea what it actually took to successfully con people. Paris was the big leagues, and he felt like the Triple A minors at best. But then again, being a pretty face helped immensely.

That was just basic psychology. People felt safer and more trusting of the aesthetically pleasing, they let their guards drop easier, and you didn't have to be a gay man or a straight female to appreciate how handsome and impossibly well put-together Paris was. Roan supposed he wasn't *that* bad-looking—at least he wasn't horribly repulsive—but people never dropped their guards that fast around him, ever. Except Tanika, but she seemed to be laboring under the misapprehension that he was a hero or a celebrity or something. For some reason, it made him feel bad.

He stopped at his favorite Chinese restaurant, the Bamboo Gardens, and let the friendly owner, Mr. Wing, practice his somewhat broken English on him. The food here was great; he'd been coming here since they opened three years ago, and he knew Wing and his family by sight, just as they knew him. They had no idea he was an ex-cop, a detective, an infected, nothing like that—they just knew him as the red-haired guy with the strange name who tipped really well. And he was happy with that kind of friendly anonymity.

He stocked up on everything he and Paris liked—Mongolian beef, kung pao chicken, princess beef, fried won tons, hot and sour soup, vegetarian egg rolls—and took it home, so they could have lunch and discuss strategy for the meet with Barlow tonight. Not that there was much

to discuss, as Paris knew what he was doing. But he liked to feel included somehow.

The IMs between Barlow and Paris were just as bland as Par had said, committing to almost nothing and not really mentioning the kitty problem by name, but he supposed Barlow might be wary of discussing this online anyway, as it was just too easy to sink someone that way. He'd especially be aware of the lack of computer safety if he had had something to do with the New Horizons firewall breach.

The Mustang had been towed home; it was sitting in the driveway looking like a beating victim, and while they ate, Paris told him how he was pretty sure he could fix it up, it would just take a while. He'd been down at the auto-wrecking yard already, talking with his friend Rodrigo (another car rebuilding enthusiast who worked at the yard), and it seemed a '73 Jaguar convertible model had just been brought in. Paris waxed on about this eagerly, as if it meant something, as it clearly did to him. But Roan honestly didn't care about cars, classic or otherwise. Still, he pretended to care, because that's what you did in a relationship—you humored your mates even when their obsessions struck you as frankly bizarre. He suspected Par felt the exact same way about his book collection and fondness for punk.

He got a call during lunch, a lawyer he knew wanting to hire him to do a skip trace on a client who'd flown the coop, and he wondered when his life had gotten so complicated that the boring, regular detective shit like this would seem so appealing.

His SIG Sauer had been returned, along with the car (it was protocol to examine any weapon that had been fired, even when it was in self-defense), and he was glad to have it back, although he wondered if he should actually bother to wear it tonight. He wasn't expecting Barlow to try anything, nor did he think his shooters would return, but he knew it was exactly when he wasn't expecting anything that things had a tendency to occur. So he loaded it up and put the Beretta away for another day.

He rented a well-used Ford Taurus, gray in color but dingy from desperately needing a wash, so he had an anonymous car with which to follow Paris to the bar. Paris took his bike, which made him feel slightly possessive—well, it was his bike, damn it, and he'd have rather been on it than in this bland Taurus—but the Taurus had a CD player in it, so he was able to listen to Pansy Division and Dead Moon on the long drive to TJ's Pub.

Just to indulge his paranoia, he let Paris reach the bar five minutes ahead of him, so by the time he parked the Taurus in the lot of the small, roadhouse-style bar, Paris was already inside and meeting with Barlow, as Paris had decided to be fashionably late (by only four minutes, though, so it seemed accidental).

He could hear the faint noise of a television over the wire, as well as rumblings from the other patrons of the bar, although none as well as Par and Barlow. Paris was so cool butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth. He feigned interest in the football game on the TV and batted about small talk with Tim like they were just a couple of guys getting together for a drink after work. They had a beer and talked about the weather and local politics before getting to anything substantive, and then Par turned the conversation on to Tim. Tim was married and lived in Summerbrook (a prefab, upper-middle-class housing enclave in the suburbs), had a wife named Shelly and two kids, and Tim worked for the MetLife branch office. Just from the tone of voice, Roan picked up that he wasn't happy with something in that mix, if not all of it, and it somehow figured that an anti-cat activist would work for an insurance company. (They must have paid out a lot in cat claims.)

Paris went about asking what Tim expected of him in a sort of sideways fashion. Tim was equally oblique, simply saying that "radical cat activists" had made the city and its outskirts unsafe for normal people, and they wanted to take their cities and towns back. Paris asked if that meant violence, and after some hedging, Tim pointed out that the cats had resorted to violence first, since they hurt and kill people when loose, and that wasn't counting infecting innocents. Damn, Roan had no idea those damn cats were so nefarious or organized. Why didn't they invite him to the meetings? It was because he was Scottish, wasn't it? Discriminating bastards.

He was startled by his cell phone ringing, but it was okay, as the conversation had gone on for about an hour now, and he didn't even have a beer or a television to watch to cut the boredom. Paris was extracting some good stuff out of Tim, there was just the usual bullshit in between, and he was finding it difficult not to yawn. The phone at least woke him up. Since Tim was currently expressing disbelief at Paris's statement that he didn't have a girlfriend at the moment (and that wasn't even a lie), he decided to answer the phone, figuring it was Murphy complaining about the New Horizons people.

There was a tremendous crackle of static, a bad cell phone connection, and somewhere in all that broken noise he heard a small voice asking, “Roan?”

“Yeah. Can you speak up? This connection’s shitty.”

More static, and some of the opening syllables were lost. “—in trouble. I think I may have gotten you in trouble too, I didn’t mean to, I didn’t know—”

“Who is this?”

“Matt, Matt Skour—” A huge burst of static obliterated the last syllable, but he knew what it was.

Oh terrific, Chatty Cathy. But as the white noise receded somewhat, Roan heard him sniff loudly. Had he been using coke again, or was he crying? “What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

Some crackling, but a bit better than before. “I came home from work, and I found the neighbor’s cat nailed to my front door. He left a note, saying he saw me with my new boyfriend, and he was going to do to me what he did to him—”

“Wait, wait. Who? And what did he do to your boyfriend?”

Another loud sniff. “He thought you were my boyfriend—that’s why he shot you. Or maybe he was really aiming for me and settled for you, I dunno....”

Roan turned down the audio feed on Par and Tim’s discussion. It wasn’t important right now anyway. “Who are we talking about, Matt? I need a name.”

“I don’t know it... not really. Everybody calls him Rambo, ’cause he used to be in the Marines, but I’ve heard him called Sam before.”

“And this idiot shot me?”

“Yeah, I think so... fuck, he nailed Mrs. Pretsky’s cat to my fucking door! I think he’s following me too, or at least Leonard is. I took off before I could get cornered, but I still think I’m being followed—”

This was so much information to digest he felt like shouting at Matt to make more sense, but he knew it wouldn’t help. He had to put this all in order. “Where are you now? Can you get somewhere safe?”

He laughed breathlessly. “What the hell is safe? He’s a fucking

psycho crackhead who thinks he loves me so much he has to kill me.”

Oh wonderful. Had he ended up in the middle of a domestic dispute? No wonder he’d got shot. There were no enemies like former lovers. “You have nowhere you can go?”

“I don’t think so. I only have a few friends, I don’t want him killing them.”

“Okay. Get to County General, or get to the cop shop on Grant. Can you do that?”

“What? I ain’t going to County, my mom’s there—”

“And so are a bunch of cops at any given time,” he interrupted sharply. “If Sam wants to try something there, fine, but he’ll be Tasered or given a dose of Ativan within a minute. Have you called the cops, reported the cat on your door?”

Matt scoffed, and it was almost lost in a rip of static. “No. As soon as I saw it and got the sense I was being watched, I got the fuck outta there.”

“You need to call the cops and report this. It’s still animal cruelty, and if he’s making threats toward you, it’s worse than that. Do you know where he lives? What he drives?”

“No. I barely know this freak! I met him at a club back when I was using, he bought meth from my dealer. I thought he was creepy but I shared a hit with him. I shouldn’t have, y’know, but it’s too late to do something about that now.”

“And that was it? He was convinced he loved you?” It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. There were complete psychos who believed they were destined to be with people they saw on a TV screen or sitting in a Starbucks sipping a latte. You just had to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, when their meds wore off or what was left of their lucidity decided to take a long vacation.

“Yeah. Lucky me.”

“And he’s a real crackhead?”

“Oh yeah, total Bobby and Whitney time. He stopped bothering me after a while, and I thought maybe he finally listened to me, y’know, or overdosed or something, but I guess he was just hibernating. God, what a nightmare.”

The fact that he was really a crackhead added a fun new level of psychosis to everything. Crack and meth really did a number on your brain; it fucked you up but good. Cops used to think an angry perp on PCP was hard to subdue? They seemed like arthritic old ladies compared to an enraged crackhead or methhead. No fear, no pain, nothing approaching sanity. Drugs could be so much fun. “Who’s Leonard?”

“His junkie sidekick. I don’t know what his story is, if he’s a boyfriend or a fuck buddy or just a Smithers, but wherever Rambo is, he’s kinda always there. It’s creepy.”

“You need to call the police now and report the cat and the threat; you may also want to mention that you think he’s following you and imply he shot me. If necessary they can take you into protective custody.”

“I don’t like cops,” he replied bitterly. “Not the ones around here. I’ve given them enough entertainment for one lifetime.”

That was an interesting—and ominous—thing to say. “You’ve been abused by them?”

“In a manner of speaking, yeah. They all had a good laugh when I tried to report what Rambo did to....” He trailed off, sniffing once more. Roan heard a horn honk in the background. “Doesn’t matter. Rambo claimed his brother was a cop anyway. If I call, he might find out.”

Wow—Chatty Cathy could actually shut down. He was so scared he was doing so right now. “He’s hurt you?”

Matt was quiet for so long only the street noises and the occasional scratch of static let him know the line was still open. “Once, yeah. Can you help me?”

“I’m on a surveillance case right now. I’ll get to County as soon as I can, but I need you to get there right now. I’ll send some friends on ahead of me, okay? Matt, you have to do this—I’ll be there ASAP.” After thirty seconds without a response, he was forced to repeat, “Okay?”

With a sigh of defeat, Matt replied, “Yeah, okay.”

As soon as he hung up, Roan checked the audio feed—it sounded like Paris was wrapping things up with Tim—and called Sikorski back. “I’m going off shift, McKichan,” he complained.

“Then find someone who’s friendly to get to County General as of a minute ago.” He told him precisely why, which made Sikorski groan like

his ulcer was flaring up.

“So you were shot because this kid’s psycho crack addict ex-boyfriend thought you were fucking him?”

“I don’t think he’s an ex-boyfriend, just an obsessed stalker.”

“Lovely. How do you get into these situations, Roan?”

“Clean living and good luck, I suspect. This kid is afraid of cops as much as this psycho, so I need plainclothes, okay? Also, no homophobes.”

“You’re going to guilt me into doing this, aren’t you?”

“Can I?”

Another sigh. “You owe me big time, Roan. He’s the club-kid-looking guy, right? Lots of piercing?”

“Yeah. Lanky, blond with purple highlights, tattooed, slightly flamboyant and a bit femme.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Oh sure you don’t, butchy,” he taunted sarcastically. “Just go, now. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Don’t be long, or you get to tell Connie why I’m late for dinner.”

“Yeah, she’s a real dragon lady. Move.”

Paris wrapped things up, and he soon saw him come out of the bar, zipping up his leather jacket and donning his helmet before straddling the bike. He was such a pro he didn’t even glance toward the Taurus, although he said, under his breath “I suckered him too well. I didn’t think he was ever going to shut up.”

Paris took off without further comment, and Roan knew he was headed to the 7-Eleven two blocks over, as they had decided to meet there afterward to discuss what had occurred. But Roan stayed there on the off chance Tim would leave the bar shortly after Paris, and he did. He was in a shadowy, poorly lit part of the lot so no one could see him in the car, and he watched Tim get into a Range Rover. He wrote the license plate down in his notebook, glad that so much experience with stakeouts and surveillance had allowed him to write legibly in complete blackness.

By the time he pulled into the back lot of the 7-Eleven, Paris was leaning on the bike, sipping a Slurpee out of a cardboard cup that looked

as big as one of those comically large mayonnaise jars they had down at the Costco. As soon as he got out of the car and walked toward him, Paris raised his eyebrows in mock-amusement, and said, “We get anything legally actionable on tape?”

“Borderline. He admitted he wants you for acts of violence—all we need him to do is seal the deal and get specific. Do you remember my friend at the DMV?”

He thought about that a moment, holding out the huge cup of sugary slush in tacit invitation of a drink. Roan shook his head. “Keisha, right?”

“Yeah, her. Go home, call her, see if she’ll run this plate for me.” He handed Paris the notepad with Tim’s license plate written on it.

“Barlow’s?”

“Yep.”

“Why me? Where are you going?”

“Gordo called me while I was listening. He needs me to go over a cat crime scene. Shouldn’t take me too long.” He had to lie to him, mainly because he knew if he told him the truth, Paris would want to come along, and if he actually met the guy who’d shot Roan, he’d probably reach down his throat and pull his lungs out.

Paris rolled his eyes and sighed, accepting it but not liking it. It was an easy lie to swallow, because Gordo had done it enough, and at all times of the day or night. It didn’t matter that he technically wasn’t a cop anymore; Par was still something of a cop widow. “Be careful,” he told him wearily, leaning in and giving him a quick kiss on the corner of his mouth. He tasted like Coke, which wasn’t really a good thing, as Coke always made his salivary glands hurt. “Don’t be too late.”

“I won’t, promise.” But the way Paris’s eyes coolly appraised him, he suspected that of quite possibly being a lie.

The traffic was on his side, and he reached County General in record time. He found himself looking around the lot for an unmarked sedan, but then figured Gordo might have come in his own car, a dented little Infiniti that seemed far too silly to be a veteran cop’s car, but he didn’t see it. Could he have actually beaten him here? There’s no way he’d park in the underground garage, was there?

Roan was still wandering the lot, headed toward the sprawling

rectangle of the hospital, when the wind brought a snatch of angry conversation to his ears. “—fucking hands off me you trog—?” The insult ended in a dull noise that could only be flesh hitting flesh.

He followed the voices to the dead side of the building, the one where an entire wing of the hospital had been shut down for refurbishing, so there were no lights at all. The lot wrapped around this side and went around to the back, but had been cordoned off with sawhorses as some paltry attempt was made to fill potholes large enough to swallow a Honda.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw a guy built like a refrigerator leaning against the dead wing... only no, he wasn't. Matt was sandwiched between him and the wall, the guy's left arm lying flat against Matt's chest as he held something up against the base of his throat. It was hard to see, since the blade was as dark as a KA-BAR, but it was a large, wicked-looking hunting knife, the kind that could gut a deer with little trouble, and he was pressing it so firmly into Matt's throat he could see a shine of wetness that indicated the skin had been broken. It was a shallow slice, but only for now—one quick tug or a single deep push, and Matt's blood would either be spurting like a fire hose or his head would hit the ground independent of his body. Roan considered sniping the guy, just putting a round in him from this angle, but there was almost no way he could take down Rambo—Sam; Rambo was just too silly, even if it was apt—without potentially killing Matt as well. It would have been better if Sam was threatening him with a gun; a shot to paralyze would have kept him from being able to pull the trigger.

He got the sense that someone was trying to sneak up on him—this would be Leonard, yes?—and Roan decided to let it happen. He needed to get closer to Sam to disarm him safely. He felt something hard poke into his spine, as a voice snarled in his ear, “Make a move, make a sound, and you're dead.”

He'd actually put his gun flush against his back? What an amateur move. Had he actually ever held a gun, or did he only know of them from Tarantino films? Moron. “One word for you tough guy: Altoids. What have you been doing, eating roadkill?” His breath was pretty bad; Roan thought he smelled rot, and figured it was his teeth. Heavy meth and crack usage was not friendly to teeth or your appearance in general. The harsh chemicals ate away your teeth, making them crumble like old drywall, while it pitted your face like the surface of the moon. After a while, you could tell the habitual users on sight alone.

“Shut the fuck up,” Leonard snarled, as he frisked Roan roughly and inexpertly with one hand, the other continuing to press the gun into his back. (This idiot would be easy to disarm.) This was a bit of a stretch for old Leonard, as he was a couple inches shorter than him and apparently didn’t have much of a reach, but after doing something that seemed like copping a feel, he found his SIG Sauer and pulled it. “Plannin’ on shootin’ us?”

“Only if you asked nicely.”

He shoved him violently, making him stumble forward. If he’d wanted to disarm him, he could have now, but it was still too soon. Leonard smelled faintly of blood, and just a bit of cordite. Even though he was the driver, he was the one who took the bullet yesterday, wasn’t he? The bullet missed Sam but hit Leonard, and because he couldn’t go to the hospital about it, the wound was still open. Not fatal, but give it time. “Move it, funny man,” he growled unnecessarily, then added with a shout, “Sam, look what we got here.”

Sam looked their way, not letting up pressure on Matt. Matt had clearly been angry, which was good because that was often more useful than fear, but when he saw Roan panic flashed through his eyes, along with what could have been an apology. Roan tried to reassure him with his eyes, let him know that this was all part of his plan, but he didn’t know if he got that.

Sam stared at him appraisingly as Leonard frog-marched him closer—again, an idiot move; these guys were not rocket scientists—and Roan got a good look at his shooter. He was a muscle head, one of those obsessive weightlifter types who’d long ago crossed the line from toned to grotesque, which also meant he could be a ’roid rager. Terrific. His head was block-shaped, his scalp shaved clean, his eyes glittery black dots like chips of polished onyx. In spite of his unnaturally carved body, there was something doughy about his face, which was pitted with both acne scars and the kind of pits that ate into the face of heavy meth users, making his cheeks look like they were starting to collapse in. “How the fuck are you up and around?” Sam demanded, his voice sounding scratchy. Had he smoked up recently? Maybe; Roan swore he could smell the sour chemicals of crack exuding through his pores. “I shot you.”

“Badly. You can’t shoot for shit, can you, Sam?” Yes, he was provoking him. If Sam turned his anger away from Matt and on to him, he could end this charade.

Sam's expression sharpened, moving from crazed to crazed and contemptuous. "I can cut real well. Wanna see?" He increased the pressure on the knife, and Matt leaned his head back as far as he could, as if trying to avoid the blade.

"Afraid to pick on someone your own size? I guess I should have figured that."

That made Sam glare at him. "What, you mean you?" He snickered, although there was no actual humor in it. "You overestimate yourself, string bean."

Sam was easily twice his weight and half a foot taller than him, and yet Roan had no doubt he could kick his muscled ass. He just had to get him to move that knife off Matt's throat. "You're a pussy, Sam. You can't even face me to kill me. But then again, I bet you lost your balls long ago, huh? Shrunk 'em to the size of raisins. You really should have quit the 'roids while you still had your dick."

That was it. Insult a man's dick, and you plucked a nerve that was hard to ignore. Sam continued to glower at him, and Leonard jabbed the gun barrel in his back and snapped, "Shut the fuck up!" Matt seemed to be sending a "*Don't!*" look to him, but Roan ignored it in exchange for locking eyes with Sam.

Sam finally embraced the challenge. "Oh, you think so, huh?" He moved, taking the knife away from Matt's throat and grabbing him by his hair before slamming his head back into the wall and dropping him to the asphalt. Matt was still conscious, but dazed. "Let's—"

Roan didn't wait for him to finish his threat. He spun, ripping the Glock out of Leonard's hands as he turned and smashing a flattened palm into Leonard's eagle-beak nose, shattering it, his warm blood spurting over Roan's hand. "Fuck!" Leonard screamed, staggering back and grabbing his bleeding nose.

Sam had screamed as he lunged, so Roan knew Sam had launched himself at him, probably knife first. He spun aside and Sam sailed past him, coming to a quick stop and turning as Roan raised the weapon and fired, blasting a hole in Sam's chest. He seemed to waver for a moment, looking down and seeing the blood that was now spreading out all over his skintight gray tank top, and Roan figured he might have nicked a lung. He didn't get the heart, although God knows he had reason for a kill.

Sam then looked at him in disbelief. “You fucker,” he spat, and threw his knife at him.

It wasn’t a throwing knife, but Sam actually threw it quite well, and it had a chance of actually hitting and doing some damage, except Roan turned aside and let it fly past harmlessly. But it was then Sam moved, much faster than you’d think a guy his size could, and wrapped an arm as thick as an average man’s leg around his throat from behind. “You dirty cocksucker,” he snarled, his breath redolent of something akin to ammonia. Roan felt Sam’s blood soaking through his coat.

Sam started to squeeze off his air supply, and Roan put the Glock point-blank against Sam’s meaty thigh and pulled the trigger, only to feel the gun pull hard, like something had clogged the firing mechanism. Nothing had, it was simply the gun had picked an excellent time to jam. Motherfucker.

He let the rage come, wash over him, as he threw his head back hard and caught Sam in the bridge of his nose. He kept slamming his head back, ignoring the pain, as he broke his nose and continued to drive the cartilage shards deeper into his head, the blood running warm down the back of Roan’s neck. In spite of it being poisoned with drugs, his blood smelled oddly good.

Sam punched him in the kidneys, hits that seemed to numb him from the waist down—or would have, if his muscles didn’t knot and release, a strange kind of warmth infusing him as adrenaline flooded his body and every sight and every smell became acutely sharp, almost painfully so. Sam shoved him away, but Roan turned instantly with a growl deep in his throat and punched Sam in the neck, hard enough to nearly crush his larynx.

It wasn’t what he wanted to do. He wanted to grab his throat and rip it out in one big chunk, feel the hot blood pour down his own throat as he ground the flesh beneath his teeth ...

In spite of the drugs artificially propping him up, you needed to breathe to keep going, and Sam couldn’t. He started choking, bending over at the waist and grabbing his throat as he struggled to catch a breath,

He sensed Leonard’s attack coming, the clumsy charge to come to the aid of his friend, and while Roan, slightly detached from himself, found it amusing, the beast in him didn’t. He spun with a roar and met Leonard’s charge with his own, catching the scrawny man in a tackle and

throwing him to the ground hard enough to break something in him with a crack like a snapping twig. He stared down into the man's rodentlike face, growling, feeling the muscles in his face twitch and jump as if anxious to get out, and the smell of fear coming from Leonard was as sour and pungent as piss—perhaps it *was* piss. His pale blue eyes were wide with abject horror as he stared up at Roan, mouth agape as if frozen in a scream, blood from his ruined nose streaming down his face. Leonard's mouth eventually started to work as if he was trying to say something, but nothing came out but a series of ineffectual squeaks. Roan heard a noise like the rumble of a jet engine, and realized his own growling had filled his head like a curse. He saw his hand was gripping the top of Leonard's head, tangled in his greasy mop of black hair, and he was thinking idly how easy it would be to twist his head off, just rip it away clean. His blood smelled much better than Sam's, less toxic, as if his flesh was slightly less poisoned, no matter the state of his teeth.

There was a noise near the cordon, and two separate beams of light stabbed toward them. "Police! Nobody fucking move!" Sikorski's familiar voice shouted, and Roan squinted at the bright lights, smelling the flesh of two clean people, and wondering which one he should take out first.

What?!

It was hard to come back to himself—in fact, it was almost fucking impossible. The beast was out and didn't want to go back in. It wanted to feed; it wanted to rend flesh from bones and make everyone who made it hurt pay. And the worst part was Roan kind of wanted the beast to do it; he was almost inclined to let go.

Gordo and Seb lowered their flashlights, but he could still see with crystal clarity, and the shock on their faces told him they had seen something on his face that they wished they hadn't. "Roan, are—are you okay?" Gordo asked, trying to hide the surprise in his voice and failing miserably.

What had they seen? He almost didn't want to know. He made to speak, but then suddenly realized he was still growling. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to force the beast back inside its cage. It didn't want to go, and Roan wasn't sure he wasn't shoving some part of himself back in with it. When he opened his eyes, he was sure he was back inside himself; the pain in his kidneys was proof of that. He'd probably be peeing blood for the next couple of days. "I'm fine," he finally said. "Where the fuck have you guys been?"

“We got cornered by the desk sergeant on the way out,” Gordo said, trying hard to sound normal, but there was a thread of tension in his voice that couldn’t be covered.

Roan got up off Leonard, who instantly shoved himself backward down the pavement as if trying to reach the cops before Roan could change his mind and rip his head off. He was making unintelligible noises, and it was now obvious he *had* pissed himself in fear.

Looking at him and Sam, who was now on all fours, still choking and hacking loudly, trying very hard to catch a breath, Seb commented dryly, “At least we’re right next to the hospital.” But even as cool as Seb was, he wasn’t looking him in the eye.

He turned to see how Matt was; while he had a long but shallow cut across his throat, a much shorter and deeper cut down his left cheek, and his right eye was swelling, he looked relatively okay. Only he was staring at Roan in wide-eyed shock, and he seemed to want to say something, but couldn’t yet muster up the ability.

What had they seen? Holy Christ, how close had the lion come to getting out?

12

The Thinnest Line

ROAN deliberately avoided everyone as he ducked into one of County General's bathrooms to clean off the blood. Gordo asked him if he needed to be checked out, but he assured him none of the blood was his. He didn't seem surprised by that.

He stared at himself in the plastic mirror over the sink, hoping that he could see a shadow of what the others had seen. He stared deep into his own eyes, until he could see the thin, erose line of gold around his pupils, the only place where the green of his iris gave way, and he tried to see the lion lurking there behind them. He couldn't see anything but himself, of course, but at what point was the separation? Was there one? He was beginning to think that it was a convenient excuse in his own mind, that there was no such thing as his desires and the beast's desires—they were all one thing, and he only created the separation in his own head because it made him feel better.

He did the best he could washing the blood off his neck and out of his hair even though he couldn't see it; he could feel it, though, smell it, saw the water in the sink turn pinkish-red as he poured water over it. At one point a reasonably attractive Asian resident came into the men's room, and when he was at an adjoining sink, washing his hands, he showed him the back of his neck and asked, "Did I get all the blood off?"

If it wasn't a hospital, that probably would have earned him a much stranger look than he actually got.

Whenever he went out on a surveillance detail, even when it was unlikely anyone would spot him, he carried a duffel with him that he called his "recon kit." It was full of plain T-shirts in various colors, windbreakers and light linen jackets, gimme caps, and cheap sunglasses. Cheap disguise techniques, yes, but usually surprisingly effective. Unless there was something really striking about you, people just went on bare surface appearance, and as long as he covered most of his hair

(occasionally someone commented on his hair color) and hid his eyes (he knew that green wasn't exactly common), he was just an average joe, a nobody, someone you passed a million times a day without a second glance. Looking ordinary was a boon to a detective.

It was also a boon to a man who often got other people's blood on him. He could dump the jacket and the shirt, exchange them for something in the kit, and he just had to hope he had no blood on his pants. And if he did, that he was able to get out of them before Paris noticed. He wasn't going to tell him about this if he could at all avoid it.

Of course he had to answer a few questions, but Matt's story that Sam—apparently Sam Merton, and Roan was relatively certain he had heard of a cop named Merton—was trying to kill him before Roan showed up was backed up by Sam's full scale freak-out in the ER. They had to give him a tracheotomy so he could breathe (okay, maybe Roan had punched him a bit too hard), and as soon as he could breathe, he got violent with a nurse and actually tried to storm off, picking up a scalpel and trying to stab someone with it. He was doped to the heavens and his arms and legs restrained so they could finish working on him—he did have a bullet wound, after all.

Leonard was such a wreck he admitted everything—including catching the cat that was nailed to Matt's door—as long as the cops promised to keep “the freak” away from him. “What the fuck is he?” Roan could hear him screeching from the room down the hall. “He ain't human!” He didn't know what answers the cops gave him, if any.

Seb had recovered his SIG Sauer, and since it hadn't been fired, he gave it back to him. Before he could leave, Gordo pulled him aside, into a quiet part of the lobby between the vending machines and a more private waiting room. Gordo looked uncomfortable for a long moment, as if he wasn't sure how to say what he wanted to say, but Roan just let him squirm. He wasn't going to help him; he honestly didn't want to know what he was going to tell him. Finally, Gordo spit it out. “Are you... all right?”

He shrugged. “Coupla bruises. I've had worse.”

“No, I didn't mean that. I mean...you're in control, right? This isn't your... it's not that point of the viral cycle, is it?”

He didn't want to say “that time of the month,” did he? Not to a man, at any rate. “No. Why? What did you see?”

Gordo glanced away nervously, rubbed his mouth as if he suddenly needed a smoke or a drink. When he looked back at Roan, it was with great trepidation. “You really have no idea what happened to you?”

“I felt it—I couldn’t see it.”

Sikorski sighed heavily, his breath reeking of coffee. “Well, your eyes, they were... something happened to the pupils. They were barely there and they weren’t exactly round. And your face was... the veins were standing out on your neck and cheeks, and it looked like your jaw was... it didn’t look right. Your teeth looked... bigger. It’s hard to explain. It wasn’t too dramatically different, it was just... bizarre. I mean, you didn’t look like a wolf man or something, it was just... incorrect. If you get what I mean.”

He remembered feeling the muscles in his face twitch, but he didn’t remember feeling the teeth change, or his jaw. But as long as his jaw didn’t break or dislocate, he probably wouldn’t have known if it had changed. If the lion’s teeth started to come out, he’d have felt the pain, tasted the blood... but he was gone on adrenaline, and he did taste blood, didn’t he? But he chalked that up to the choking. Had his jaw actually shifted? Had the teeth started to come out? The thought panicked Roan, mainly because he really hadn’t felt it. He had the urge to touch his jaw, but he fought it down. He had seen it in the mirror—it looked normal, except suddenly he had some stubble coming back. Maybe the hair growth came with the partial change.

Roan still didn’t escape clean. He was almost out the doors when Matt shouted his name. He turned with great reluctance, not sure what he was going to say, not sure he wanted to hear it anyway. Matt had fresh stitches in his cheek, but very slender bandages patched up the cut on his throat. His eye was now a deep purplish-black, swollen until it was half shut, but his fully open eye had the light glaze of good painkillers. Matt didn’t say anything as he approached; he just suddenly hugged Roan, nearly collapsing in his arms. “Thank you,” he said quietly. He was afraid he was going to start to cry, but Matt managed to keep it down to a couple of sniffles, the drugs keeping him on an even keel. When Matt let him go, he attempted to smile, but failed. Admiration shone in Matt’s eyes, and it made Roan’s skin want to crawl off and find a nice, quiet hiding place.

“I owe you my life.”

“No, you don’t,” Roan countered, not unkindly. “Just do me a favor, and stay away from the crackheads.”

He nodded, wiping errant tears away with the back of his hand. Matt looked at him with something akin to wonder; he was no longer freaked-out by what he'd seen. Roan wondered if it was the drugs, the puppy crush, or a combination of the two. "I got that lesson, believe me. Look, if I can ever do something for you—"

"You'll be the first to know," he replied, quickly turning and heading for the door. He really didn't want to face either gratitude or a come-on at this point. "I know where you work."

Matt waved at him as he went, and he felt somewhat bad for him. He bet Matt was just the type of guy who habitually dated fucked-up men; he probably tried to "save" them, and then wondered why it never worked. If he thought he'd actually listen, Roan would have told him that you were lucky to save yourself in this life, but he didn't think he would. The codependent never did.

On the drive home he let PJ Harvey rage for him and The Dead Milkmen be snarky for him as he tried to clear his head and think of nothing, just let the music fill it. He dumped his bloody shirt and jacket in the first Dumpster he saw, trading them for a clean green T-shirt and a dark windbreaker from the kit. Would Paris notice? It was possible, as he was the more fashion-sensible between them, but he was hoping he could get away with it.

As it was, he caught a break. He got home to find Paris had fallen asleep on the couch watching television. As he came in, Par was sprawled loosely on the sofa, one arm draped over the side and touching the carpet, a rerun of *South Park* playing on the screen. That just reminded him that some of the cops—supposedly behind his back, but still rather obviously—used to refer to him bitchily as "Big Gay Roan." That pissed him off so much that one day he just wanted to show up wearing nothing but pink satin hot pants and a T-shirt reading "Ass Bandit." Of course he didn't—(Like he'd ever wear satin hot pants! He just didn't have the legs for them.)—but the "stairs" incident had happened only a month later, so he never really got a chance to refine his plan.

He got out of his jeans and tossed them in the washer, glad Paris would never get a chance to discover the bloodstains, and went upstairs to shower and shave off the new stubble, as well as trim off about two inches of his hair, which also looked a bit longer and bushier than before (it could have been his imagination, but he just wasn't sure).

He was okay—he was human. And it was a very poorly lit area of

the parking lot; maybe what Gordo, Seb, and Leonard thought they saw they didn't really see. His pupils had probably contracted drastically due to the sudden brightness of the flashlights, and as for the veins standing out... sure, that probably happened when his muscles changed. It was easy to explain, and that thing with his teeth... no, damn it, he would have felt that, and there would have been more blood in his mouth. It wasn't that the teeth changed when you transformed more than an entire new set grew in over the old—you essentially had two rows of teeth, more like sharks than cats. And it fucking hurt, and since it cut your gums to shit, it always bled a lot. That's why you always woke up after a transformation tasting blood, your gums as sore as if a dental hygienist with a pick and a grudge had just gotten through with you. Maybe his jaw had distended slightly, which might look pretty weird, but there was no way that his teeth had started to come in.

Although it was odd to wake someone up to get them to bed, he did just that. Paris asked him how it went, and he told him an acceptable bullshit story about a sloppy crime scene but a relatively quick arrest. He also told him that the cops had discovered Matt had a stalker and that he and his friend had shot him out of jealousy or because he'd shoved Matt out of the way of the bullet. Either way, they were both in custody, and Par seemed so relieved by it that he felt guilty for leaving so much out.

But obviously not that guilty, as he fell asleep while Par was brushing his teeth. Adrenaline crash could be a dramatic thing.

He dreamed he was running, the street disappearing beneath his feet as if it ceased to exist the moment he was done with it, the view changing unpredictably from low to the ground to higher above, but his speed and his gait never changed. He loped past apartment buildings so tall they seemed to be propping up the canopy of the sky, which had the odd, washed-out, blue half-light of a false dawn. The buildings soon gave way to open fields, although the stinging scent of wet asphalt, exhaust, and too many humans bedeviled him, haunted him like a bad memory, following him into the tall grass where their smell should have brushed away. His muscles stretched and his lungs pulled in air like bellows, but there was no tiring, no pain of exertion; only exhilaration, as if he was free from his cage at last. Finally there was the scent of water and earth, of compost and chlorophyll, but the smell of the human lingered. It was rank and fetid, sweat and blood and fear and sex and rage, and he realized dimly that the scent was clinging to him. He was the scent, and it disgusted him.

With no transition at all, he'd gone from the razor-blade grass to a home, a staircase he climbed with the softest steps, and he realized that a new scent was pulling him, something familiar and welcome, something that made his stomach feel like it was full of fluttering birds. Once again he was simply there, standing over Paris, asleep on the bed, the sheets and blanket tangled around his waist and legs like a partially constructed cocoon. His flesh was warm, the blood beneath a slow but steady roar, and he put his head on his chest and listened to that heart thumping away inside its rib cage, something in its rhythm suggesting a desire to get out and run. Paris touched his face, ran his hand through his hair and held on, while lifting his own head and baring his throat to him. Roan kissed the skin, tasting the salt of it, feeling the pulse of a vein beneath his lips, and then bit deep, his fangs sinking into Paris's neck and the blood roaring from Paris into his mouth, slaking the thirst that had turned his own throat into sandpaper.

Roan instantly woke up, his own subconscious emergency eject system kicking in—he'd had enough nightmares in his life that he'd taught himself to wake up once his dreams turned terrible, although it didn't always work as quick as he hoped—and he had to check that Par was alive and breathing and had an intact throat. Paris's back was to him, curled up in a semi-fetal position, hogging almost all the covers (as usual), his breathing deep and regular.

He stumbled off to the bathroom, and stared at himself in the mirror over the sink, trying to will the animal inside him to make an appearance. It didn't, but he knew that it was in there somewhere, a shadow behind his eyes. "If you touch Paris, if you hurt him, this is over," he snarled to his own reflection. He made a gun of his thumb and forefinger and shoved them beneath his chin at just the right angle, so that if it were a real gun, pulling the trigger would have blasted off the top of his skull. "Bang—our brains all over the ceiling. Heal that, asshole."

If he was wrong, if there was no actual beast, then he was simply talking to himself. But that was okay, as his other self clearly needed the message anyway.

Was he a lion who dreamed he was a man or man who dreamed he was a lion?

Oh fuck it. He hated bullshit questions like that anyway.

WHEN he woke up, the sunlight streaming in through the window and the birds singing so noisily outside he felt like roaring out the window to make them shut up, he had a single moment of panic, since he was alone. But the smells of coffee and toast were wafting up from downstairs, and any momentary fear that the beast was as naturally contrarian as he was faded away.

Roan wandered downstairs in only his sweatpants, deciding he'd rather see that Paris was genuinely okay and didn't think anything was strange about him before bothering to get dressed for the day. What the hell was he doing today anyway? He could do some more checking on Barlow, maybe run that skip trace, but he had hit a dead end on leads as far as the killer went. Since all of this could be done on computer he didn't need to show up at the office; he could just stay home in his sweatpants.

He had to admit it—sometimes this job was pretty damn good.

One of the most annoying things about Paris was that he was often a “morning person,” one of those people who were inexplicably awake and happy to be so, full of energy and pep even without an intravenous caffeine drip. Roan personally wanted to beat all those freaky people with a sock full of wood screws, so of course his boyfriend would turn out to be one of them—that was just how the world worked. Paris was as happy and chirpy as the birds outside, and had decided to make French toast for breakfast. He made gourmet-style French toast too, perhaps reflective of his better-than-middle-class background; no thin slices of regular white bread for him. He got actual baguettes and sliced them thick, so a single piece of his French toast was about the size of a pancake stack at an IHOP, and on top of that he dusted them with a cinnamon/nutmeg/powdered sugar mixture, and brought out the “real” maple syrup, which he always bought in Canada, because he said the American stuff was shit (“*Vermont can kiss my ass.*”) It was another thing Paris was inexplicably passionate about, but who really cared since his French toast rocked?

Paris told him a couple of interesting things during breakfast. Namely that a deliveryman had brought a coffee basket from Starbucks this morning, which had a small note on it that simply said *Thanks*. Paris thought it was very sweet that he was getting gift baskets from the puppy, but he wondered if it wasn't time to start dusting off the restraining order. Paris was just kidding, of course, but he really hoped Matt didn't do that again.

The other interesting thing was the plate run on Barlow. Keisha had done it when she got in that morning, and it turned up the fact that Barlow had gotten himself a parking ticket over a week ago back on Pine Street. What was interesting about that? It was issued the day before Melissa Prescott was murdered—and she lived on Park Street, which was just over from Pine. Son of a bitch; they'd just placed him in the area prior to the shooting. He was sure that Barlow wasn't doing any of the dirty work... but it didn't mean he couldn't scout. Still, it was circumstantial at best, and he could always claim he wasn't driving the car; his wife or one of his kids could have been, or at least he could say that.

Which made him suddenly wonder how old Barlow's kids were.

Paris didn't know, so Roan interrupted his breakfast to go get his laptop and have a look. Tim had a ten-year-old daughter, Sierra, and a seventeen-year-old son, Troy. What did Troy think of his Dad's anti-cat feelings? Was he sucked up in it too? Would Tim groom his own son as a "soldier" for the cause? It'd be interesting to find out.

Roan had gotten a bit complacent, though, and while he was helping Paris load up the dishwasher, Par gasped and grabbed him, turning his back toward him. "Oh my God! Where did you get those?"

He tried to look over his own shoulder, but was kind of limited. "Get what? Don't tell me I have a tattoo."

"I wish. These are some very ugly bruises." He brushed his fingertips lightly low on his back, and Roan felt a tiny ache at even that gentle pressure. Oh shit, he should have worn a shirt—he forgot all about the kidney punches Sam had given him. (And why? Did he not piss some blood this morning? Jesus, sometimes he was a moron.) "Do they hurt? Who did this to you?"

"Well... I kinda helped apprehend my shooter last night," he said, settling on a partial truth. "He didn't go quietly."

Paris let him go, if only to scowl at him. "And you were going to tell me this when?"

"Possibly never, if I could at all avoid it."

The evil look he got from Paris presaged a lecture (he knew it by heart), but before he could start, the phone rang, and Roan lunged for it like a lifeline. He didn't get saved by the bell often, but when it happened, he was glad about it.

It took him a moment to recognize the caller, who was on a cell phone with a semi-crappy connection. It was Juan Marquez, the exterminator who was Patrick Farley's neighbor. He prefaced his statement with lots of hesitation, saying he'd thought of something but it was kind of stupid and probably not important, but Roan coaxed him into telling him what he had just thought of. "So yesterday there was a UPS guy at the apartment," he said, with an almost constant crackle in the background. "And he parked his truck right out front, in what's s'posed to be the fire lane. All the UPS and FedEx guys park there; they just run in and run out, so no one thinks too much about it, know what I mean? But the day before Patrick got capped, I came home from work and saw a UPS guy in the lobby, where all our mailboxes are. But I didn't see a truck out front; I didn't see a truck anywhere. They're pretty distinctive, ya know, hard to miss, but there was just the guy. I thought it was weird at the time, but I really didn't think about it until I saw the UPS guy yesterday. You said to call you if I thought of anything strange around the time Pat was killed, so I thought I should."

"Thank you, I appreciate it." And he really did: a fake UPS guy. Motherfucker, that was perfect. Who else could get slightly paranoid, stranger-wary infecteds to open a door? And who, when asked if they saw someone strange, would ever report seeing a UPS guy? They weren't strange, even if seen leaving a recent crime scene.

This was why you canvassed people in person, in the hopes you could gain the trust of a good witness, one who would make your job infinitely easier. He asked Paris to put the scolding on hold while he called Murphy, and she was a little grumpy, as New Horizons was going to make them take them to court to get the list of clients. She asked him to go talk to them, thinking they'd be more amenable to someone like them. He decided to overlook the "someone like them" comment, the slight edge to it, as they were both a "them" in other people's contexts, both being homosexual. Also cops (admittedly, him formerly).

He was tempted to start chanting, "One of us, one of us," but she sounded like she might have him arrested if he did.

After getting off the line with her, not committing one way or the other about talking to the New Horizons people, he started searching through their entire list of suspects—and honestly there were quite a few, including all the names of the Humanity First people they'd managed to uncover—and to speed up the process he divided the list in half, with Paris

volunteering to do the other half. What he was looking for was someone who worked in any kind of mail delivery capacity: UPS, post office, FedEx, courier even. He didn't think the killer just pulled the whole UPS angle out of his ass. Yes, it was brilliant, but he had a feeling he knew that from personal experience, from the way people reacted in such a blasé manner to his arrival. If that didn't pan out, he was willing to go to delivery professions of less "official" capacity—pizza guys and newspaper deliverers, if necessary—but he thought the connection would grow tenuous to the breaking point by then.

It would have been nice if he'd got a hit right away, but things like that rarely happened outside of cop shows. It took them hours of sitting in front of their respective computers, until their butts went numb, but they got two solid hits and a partial third. Reese Campbell, the copy shop manager who had hosted the Humanity First recruiting meeting for "Kevin," had worked at the post office for six years before quitting and going off on the career path that led him to Kinko's; Jordan DeSoto, Mia DeSoto's brother (Eli's quasi-girlfriend), worked at FedEx as a delivery driver before being fired for being drunk on the job (classy); Noah Hammond, Karen Hammond's oldest son, worked as a bicycle messenger downtown.

So much for the lazy day half-dressed in front of the computer. These guys had all vaulted into the best-bets category, and if any of them were expert computer hackers, that would pretty much cement them as the only suspect. The only one who had been on their radar at all was Reese; he'd discarded the DeSotos for now since he wasn't terribly interested in getting between Eli and his bitter current girlfriend, and only Paris had followed up on the Hammonds in any respect.

They needed to get on these guys and start narrowing them down now. Roan called the Kinko's and asked to speak to the manager; he put it on speaker, and as soon as a man responded, hung up. Paris confirmed that was Reese's voice. So they knew where he was, and where Reese would most likely be for the next few hours. This left Jordan and Noah up for grabs.

Jordan was currently unemployed, although he apparently functioned as something of a handyman around the church (a sop thrown by Eli to his girlfriend, surely), and Roan called the service Noah worked for, and confirmed he was working today. What was left now was checking these men out, staking them out, and trailing them if necessary. Nothing too

intensive, just enough to see if there was even a smidgen of possibility they were cold-blooded murderers.

There was no choice in the matter. Roan was too well-known at the church, and his hanging around would cause obvious consternation; Paris was generally liked there, and no one made a big deal about him working for a detective agency, whereas Eli and Stovak liked to point out Roan was a “failed cop.” Paris was the only one who could observe Jordan without too much suspicion. That left Roan chasing around the city after a bicycle messenger, and that was going to be a shitload of fun.

They worked out possible covers and stories, how often they were going to keep in touch, and Paris left first, giving him a quick kiss before grabbing his leather jacket and heading out to the GTO, with the warning that they were going to talk about last night later. (Roan was taking the bike, damn it, as it only made sense if he was going to be chasing after a guy on another type of bike.) Roan changed into nondescript clothes, shoving as much of his hair up in his Toronto Maple Leafs cap as possible, and dug out a pair of deep black Ray-Bans to hide his eyes. He couldn’t take the recon kit with him on the bike, so he was just going to have to do his best not to get noticed.

But he found himself wondering about something. Downtown area. It was a long shot, but sometimes they were all you had.

He called Matt’s apartment, and his roommate told him he was staying at a friend’s place because he was so freaked-out about last night. But the roommate gave him the number of where Matt was staying (at the apartment of a woman named Candy), and he called it. It was Matt who picked up, and when he heard it was Roan, he went from sounding slightly irritated to frighteningly cheerful.

Before he could get started on some digressive ramble that would probably sidetrack into profuse thank yous, Roan asked him if they got a lot of bike messengers at Starbucks. Matt scoffed. “Are you kidding? Shit yeah, those guys are comin’ in all the time. Not that I’m complaining, ’cause some of them look pretty good in those shorts, y’know.”

“I bet. You know any by name?”

“Some of ’em, yeah. They’re mostly straight, though, so it’s casual.”

“You don’t know one named Noah, do you?”

“No.” He paused suddenly. “But I think he’s that creepy guy that I

sometimes see with Elvez.”

“Elvez?”

“Oh, that’s what we call him; I think his real name’s Adam or something, but we all call him Elvez ’cause he looks kinda like a Spanish Elvis, y’know?”

Cute. “Is Noah a regular?”

“No, he never comes in. We see him standing outside the window with his bike, but it’s always Elvez who comes in. I don’t know why. I just figured that maybe he had some kind of dislike of Starbucks commercially, but would still drink the coffee if someone bought it for him.”

“But Elvez is a regular.”

“Fuck yeah, every single weekday, although Noah’s only with him about half the time. Venti skinny double-shot espresso.”

“What time does Elvez show up? Does he have a regular time?”

Matt snorted humorously. “Of course he does. He usually stops in, like, at a quarter to one on the dot, unless traffic’s really shitty or he had a job way the hell on the other side of the city.”

He glanced at his watch, and realized he could actually beat Elvez there if he made tracks now. “Thanks, Matt. Oh, and thanks for the gift, but stop sending me stuff. I just did my job, okay? I appreciate the gesture, but it feels weird.”

“Your job? You’re not a cop. Since when is helping me part of your job?” Okay, that was a point for him. “Few people have ever stuck their neck out for me. I really appreciate it, y’know.” He paused briefly, then asked, “This stuff about that Noah guy—is this related to Ashley’s case at all?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“Y’know that sounds like a yes to me.”

“Can’t do anything about that. Stay out of trouble.” He then hung up and dry-washed his face before grabbing a brown canvas jacket and heading out to the garage.

Either Ashley’s murder was pure coincidence, or the killer had had more casual contact with at least one of the victims than they had been aware of until now. For some reason, that wasn’t a comforting thought.

13

Digging the Grave

FOR a stakeout on a suspected killer, it was surprisingly civilized.

Rainbow—just the woman he wanted to see—intercepted him almost immediately, and the two of them ended up sitting on the wicker chairs at the far end of the front porch, drinking chamomile mango tea and discussing how long Jordan DeSoto had worked for them. Rainbow was aware Roan was working for Eli in some capacity related to the threats he had received, but she didn't know much beyond that, and Paris didn't go out of his way to illuminate things for her. It wasn't personal—how could you not like Rainbow?—but if Eli had actually wanted her to know he'd have told her. Also, it was an open case and all that. He actually wasn't sure how Roan applied these rules, but he could fake it if he had to.

According to Rainbow, Jordan was a good groundskeeper, but he seemed to have a troubled relationship with his sister and the church alike. He didn't seem to like infecteds much, and he didn't like that Eli was dating his sister, but he needed the job and he wasn't rude or mean to anyone. He just kept to himself a lot and didn't really socialize. As if on cue, Paris heard a mechanical roar somewhere in the back, slowly growing louder (closer), and he judged it to be a lawnmower. Good old Jordan was taking advantage of a rare sunny day to mow the grounds—lucky him. Paris asked if they kept records of the days he worked and the days he didn't, and she said Eli had all the time sheets.

Chamomile mango tea actually tasted quite nice, but it went through him like a bullet train, and he had to duck inside to use the bathroom. Had he been aware before now that the church had Italian tile in its bathrooms? He was sure he'd have remembered a detail like that. He was washing his hands at the sink, and after noticing that they had those blue LED things attached to the tap so the water came out looking neon blue (now he knew who bought shit like that), he noticed he looked a little flushed. He stared at himself in the mirror a moment, wondering if the lighting just had a

reddish tinge to it, but then he listened to his heart; he could hear it pounding in his ears, feel it making his chest vibrate like a hollow drum, and he wondered why this was happening so soon.

Roan had his secrets, and he knew it. He didn't want to tell Paris he'd got in a fight last night, probably because he'd partially transformed, or because his life was in genuine danger, or both. But Paris had a secret of his own. His last routine checkup, typical after he went through his viral cycle, his doctor had had some news for him that wasn't that shocking but was still depressing. She told him, very kindly, that she had detected a heart murmur, and suspected the blood flow to his heart was now being affected. He was tiger strain and approaching thirty—it wasn't a surprise. Heart valve problems and blood flow irregularities were common with tiger strain; according to his doctor, it was usually the valves that went first, and aortic dissection killed many a tiger. She was very kind: she'd said it was "early days" and was probably not going to be a real problem for up to a year; all he had to do was watch that he didn't exercise too strenuously, and expect some heart palpitations (although she'd advised him to come in if they started to get really frequent or really bad). She suspected that he wouldn't notice until he was near the high point of his viral cycle.

He hadn't told Roan. He'd told him he got a clean bill of health and praised his continued luck. Roan was relieved and held him for the longest time, so long he felt horrible for lying to him. But he didn't want Ro to worry or, worse yet, coddle him somehow. So what if he was on borrowed time? He had been since he'd contracted this virus, and since he'd met Roan.

Which was the funny thing... funny in a bitterly ironic sort of way. He'd never been brave enough to commit suicide, but he still chased death, afraid of this thing inside him. And when he met Roan, he had almost achieved his goal, although he was unaware of it. Roan knew he smelled like he was in the transition phase, but he also thought he smelled sick. After he spent the night in the police transformation tank, Roan took him to this special clinic that was for the treatment of infecteds with other medical problems. It had a waiting list, but Roan knew the right people and got him in. He had pneumonia, apparently, and according to the doctors who saw him, he was suffering from malnutrition. Which sounded insane, but apparently due to his wonky metabolism he didn't have enough fat in his body to tolerate another transition, and he was one or two away from a fatal heart attack or organ malfunction. By that time he was too

medicated to say “Let it happen,” and he’d stayed in that clinic for weeks while they cured his pneumonia and got him back up to fighting strength. By that time he’d figured out he wanted to live, as Roan had visited him as often as he could, brought him books (from his own collection, which he didn’t know at the time), and sometimes called to talk to him when he was on boring stakeouts, just to have the company, and somewhere in all those days Paris had fallen in love with him, although he wasn’t sure when. It just sort of struck him one day that he loved him, and rather than being shocking, it struck him as bizarrely commonplace. Who couldn’t love a guy like him? Besides, he’d given him his life back, and love was the least possible response.

But that was how life tripped you up, wasn’t it? As soon as you were content with what you had, it took it away. He was glad to have some semblance of a life, and now the walls were closing in, and the death he had chased had now turned around and was charging at him. He could have been angry about it, or depressed, but mostly he was just weary. It was almost too predictable.

He closed his eyes and took deep breaths through his nose, letting them out slowly through his mouth, trying to get his heart to just slow the fuck down. That was much harder to will than you would have thought. Maybe he’d had too much sugar and caffeine this morning.

He splashed cold water on his face and rubbed it in, hoping to absorb it through his pores, and he thought his heart rate finally went down. He hoped his face was less flushed, but he wasn’t sure.

Roan had told him about the narrow side hall leading to Eli’s pretentious private office, so he slipped down it, coming to a huge door that he knocked on quite loudly. He thought he heard the strains of SportsCenter leaking through the cracks. “Who is it?” Eli shouted in reply.

Paris didn’t answer. He turned the knob, found the door unlocked, and walked in. He found Eli sitting on an overstuffed sofa, watching a flat screen TV hidden within an open cabinet, drinking a Coors Light. He looked at him, indignation twisting his features, but when he realized who had just barged in he paused himself mid-rise and sat back down on the couch, grabbing the remote and bringing the volume down. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“And good afternoon to you too,” Paris replied cheerfully. “I need the time sheets of Jordan DeSoto for the last month and a half.”

He loved the way Eli looked at him, like he was the millipede he'd just found in his chicken salad. He still hadn't forgiven him for threatening to lock him in the cage with his tiger, had he? Well, he hoped Eli knew that offer was still on the table. "Why Jordan? McKichan can't be suspicious of that... loser."

"You don't like him."

It wasn't a question, but Eli treated it as such. "He's a terminal fuck-up." Paris entertained the idea of telling Eli that his own brother actually thought of *him* that way, but decided there wasn't a point. He wasn't sure Eli had a sense of irony. Or humor. Or dress sense, judging from his unfortunate choice of beige Dockers and a pale pink short-sleeved shirt. He still had the slightly spiky Eurotrash hair going on too, which just didn't go with anything from the neck down. Every time he saw him, Eli brought home the fact that he had much more money than sense.

He levered himself off the couch, leaving his beer and remote behind, and walked over to a desk that looked like it was made for a grown-up, not Eli. He started working on his computer, but didn't sit down.

"So why did you hire him if he's such a fuck-up?"

He snorted derisively. "I know you play for the other team now, but you can't be that stupid."

Paris smirked at his snide little comment, but he suddenly realized his head felt very light, like someone was pumping it full of hydrogen, and the room started a slow but obvious tilt. He sat on the arm of the sofa before the dizziness could fully overwhelm him. "To make Mia happy."

"More like to shut her up, but same difference. She thought maybe I could put in a good word for him with Tom, get him in one of his businesses, but she apparently doesn't understand our relationship."

Tom was his much more respectable brother, and as far as Paris knew, they barely talked before Eli had managed to get himself infected. Now that he was genuinely infected, Tom probably didn't take his calls for any reason. "Is he good at his job?"

Eli shrugged, and started to print out the documents. "A chimp could mow a lawn."

"Wow. You should slap that on his resumé."

He glared at him. "He's hungover when he isn't drunk, and he's a

total bastard in any state. If he wasn't Mia's brother, I'd have fired his ass already."

"He doesn't like infecteds, or just you?"

Eli sighed heavily, glancing at the TV instead of him. "Is there any difference?"

"A bit, yeah—you're not every infected. Does he blame you for Mia's infection?"

Eli's neck stiffened, and it was clear he was trying not to react to that. "Mia was infected before she got here, so I don't see how he could."

"But he hates your fucking guts."

Another shrug, but far too deliberate to be casual. "Probably. He's an ungrateful bastard." He checked the printouts, which continued. There must have been five pages already.

Over dinner last night, before he went to meet with Barlow, Roan had told him he didn't think the person threatening Eli and the killer were one and the same. Roan figured that since the killer was framing Eli, he wouldn't kill him off; and then there was the fact that the killer hadn't warned anyone else with a threatening note before doing the deed, so why would Eli warrant one? As far as Ro was concerned—and Paris agreed with him—someone was taking advantage of the killings to put the fear of God into Eli. A spurned lover, perhaps, or an irate brother of a lover. But as soon as they told Eli he was probably just the victim of harassment and not being stalked by an actual killer, he'd stop funding the investigation. So they weren't going to tell him right away.

There was the question of how the harasser knew of the killings, but that was simple enough, at least according to Roan: Eli knew. He knew as soon as Patrick was shot, and he probably mentioned it to someone, but he didn't care about the killings until he himself was threatened. So much for caring about "his people," but neither of them were shocked that Eli was a selfish hypocrite.

Outside he could hear the hum of the lawnmower, but Eli had flimsy yellow curtains drawn over the window, letting in light but blocking out most of the heat and any prying eyes. Staring at the yellow light made him feel even dizzier, although he didn't know why.

The printing finally stopped, and Eli gathered up the pages, bringing them over to him. As soon as he came within arm's reach, he made to grab

the papers, but paused, making Eli stand there uncomfortably close to him. “Is there a garden shed? Somewhere where Jordan gets his tools?”

“Yeah, out back, past the gazebo.”

He took the papers. “I didn’t even know you had a gazebo.”

“No reason you should.” He’d turned away, but Paris heard the sneer in his voice.

Just for a laugh, he growled low in his throat, and Eli jumped, startled, turning around so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash. Paris grinned at him, all teeth and ill will, as he managed to stand and not fall over. “Don’t fuck with me, Eli. Roan isn’t the only one who can bust your balls.”

Eli’s eyes flashed with annoyance. “Aren’t you fags supposed to be effeminate?”

Ooh, he’d used the “f” word. He wouldn’t do that in front of Roan, but he felt it was safe to use in front of the bi. What, he didn’t think he would be offended? Paris took a couple of steps toward him, saying nothing, and Eli suddenly realized he might have made a mistake, eyes widening slightly as he took a corresponding number of steps back, bumping into his own desk. “Do I *look* effeminate to you?” Paris waited for him to respond, but when he didn’t, he prompted, “Well, do I?”

Eli finally understood it wasn’t a rhetorical question. “No, no, of course not.”

“Goddamn right. I’m a fucking tiger, Eli, and we don’t take shit from little pussycats like you. And get that word out of your vocabulary before I’m forced to smash your face in. We’re only your employees until we solve this case, and then it’s open season on you again, bud. Keep that in mind.”

He nodded hastily, clearly wanting to say something nasty but too scared to do so. Paris had height and muscle mass on him, and the reminder that he was a tiger—and the corresponding memory of threatening to lock him in the cage with it—made him shut the fuck up. He probably should have done that two minutes ago.

He left Eli’s office and walked through the church’s main building, passing through several “sitting rooms,” a dining room that was mostly for show, and the sterile, stainless-steel-heavy kitchen before finding a back door he could actually leave through. He folded up the papers as best he

could and shoved them in his pocket, where they fit very awkwardly but would do. He was still light-headed, but now it was kind of pleasant; it was almost like a contact high.

The “backyard” of the church was almost a solid acre, which was impressive for a city location. It was walled off by a seven-foot-high wooden fence, stained to a warm reddish-brown. The lawn was as smooth and weed-free as a golf course, with small, highly landscaped little islands, usually following a theme: one was filled with roses in all hues, another full of azaleas that were mostly in white and reds, another with various kinds of long ornamental grass. The gazebo was latticed and painted a bright white, big enough to hold a barbecue and several people to clean it, and just past a small, koi-stocked pond with a fountain that looked like a heap of rocks, was a small shed. It was painted the same reddish-brown color as the fence, so it kind of blended in, but it looked so nice and new someone could have lived in it. Well, if it wasn’t the size of a walk-in closet.

There was a shiny new hasp and padlock, but both were open so he didn’t have to break them. Inside it looked just like a tool shed, with weed eaters, edgers, and other large tools lined up against the wall, with a variety of saws and clippers hanging up on the right side. There was a kind of utilitarian table set up against the far wall, where a huge tool kit sat, along with a couple of random tackle boxes. Jordan had left a scuffed brown leather jacket in here, right below the calendar picture of a hard-faced blonde with artificially inflated breasts in a red bikini that barely covered anything, and proved she’d had a full body wax.

The toolbox wasn’t locked, so he opened it up and had a look. It had the usual assortment of tools, all haphazardly placed and in varying states of wear, but when he removed the first level and started searching among the others, he found something interesting: a red permanent marker. The type that was used by the person who wrote “*Your next*” on the article about Ashley Cryer’s death? Since he could still hear the buzz of the lawnmower growing farther and farther away, he decided to search the pockets of the leather jacket. There was nothing in them but a half-filled pack of crumpled Marlboros and a cheap red plastic lighter. He must have kept his wallet with him.

He called Roan while he continued searching the levels of the toolbox. Roan picked up after the fourth ring. “How’s it going?” he asked, without preamble.

“Guess what I found in Jordan’s tool kit? A red marker.”

“Really? That wasn’t very smooth of him.”

“There’s also a stack of newspaper in the back corner, for recycling, I imagine.”

“I imagine. I’m going to guess he’s not a bright guy.”

Paris found what looked like a small aerosol bottle, but something wasn’t right about it. He screwed off the cap, and caught a whiff of strong whiskey. “He drinks a lot. How are things with you?”

“Well, I’m standing in the lobby of a bank, watching a bike messenger called Elvez and Noah drink lattes at an outdoor table at the Starbucks across the street.”

“Why are you standing in a bank?”

“The windows are mirrored; they can’t see me watching them through binoculars.”

Made sense. “And the tellers haven’t called the cops on you yet?”

“You won’t believe this, but the security guard’s an old cop I used to know. We didn’t get along, mind you, but he knows I’m a detective, and he told the others I’m harmless. So I’m being tolerated.”

Paris had finally gotten to the lowest level of the tool kit, and beside a plumber’s wrench was a red, grease-stained rag. It looked to be covering something, so he pulled at it, only to find it weighted down. “So nothing of note yet?”

Roan sighed in a way that suggested he had hoped something—anything—would happen. “Not really. I’ve been trying to lip read, but it’s harder than it looks. So, what do you want for dinner tonight? Should I pick something up?”

Man—you knew a stakeout was unbelievably boring when he started thinking about dinner. But Paris smiled, remembering the time he was in the hospital, and Roan had started talking about this crazy Greek restaurant he’d take him to as soon as he was out of there. He’d kept his word too; he did, and the place was even more fucking nuts than he’d said. It was like a living Monty Python sketch. When it burned down a couple of months after that, it was sad, but not really a surprise. That was the place where he’d first tried ouzo, which he never really acquired a taste for, and where he’d first kissed Roan in public, which he did acquire more

of a taste for. “I’ll be done sooner than you. I should probably do the picking up.”

“Fine, but no tofu. Stop that.”

“Oh come on, it’s not that bad.”

“Look, we’re cats, okay? Carnivores. Don’t make me smack you.”

He snorted humorously. “You wouldn’t even have known it was tofu if I didn’t—” He paused sharply as he finally loosened the rag and pulled it free of the thing weighing it down.

“What?” All the lightness in Ro’s tone had fled as he sensed something was wrong.

“Jordan has a gun in his tool case.” Paris stared at it, trying to figure out what it was. He didn’t know his weapons like Roan, so all he could say for sure was it was a compact black handgun. He supposed if he picked it up he could figure out what it was, but even he knew the first rule of finding a weapon that may have been used in a crime was you never fucking touched it. Let the forensic guys and the cops do that. “I thought it was grease on the rag he wrapped it in, but it’s gun oil. It’s been cleaned recently.”

“Get out of there now,” Roan said, his voice all business. “I’ll call Murphy, have her send out some blues. Do you have his time sheets?”

“Yeah.” He threw the rag over the gun and started putting the toolbox back together. This wasn’t proof Jordan was the killer—all it proved was he hid a gun in his tool kit. Why? Maybe he really was planning to kill Eli. Maybe he wanted him to stew in his own juices for a bit before taking him out. Or maybe there was a very good reason he couldn’t think of right at the moment.

“Check them. Was he working the day Ashley was killed?”

Paris headed out of the tool shed and was walking across the back lawn before he bothered to check. He wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear and unfolded the papers. That info was on the last page, and as he checked, he felt a sudden twinge of anxiety, and his heart decided to do laps around his chest again. He wished he could tell it to stop that. “No, he wasn’t. It looks like he works maybe three days a week, if that.”

Roan started listing dates for him to check, and they were all negative: he was not at work at the times of any shootings. He was at work

the day Eli was threatened, but he'd have to be to deliver the message, wouldn't he?

Paris sat on the back steps of the church, listening to the distant hum of the mower out front, feeling his heart thump against his chest walls. "Is he our guy?"

Roan didn't answer that right away. "It's looking really bad for him at this rate. Let's see what alibis he can come up with. Ballistics will be able to tell us if that's the gun or not, and then it won't matter if he gets the Pope to vouch for him, he's fucked on toast." There was a brief pause, followed by a distant, "Sorry ma'am. But he's probably heard worse on the Internet."

That made him smile. Ro's apologies often sounded woefully insincere. "Cursing in front of children? What a bad influence you are."

"I'm a rebel," he replied, deadpan, and Paris found it hard not to laugh. Roan paused, long enough to get serious on him. "You okay?"

He knew he meant here, sharing the grounds with a possible serial/spree killer (he really didn't know how you parsed those definitions), but for a moment he wondered if Roan could hear his racing pulse over the phone. The lion was coming out more and more now, and Paris thought that Ro just didn't realize the control he had there. He didn't care if the cats in them were mindless creatures of pure instinct—he knew Roan. And he knew that his willpower could force the beast back down. Ro had a good shot at controlling it because he was a born fighter, and he bet the cat in him would back down if it really came to that. If Ro was afraid, it was probably mostly due to him being afraid of himself. Paris knew that the tiger was stronger than he was, in almost every sense of the term. He knew that in the battle between Ro and the lion, the lion didn't have a shot in hell. But did Ro know that? Roan doubted, and Paris didn't know why. His rare sense of insecurity rearing its ugly head, he supposed.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he lied, and rested his head down on his knees, assuming a crash position in hopes the dizziness would fade. He was glad these weren't videophones. "Do we think Jordan could hack a system though? If he hated Eli so much he would frame him, why go through New Horizons? He could use his contacts here."

Roan thought on that for a moment, and Paris could just picture that computerlike mind of his clicking away behind his eyes, considering theories and discarding them with a rapidity that would have made other

investigators jealous. “Two possibilities,” he finally said. “One: he wanted to keep himself off the suspect list, and the more disconnected the killings were from the church, the better. Or two—and I admit, this one bugs the hell out of me, but may be more possible.”

“What?”

“He’s not working alone. There’s more than one killer.”

Paris wondered if the sudden nausea he felt was related to his erratic heart. Or maybe it was due to the fact that he was now wondering if Jordan had any connection at all with Humanity First. He bet as soon as Roan called Murphy he’d start checking that, because that was how he worked.

He hung up so Ro could call Murphy, and heard the hum of the lawnmower motor change, becoming louder, nearing him in a slow but deliberate manner. He sat up and waited for Jordan to come around the opposite side of the complex, which he did eventually. He probably wasn’t anyone’s preconceived idea of a crazed killer. He was of average height, maybe five-seven at best, with short, wavy brown hair now plastered down to his scalp by sweat, and a slender but soft build that was shown off thanks to the fact that he was shirtless, only wearing worn jeans that sagged down toward his ass and showed a good inch of gray boxers, and overly expensive Nikes. He was also listening to an iPod, clipped to the front of his baggy jeans. His chest was underdeveloped to the point that it was almost concave, with a sparse, mangy smattering of brown hair dusted across it like fallen shreds of tobacco, and a doughy stomach that swelled ever so slightly, the promise of a beer belly just starting to grow. He was definitely the type of guy that should have kept his shirt on under any circumstances. Paris glanced at him as he pushed the lawnmower by, and while Paris gave him a tight but insincere smile, Jordan’s return glance was curiously hostile, thin lips curving down into a scythe of a scowl. He just didn’t like infecteds at all, did he?

He was just digging his own grave deeper and deeper. Paris supposed that he should get up and try and turn his charm on him, see if he could weasel some reason out of him before the cops came to take him away and dug their jackboots into his ribs.

But today, he just wasn’t feeling that kind.

14

Ready to Fall

ROAN wanted to go over to the church and see how things were going down, but he decided to stick with his surveillance because there was still something deeply suspicious about Noah Hammond.

Okay, that was hardly enough to go on. In fact, he'd be laughed out of the force if he was still a cop, so perhaps it was a good thing he wasn't a cop anymore.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket, as he'd set it to vibrate instead of ring, and he expected it to be Paris, catching him up on what was going on, but his screen showed him it was Matt. He almost didn't answer, but if he didn't tell this kid off now, he might never get the hint. "Matt," he answered with an irritated sigh. "I can't have you—"

"I know," he interrupted hastily. "I know, I'm a total pain in the ass. But I got somethin' for you."

Save him from the amateur detectives. "What?"

"Noah's real address. I called around, I know some guys who—"

"I have his address," he interrupted, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "He lives at the trailer park with his mother."

"No, he doesn't. I mean, he gets his check there, he gives that as his official address, but it's not true. It's only his mail drop-off point, 'cause he doesn't want anybody knowin' where he actually stays, y'know. But he's had Elvez over, and he told Trip about it."

He was positive Matt wasn't using again and just high on caffeine, right? "Trip?"

"Another bike messenger. It's short for Tripod, which is—"

"I can guess where that came from," Roan told him, digging his notebook out of his coat pocket. "Where is it that Noah supposedly lives?"

“Over on Jefferson, at a place called Sun Hill. Apartment 32.”

Even as Roan wrote it down, he found himself looking at it in disbelief. “Sun Hill on Jefferson Avenue?”

“That’d be it. You know it?”

“I’m surprised you don’t.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Almost as bad as Wildwood.” It was another tenement, and in fact it was just a mere two blocks down from the Wildwood. It was smaller, and was on a block more known for its bars and convenience stores than its apartments, but if you wanted to live somewhere where no one noticed you engaging in illegal activities—ranging from drugs to prostitution to outright murder—that was the place you went. No one ever saw anything, even if it happened right in front of them. There was a high concentration of high-risk parolees there, as the landlord of Sun Hill, ironically, used to be one himself. (Admittedly it was back in the ’70s, but he still seemed a bit too creepy. His fondness for polyester shirts was unnatural.) “I know bike messengers don’t make much, but he’d be better off living in the trailer park than in that shithole. I don’t suppose Trip knows why Noah would be there.”

“Well, Elvez supposedly asked him about that, and Noah said he didn’t like living with his mom ’cause she was a total drunk and a slut and all sorts of shit like that. He said he got his mail there ’cause he still checks on his brother and sister, and he didn’t want them knowin’ where to find him.”

He wasn’t sure he followed that. “He doesn’t want his family to know where he lives?”

Matt clicked his tongue, like he was being stupid on purpose. “No—*them*. Y’know, the government and that sorta shit.”

“He’s a conspiracy nut?”

“I dunno, nobody’s quite sure. They think he might be born again, y’know, ’cause he has this, like, fundamentalist view on things. He doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke, he thinks all drug dealers and users should be executed, that sort of thing.”

Now Roan was very glad he’d stayed. It didn’t matter the religion—all extremism was bad, and most extremists could be convinced to commit

violence with the right prompting. It wasn't a huge leap from being intolerant to being deadly. Of course he was a cynic who believed everyone could become a killer, given the right circumstances, but that just meant he took too much of his work home with him.

Matt continued talking, which was par for the course. "He's never been seen out on a date either, or ever talks about a girlfriend, y'know. Some think he may be gay but in the closet, but I think he's just asexual, y'know? 'Cause he doesn't set off my gaydar; he just sets off my 'creepy straight guy-dar'... which doesn't exactly sound right, but you know what I mean."

"Because he seems to have no sex life or social life?"

"Right."

"Which just supports the religious extremist supposition." And did you have a lot of time to date when you were planning to murder a large group of people? Getting away with murder usually required some planning.

Matt seemed to pause for an abnormal amount of time. "I have no idea what that word was, but you sound very manly saying it."

Roan chuckled, but he shouldn't have. He didn't want to encourage him. "Thanks, I try. Is it likely any of these friends of yours will tell Noah you were asking after him?"

Matt snorted, a partial laugh mixed with a scoff. "No. Even the guys that kinda like him find him creepy."

"Does that include Elvez?"

"Oh yeah. He's nice to everybody, y'know, but you can tell he isn't sure what to make of him. Still, it isn't like Noah has any other friends."

At least that his work friends and other peripheral acquaintances knew of. He probably kept his lives separate, like a good boy.

He'd been watching Elvez and Noah throughout this conversation, but now he saw Noah grab for his cell phone like it was ringing, but he didn't talk into it, he just looked at the screen, and his face went astonishingly blank. A text message? Roan guessed that whatever the message was, it didn't make him happy, and he was struggling not to show it. If he was right, he expected Noah to make an excuse and leave, and it looked like that was exactly what he was doing. "Matt, I have to go.

Thanks for your help, but stop it now. I don't want to have to save your ass again."

"Yes, Mom," he said sarcastically, but he could hear the smile in his voice. "If this bastard killed Ash, nail him to the wall."

"I intend to." He flipped his phone shut and dropped it back in his pocket as Noah got up, leaving his coffee cup behind, and retrieved his bike. Roan's binoculars were also the kind that folded up, so he was able to put those away and leave the bank just as Noah started pedaling north down the main drag. Roan figured he could follow on foot, he knew he had the stamina to run after him no matter how far he went, but then he'd be at the mercy of the traffic, and he'd be pretty conspicuous.

His bike was pretty conspicuous, in the sense that it was a motorcycle, and a very nice motorcycle at that, but it gave him the ability to be more mobile than a car in this traffic, especially while on the trail of a bike messenger. The trick was keeping far enough back that Noah—whom he had to assume was a paranoid sort—wouldn't suspect he was being followed.

He tried to guess where Noah was heading based on his general direction, but he was shocked by where he actually went: the Kinko's where Reese Campbell was the manager. Wasn't *that* a coincidence?

He parked the bike in an alley beside the dollar teriyaki place, hiding it behind the rather smelly Dumpster, and strolled into the Kinko's (it wasn't like either Reese or Noah knew who he was). The copy place was surprisingly busy, but he recognized Reese right away—Amy Campbell had a chatty MySpace page full of pictures of herself, her husband, and some of her friends (surprisingly, she didn't mention her politics either)—a bald man whose scalp had a sunburned, reddish tinge, and whose gut strained at his button-down white shirt. He was talking to Noah on the far side of the shop, a counter between them, their voices so hushed he couldn't hear them over the noise of copying, faxing, and customers, but he could tell from their body postures that Noah was upset about something, and while Reese wasn't happy either, he was trying to calm the boy down. He watched them from the corner of his eye as he pretended to be fascinated by the amount of paper colors available, and it suddenly occurred to him what might have upset Noah: Jordan had just been arrested. Could all three men be connected?

He could connect Reese to Barlow, and Noah to Barlow only

through his mother, but Jordan was a nonstarter as far as they knew. Maybe a little more digging into his background was necessary. But Roan was uncomfortable with the conspiracy he was starting to smell here. The reason why most killers worked solo—beyond the obvious fact that serial murderers usually killed as some grotesque parody of intimacy—was the same reason vast conspiracies rarely existed: the more people involved, the more likely someone was to talk or to fuck up. Yet if there was a group behind the killings, plotting, planning, perhaps sharing gunman duties, it might explain why the cops had absolutely zero to go on. They were looking for a single killer, but in fact there was a group that had managed to plan its hits pretty well. But the thing about groups was there was often a fragile dynamic, and it was more than possible that yanking one of the people out could cause the whole thing to collapse.

The best-case scenario was they were able to hold Jordan for a while, he wouldn't lawyer up immediately, and he broke and sang like a drunken American Idol contestant, but Roan knew better than to count on best-case scenarios. If he could make a solid connection here between Jordan and Barlow, he could call up Murphy, apologize profusely for running his own investigation on an active case, and turn it all over to her. He honestly didn't care that he'd get no credit at all, and might in fact get a lot of shit—he just wanted these fuckers stopped.

He was trying to work out how such a cabal might function as Noah finally left, and Reese turned and headed back into his office, looking sweaty and vaguely dyspeptic. It would make the most sense, efficiency-wise, if the duties were split: one to hack the New Horizons system and pick out the likely targets, another to scout and confirm targets (they had to have some knowledge of when these people were home, when they were alone, when their streets or apartment buildings weren't so busy), another to drive, and the last to do the shooting. So a minimum of four people? Noah, Reese, Jordan, and... Barlow? The math tracked, but he wasn't sure the people did. Who among them was a hacker? And who was the most likely triggerman?

He couldn't follow Noah out instantly, so that pretty much meant he'd lost the tail, but not really. Matt—super-annoying puppy that he was—had given him Noah's real, "secret" address. He had time to go home, trade the bike for the rental car, grab his laptop, and stakeout Sun Hill until Noah got home. And where he went after work might be a hell of a lot more illuminating than following him on his rounds through the city.

He felt his cell vibrate in his pocket on the drive home, but there was no way to use a bike and talk on a cell at the same time (well, maybe with one of those hands-free models, but he wasn't sure how that would fit on his head along with the helmet), so he just let it go, figuring they'd call back if it was important. When it started buzzing a second time less than a minute later, he pulled off into a gas station and answered the phone.

It was Paris. "I just got the weirdest call from Barlow," he said. Did he sound slightly breathless? Roan thought he had before. He was okay, wasn't he?

"Weird how?"

"He wanted to meet me as soon as possible. He said it was really important but he couldn't talk about it over the phone. I agreed to meet him at the Road House at five-thirty. Isn't that interesting timing?"

It definitely was. Was that who Reese had called? Had he gone back to his office after talking to Noah and called Tim? "*Très* suspicious. Was Jordan taken in?"

"Oh yeah. I told Eli what I'd found, and when the cops arrived, Eli gave them permission to search the shed since it's his property. They found the gun, Jordan claimed he'd never seen it before and had no idea how it got there, but a routine run on his name turned up a bench warrant. Seems he got a DUI in Fairview last year and never showed up in court." He paused briefly. "Did you just say *très suspicious*? Could you be more gay? Is that possible?"

He smirked, trying hard not to laugh. "Girlfriend, please."

"You're doing the snaps, aren't you? You can't say that without the snaps." Paris let that hang for a moment, just long enough to signal a topic shift. "What do you think's going on, Ro?"

"I think Reese, Noah, Barlow, and Jordan are all in on this. There's enough concern about Jordan being taken in that I suspect he was vital to the next hit. Maybe that is the gun that's been used in his tool kit, or they're afraid a search of his home or car will turn up something incriminating."

"Or he'll talk."

"All potential disasters."

"How do you think they're all connected?"

Roan explained what he'd just seen, and what Matt had told him about Noah. Paris's reaction to this was a succinct, "Well, shit."

"I think we may have kicked over a hornet's nest here."

"So why do you think Tim needs to see Kevin so badly?"

That was a good question, and there were a couple of troubling possibilities. "It seems early to slot you into Jordan's place."

"Too bad. If they ask me if I want to kill someone, we could get them arrested on the spot."

Roan rubbed his eyes, trying to work out the timing of staking out Noah and listening in on Paris and Barlow, and he knew almost immediately that he couldn't do it. He had never been able to bilocate, and it was unlikely he'd learn to do it in the next couple of hours. "Yeah, but I doubt they'll make it that easy for us. Listen, since I'm going to be tailing Noah, I'm gonna call Phil and see if he has an operative free that can shadow you tonight, okay?" Phil was the fellow private detective who ran a huge operation over in Springfield, and they occasionally helped each other out. Phil owed him, because the last gig they did together it was Par and him working as floaters at that conference Phil was providing security for. That's where he'd got all the name tags for their appliances.

Par scoffed. "I don't need a shadow. I can handle myself."

"I know you can, but you're meeting with a guy who may be in a super-group of serial killers. Even I wouldn't go into a situation like that alone."

"Bullshit."

"Par, please, don't do this now."

"You're tailing Noah alone, aren't you? He's in the same super-group, if you're right."

"Yes, but he's never going to know I'm tailing him."

"Ideally."

"Yes, and if I'm dumb enough to let him see me, I deserve what I get." He sighed, aware that this discussion could go nowhere positive. "I don't want to fight. You don't send someone into the field alone, and that's that. I'm not going into the field, I'm loitering on the sidelines. You're going in, and you're having backup."

Par let out an exasperated sigh, and Roan glanced at the traffic gliding by on the road. People honked as risky lane changes almost caused accidents, and that was always the first sign that rush hour was almost here. People's driving got worse and worse as more cars got on the road, and he wasn't sure how that worked, but it did. Maybe it was the auto corollary of people being stupider in larger groups than they were on their own.

"Is that why you went after your shooter all by yourself?"

Oh, he should have known Paris was going to trot that out. "I didn't. I called Gordo and Seb as backup. Ask them if you don't believe me."

"And not me?"

"You're not police—you couldn't have arrested this crackhead fucker." As soon as that escaped his mouth, he regretted it, and rolled his eyes at his own stupidity.

"He was a crackhead?" Paris repeated in angry disbelief. "Jesus Christ, Roan! No wonder you weren't going to tell me about it."

"It wasn't that big a deal, really. It sounds worse than it was..."

"How badly did you get hurt?"

"You saw it for yourself, just some kidney punches."

"Fuck you. That's after you partially transformed and healed yourself. What happened before?"

"Nothing. The guy was high and inept, and he didn't have his gun. Ask Gordo if you don't believe me." Okay, that was a partial lie, but not by much. Sam didn't crush any bones in his neck when he attempted to strangle him, and repeatedly head-butting him hadn't done any harm to his hard head. He glanced at his watch, the cuff one that was covering his Leo tattoo. It just seemed like the best idea on a stakeout, just in case. "Look, meet me at home, we can argue there."

"I don't want to argue."

"Neither do I! So what the hell's this about?"

Again with the exasperated sigh, but at least it didn't sound as angry this time. "Don't shut me out, Ro. I'm getting the sense that you are, and I'm not sure what I've done to make you do that."

Oh great, just what he needed: industrial-strength guilt. "God, Paris,

it's not you. I just... I don't know how to handle this. Just be patient with me, okay?"

"I have been, hon, but I can only wait so long before I start to feel like a complete idiot."

"You're not. You've never been that."

"My sisters will disagree with you," he replied, a humorous tinge to his voice. But it faded away long before he added, "I'll see you at home."

He hung up after Paris did, wondering if he was fucking this up. He just wasn't good with relationships; he was used to being on his own, doing things on his own, relying on no one but himself. It made things infinitely easier. Lonely, sure, but easier. He trusted Paris, he knew that he did and could, and yet it was still so hard for him to do so in a meaningful way. He was so accustomed to betrayal and disappointment, and he didn't even think it was anyone's fault; the human animal seemed built for betrayal, for the casual meting out of pain, and he almost expected it on some level, even though he never abided it when it happened. There was a difference between expectation and acceptance, and he was proud he hadn't crossed that line.

He wished he was one of those guys who was good at anonymous, quickie sex, but even that required a level of trust he wasn't comfortable handing out to just anyone. He probably should have been straight, as he figured he was an awful gay man, but that just wasn't how he'd turned out.

Life was full of perversity like that.

ONCE he got home, he changed into another set of anonymous clothes—he had gone into the Kinko's, after all—and did another search on Noah Hammond, but it was much the same as before: he was so squeaky clean he could have been an honorary Mormon. A search on the address Matt provided him showed that that apartment had supposedly been rented out to a "John Smith." Incredible. Was no one good at thinking up pseudonyms anymore?

Paris came home with some takeout Vietnamese food, and for a little while they just pretended that everything was okay, but there was an obvious awkwardness. While he was eating his curry, he decided to tell

Paris, with no preamble, about the scar on his chest.

He hadn't been in a lot of abusive foster homes; most foster parents were do-gooders who meant well. The problems were the people who actually thought this was an easy way to get money from the state (it wasn't), or one person who wanted to be a foster parent in a couple and the other who didn't but went along with it anyway. They were usually quite bitter and resentful, and they usually took it out on the kids.

Such was the case with the Swansons. Phyllis was a church-happy do-gooder who saw helping these kids as "God's work"—Roan found her overbearing, but he appreciated that she never tried to convert him. Henry was different; Henry was an extremely angry, controlling man who, in a clinch, got intimidated by Phyllis. Roan suspected that he had an Oedipus complex that he'd never got over, and he saw Phyllis as much as his mother as his wife (Henry's mother was a scary, creepy old Bible-thumper, so the through line between her and Phyllis was pretty obvious). Henry had a tendency to smack him around when Phyllis was at one of her many church functions, which was often.

Sometimes he wondered if being exposed to so many dysfunctional heterosexual relationships was why he so happily embraced being gay, but honestly he had no idea. It was fun to think about, though.

His memories of childhood were very fuzzy things; he only remembered scraps, most of them bad. He could remember being in the Swansons' garage, for example, but he could no longer remember why he was there. Henry was mad at him for something again—and again he couldn't remember why, but that wasn't his bad memory; that was because he rarely knew why Henry was mad at him beyond the fact that he simply existed—and Henry made to smack him, but Roan saw it coming and was big enough at this stage to catch his arm and shove it back. He was ten, after all. This infuriated Henry more, so he grabbed something blindly off his workbench (which was actually little used, as Henry had no patience for anything), and hit Roan with it. He jumped back, avoiding most of it, but what Henry had picked up and hit him with was a saw, and the tip of the saw caught him, the teeth sharp enough to rip open his shirt and the skin beneath. Blood was everywhere before Roan even realized he'd been cut, and it even seemed to take Henry a moment to grasp it. He could still remember the naked terror on his face, making him look a thousand years old as he held the bloody saw, and then his eyes drifted toward it, and when he saw the blood running down the blade he threw it across the

garage, like the metal was so hot it was burning his skin. He started shouting for Roan to get away from him, so horrified his skin had turned the color of old oatmeal, and fled the garage like he had the devil on his ass. It took him a moment to work out why, it wasn't like Roan had hit him with the saw, but then he figured it out as blood continued pouring down his chest, turning his shirt red, dribbling down his jeans and pooling on the oil-stained cement floor.

It took him a moment to understand why Henry was so freaked-out, but then he tried to staunch the blood with his hand, and that was when he got it: his blood. His diseased, pestilent blood. He was suddenly full of rage, just furious, and he began splattering his blood all over the garage, collecting it in his hands and flinging it all over the room, smearing it on the walls, the workbench and tools, even Henry's car. He wanted to bleed to death, he hoped he did, as his disease would taint this fucking place and everything in it. He wanted them to live with it, to live with this. He was so angry he knew he was acting like a fucking crazy person, but he couldn't stop; his rage was bigger than he was. He thought he was screaming, but he didn't know for sure; he remembered nothing but red-hot rage.

An ambulance team arrived—Henry had said that Roan had “accidentally” cut himself—and he still remembered the laconic, sleepy-eyed EMT who knew immediately that Henry's story made no sense with the wound involved, and that he'd lost an awful lot of blood for someone who'd “just” done it. Roan could remember that the patch on his jacket said O'Neil, and he had hair the color of driftwood, and his touch on the cut was very gentle; he suspected O'Neil was his very first crush. Although his partner, a wiry guy who seemed more comfortable around Henry than around the kid with the diseased blood, seemed nervous, O'Neil was too much of a pro to care. He looked him square in the eyes (he could barely remember the color of O'Neil's eyes, but he was pretty sure they were as brown as his hair) and said, “You didn't do this to yourself, did you?” Roan shook his head, and glared over O'Neil's broad shoulder at the cringing, terrified figure of Henry in the garage doorway. He didn't need to say it—out of the four of them in the garage, three of them knew what had happened. The EMTs took him to the hospital, and he never went back to the Swansons again. He ended up back at a state foster-care group home, and they said he'd probably be left with a nasty scar, but it had faded pretty well over time. Oh sure, it was still there, a ghost scar that seemed to trace the contour of his collarbone where the tip of the saw

had gotten caught in his skin, but it had healed a lot more cleanly than anyone had ever expected.

While he told the story he'd kept looking down at his curry, moving the vegetables and chicken pieces around the Styrofoam container, rearranging rice that was the color of saffron. He didn't want to see what was on Par's face, because he was afraid he wouldn't like it. But after he told his story, Par reached across the breakfast bar and put his hand over his. "Oh God, sweetheart, that's horrible. I hope they threw his ass in jail."

He shook his head, sparing a quick glance at Paris. His eyes were shining with empathetic tears, but none of them had fallen, and he was glad about that. "No, nothing really happened to him; the laws were a bit looser then, you understand, a little abuse here and there was tolerated more. I just hope it took him eighty years to decontaminate his fucking garage."

Paris squeezed his hand, and he looked indignant as well as sad. "If I ever find the guy, I don't care if he's a multiple amputee in an old people's home, I'm kicking his fucking ass. Hitting a kid with a saw? Jesus."

He leaned over the bar and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you."

That seemed to startle Paris, or at least deeply confuse him. "What for?"

"For caring, for putting up with me. I can barely stand myself at the best of times."

Paris reached across, burying his hand in Roan's hair, and pulled his head over the bar, meeting him halfway and kissing him full on the mouth. He tasted like sweet green tea and bo kho. After the kiss, he leaned his forehead against his for a moment, and Roan felt a surprising surge of relief. He hadn't fucked this up too much; this wasn't beyond fixing. "You are a wonderful, amazing man," Paris told him. "And if you don't give yourself a break, I'm gonna kick your ass too."

That made him smile. He probably meant it, too, but it was still oddly touching.

He called Phil after their combo lunch-dinner (he was on a stakeout tonight and Paris was meeting Barlow in a seedy bar, this was probably their last chance to eat for a while), and luckily he was able to dispatch Jamal, who didn't have any open cases at the moment. He knew Jamal; he was ex-military intelligence, like Phil himself, but he had a better sense of

humor in general. He was on the short side but built like a fireplug, and he had no doubt at all that if things went really horrible, Jamal could kick the ass of the entire population of the bar and not even break a sweat, which was exactly the type of person he wanted shadowing Par tonight. Paris and Jamal decided to meet in the parking lot of a Wendy's just over from the Road House and work out the cues in case something went wrong. (Unlikely, but it was always vital to have them.)

Roan left in the rental first, feeling a bit better about things in general. Admittedly, the records search on Jordan turned up nothing that connected him in any way to Barlow or Reese or Noah, it just reinforced Eli's view that he was a "fuck-up." Clearly he had problems with alcohol, as he had a few DUIs on his record, and a couple of arrests for public drunkenness and urinating in public (classy again), although none since last year. He seemed like the type you didn't want in on an intricate assassination plan, so Roan couldn't imagine they used him for anything really important. He was close to Eli, though—did he tell them how best to frame him?

He parked down the street from Sun Hill, in front of an abandoned building whose broken windows were covered with wooden planks and gang tags, and was once again glad he'd insisted on tinted windows on the Taurus. Since he assumed he was in for a long stakeout, he brought a thermos full of hot, sweet black tea (full of caffeine and sugar, a one-two punch that should keep him hyper-alert), a sizable empty plastic bottle to pee in (disgusting, but necessary when you couldn't leave your post to piss), and an audio book that he slipped into the CD player. It was a Stephen King one, so it'd last all night, and possibly into next morning. At least audio books made these long, dull stakeouts a bit more tolerable.

He tried to focus on the front of Sun Hill and ignore all the drug deals going on around him, as well as the johns picking up the occasional prostitute (mostly female, but a couple male; in fact, he recognized two of the women, DeeDee and Cherry, and one of the boys, Justin, from his time on the police beat). He'd been there for a bit over an hour, sunset making the sky cycle through the spectacular crimson shades that you could only see in polluted areas, a red explosion like neon blood painted across the bottom of the clouds, when a car far too nice for the area pulled up to the curb outside Sun Hill. It was a silver '04 Audi A8 with some minor denting in the back, but still a lot newer and classier than any car that ever parked around here (some of the johns' cars were extremely expensive,

making you wonder why they were trolling for cheap tail down here). As he took a photo of the plate, he saw a woman get out, and she instantly struck him as familiar.

She was petite with a very slender, willowy frame, her black hair styled in a short pixie cut that just reinforced the youthfulness of her elfin face; she looked barely legal, but she carried herself like a much older woman, making her true age a crapshoot. She looked around nervously, giving him a good look and shot of her profile as she drew her leather jacket around her anxiously and walked into the plain brick building that was the Sun Hill Apartments.

Holy shit. It was Mia DeSoto.

15

Collision

PART of him was almost hoping that the Road House would resemble that cheesy Patrick Swayze film, but no such luck. It was just a random cheap dive, noisy with pool players, a jukebox playing classic rock tunes (he came in to strains of “Don’t Fear The Reaper”—foreshadowing?), and people talking. The clientele was almost all male, but the place was too dreary, the lights so dim it was like suddenly submerging into a algae-filled pond, to ever consider it a “gay” bar. It was just a depressed bar, the kind perfect for career drinkers who wished to wallow in their own rampant misery. If they’d had neon Molson and Moosehead ads on the wall instead of buzzing Budweiser and Miller ads, this easily could have been a saloon somewhere in the dreary plains of Alberta. And was there a single mullet-sporting bouncer? No there wasn’t. That was about eighty different kinds of suck.

This time he beat Barlow here, so he got one of the round wooden tables in the back, near the pool players, and he ordered a tonic on the rocks with a lemon slice, which made the burly Hispanic bartender look at him funny, but it would look quite a bit like a vodka and tonic to Barlow. He couldn’t actually drink tonight. After Roan left, he’d gone into the bathroom and taken half a Valium, as his heart was starting to race again, an uneven lope that seemed more like a spastic gallop, and he knew half a Valium should take down his heart rate without compromising him. But drinking a beer on top of it would threaten to put him to sleep, so he couldn’t risk it.

He was watching the pool players—one guy with a beer gut so massive he probably hadn’t seen his feet since 1985, and a skinnier, seedier-looking guy wearing a “No Fat Chicks” T-shirt (Paris had no idea those existed outside of *The Simpsons*)—and trying to discern if they actually knew what they were doing by the time Barlow showed up, apologizing profusely for his lateness. He said there was a wreck that was holding up traffic, but Paris honestly didn’t know if he was lying or not. It

was times like this that he wished he could smell a lie.

Barlow ordered a beer and got to business pretty shortly afterward, and it wasn't quite what Paris expected. Barlow was asking him to go to a meeting tomorrow night and pretend he was a newcomer. He said they did that because people were often reluctant to be the first one to share their story, and they had plants as a way of getting the ball rolling. Paris was glad about the Valium, as it helped him not react to things, but his gut twisted in sudden anxiety. "Was that woman there the night I went a plant?"

"Karen? Yeah, she's been with us for a couple of months now. But she can't do the meeting tomorrow night, and I was thinking since your story was so dynamic, you might want to give it a try. I know how it sounds, but it actually helps people open up."

So Roan's instincts paid off again. It wasn't that Karen was homicidal as much as that she was lying—while telling the truth. Roan knew something was wrong, but didn't know what, so he'd tagged her. It was creepy how he did that.

And if Karen had been active in Humanity First for a couple of months, it probably meant that Noah had been too. There was the connection between Noah and Barlow. The circle had been close ... but was that enough?

He was thinking of when to make an excuse to leave when Tim's cell phone buzzed and, after apologizing, he answered it. But it wasn't a phone call or even a text message; he had a web-enabled phone, and it was an e-mail. He learned this after Tim grunted in what seemed to be muted disgust, and asked, "Have you seen a man like this around?"

Looking at the cell phone screen Tim held out toward him, Paris was once again glad the Valium had numbed his responses. The tiny picture was of a man in a dark blue police uniform, only visible from the shoulders up. He had a narrow, almost vulpine face, with sharp cheekbones and big, deep-set green eyes that had just a hint of an exotic shape, like maybe there was some Eurasian blood in his family, while his normally full lips were pulled slightly flat, as if he was trying hard not to smirk. There was a sparkle in his eyes that suggested he was actually trying not to laugh because he thought this was so stupid.

Of course he knew this man. It was Roan, and that was the photo they took for the newspaper article that came out when he joined the force.

He looked a bit younger and strangely adorable, with his reddish-brown hair short and combed back; he took a moment to regret the cut, but enjoy how sexy he looked otherwise. There was nothing really classically handsome about him, but he still seemed unbelievably attractive, and Paris had no idea how Roan couldn't quite see that about himself. He was glad, though, because there was only room for one unbearably vain person in their house, and he had no intention of giving up his throne.

"No, I've never seen him before," Paris replied. "Why?"

Tim pulled the cell phone back toward him, and took a moment to decide what to say. "It seems he may be following some of our people. If you see him, don't confront him—just call me and let me know where you are, okay?"

"Is he dangerous?"

He shook his head, and flashed him a very anemic attempt at a reassuring smile. "No, don't worry about that. He's just... not a person we want around."

Kevin Stiles would be puzzled about this, so he pretended to be. "What is he, a stalker?"

"Something like that, yes."

Paris finished his drink, and excused himself to the men's room. There was a guy at the urinal so he ducked into a stall. The bathroom was as dark and dreary as the rest of the bar, but it wasn't quite the disgusting cesspool he had braced himself for. Under his breath, he said, "Don't worry, Jamal, I'm just calling Roan. There's been a troubling development."

Real troubling. And what made things worse was that Ro was either away from his phone or he had turned it off. After four rings he was shunted directly into his voice mail system. "Damn it, Ro! Look, Tim wants Kevin to be a plant at the next meeting, taking Karen's place. She's been with HF for months now, and it's a good bet that, despite their estrangement, Noah has been as well. Also, Tim just got an e-mail on his phone, I don't know from who, but it included a photo of you. Hon, get out of there, you've been made; they know you're investigating them. I don't know what they'll do if they find you, but if they are the killers... look, call me as soon as you get this message, let me know you're okay. Oh, fuck it, I'm heading to Jefferson Avenue as soon as I'm out of here. Call me or not, I'll be there ASAP." He hung up, not sure what else he

could do.

Didn't it somehow figure? Ro was worried about him, and it should have been himself he was worried about.

MIA was in Sun Hill for almost forty-five minutes. It took him barely a minute to pop the lock on her passenger door, and while he was doing it, Cherry recognized him and called out, "How ya doin', Officer?" The street immediately cleared of drug dealers, nervous johns, and all her rivals in prostitution. She had to know he wasn't on the force anymore; she just wanted to get the others off her corner. He gave her a sarcastic little wave, and she blew him a kiss as he ducked into Mia's car. This behavior didn't strike her as weird or out of the ordinary, which spoke volumes about the area, and about Cherry herself.

Cherry was actually a woman named Nadine Guest, and she was probably about thirty now, although she looked about forty under all that makeup. She was one of the hookers the cops called the "old guard," as she was hooked on heroin, whereas most of the hookers nowadays were supporting meth or crack habits, not smack ones. She had at least one kid that he knew of, in state foster care (the father was identified, but couldn't be found), and lived in one of the crappiest apartments around, one that probably should have been shut down as a health hazard. Her story was as sad as hell, as was her life, and he used to feel horrible running these women—and the boy hustlers—in. What they were doing was illegal, sure, but they were just trying to survive, and most were feeding monstrous habits they couldn't kick. They needed help, not incarcerations or fines, most of which they couldn't afford anyway. He wasn't the only cop who had felt that way, but they were employed to enforce laws, even if those laws struck them as unjust. But he'd only run the hookers and rent boys in if he absolutely had to, and therefore that segment of the street community actually looked kindly on him, or at least more kindly on him than they did other cops. They knew he was a soft touch, good for a burger or a cup of coffee, and they'd tell him things they wouldn't tell other cops. That left the Chief torn, as he didn't like him slacking on the job, but he'd forged some valuable connections that would be hard to replicate. Of course, as soon as he left the force it was a moot point, but he was strangely touched that they still remembered him.

He hid in the backseat of Mia's car, which had a nice gray leather interior, and hunkered down on the floor behind the passenger seat. It was a clean car, well looked after, and he thought Paris would have approved, although he did find a stale French fry, straw wrappers, and a loose scattering of change beneath the seat. Also a pill that looked like Prozac, but it was partially melted, its name obscured.

Finally he heard the click of the driver's side door being unlocked, and she got in, a swirl of a perfume filling the car as she tossed her purse in the passenger seat and slammed the door. Chanel No. 5? He was pretty sure that was it, although he wasn't always great at perfume recognition.

He waited until she'd started the car and started driving, and then popped up, leaning over the passenger seat. "Hello, Mia," he said.

She let out a startled shriek and her hands twisted on the steering wheel, nearly making her plow into a parked car before she fought to get back under control. She glared at him out of one dark eye, and he had to admit she did have a very attractive profile. He could also see that the indigo blouse she wore was silk, not satin like he'd first thought, although paired with jeans was an odd choice.

"Who the fuck are you and how did you get in my car?"

"I think you know who I am," he replied, doffing his baseball cap and pushing his sunglasses up to the top of his head. "You date Eli after all. Surely he's mentioned me."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she sneered slightly. "You're Roan McKichan, that infected detective."

"Isn't it neat how that kind of rhymes?"

Apparently she didn't appreciate his sense of humor. "He has you following me, is that it?"

"Now why would he do that? Just because your brother just got arrested with a gun in his possession...."

"He's been framed," she snapped bitterly. "Probably by your pretty-boy boyfriend. He was there, wasn't he?"

He sat back in the seat, crossing his arms over his chest and shaking his head as he stared at her in the rearview mirror. "Rookie mistake number one. Just a minute ago you were pretending you didn't know who I was, and now you're telling me you know my boyfriend and that he was there when Jordan got popped. So why the act?"

She looked away in disgust. "I don't have to say anything to you."

"I think you'll want to, Mia, especially since I don't think Jordan is guilty."

That really did surprise her. Her head shot back and she stared at him in the rearview mirror. "What?"

"Jordan is a perfect fit for the timeline, but for once, Eli and I agree on something: he's a fuck up. He might have the will to do this, but I don't think he has the ability, not with his chronic alcoholism. But you, you fit a hell of a lot better."

Her face had hardened until it looked like a mask. A pretty mask, but one that still wouldn't have been out of place on a gargoyle. "What the fuck are you talking about, you smug little faggot?"

"I'm not little."

Again, she didn't appreciate his jokes, but he wasn't surprised. The hate she was radiating was nuclear, and while he'd be the first to admit that what he'd done—breaking into her car, scaring the shit out of her—was an act deserving of anger, he wasn't sure he deserved the sheer amount of contempt coming from her. This felt deeper and older, far more personal than could possibly be warranted. "I'd like you to explain something to me, Mia. You're infected, just like I am, so why would you help kill fellow infecteds? I know some of us can be as self-loathing as gays, but come on—there's a huge difference between preaching that fags are a scourge that should be wiped from the earth and then picking up a young hustler who'll beat you with a leather strap before fucking you up the ass, and actually taking out a gun and shooting someone in the head. Admittedly, it's a small gulf, but it's there."

She grimaced in disgust at the mention of a guy being fucked up the ass, which is what he'd intended; clearly, she wasn't a fag hag. "You're disgusting."

"Says the murderer."

"I am not a murderer!"

"Then why were you meeting with Noah Hammond?"

"Who?"

He sighed wearily, catching her eyes in the rearview mirror. "You know I can smell lies, right? Eli mentioned that, didn't he?"

“He says you claim that.”

“It’s much more than a claim and he knows it. So let’s just can the bullshit, okay? Noah’s in on this. What I don’t get is, was Jordan threatening Eli on his own? He must not have been aware that you were helping Noah frame him. But where did Patrick Farley fit into this? The other victims were women Eli had some interest in—more than interest, in Melissa’s case—but Patrick doesn’t fit. He wasn’t gay, and even if he was, Eli isn’t. So what could Patrick have done to get himself on the hit list?”

Her lips had thinned to a line so tight it looked almost as if they were disappearing, receding into her taut face. “You think you’re so smart,” she growled. “You know nothing about me.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You were born in Flagstaff, Arizona, raised in the tiny town of Elk’s Grove, Colorado, dropped out of Brown University one year in, probably due to being infected or due to your shockingly low grade point average, whichever came first. Jordan had been bounced from college almost right away, after he got hospitalized for alcohol poisoning, and the two of you wandered up here. You’ve been working as a temp in a law firm for the last six months, and dating Eli for two of those. I believe you’ve been taking care of Jordan, even though he lives apart from you, possibly because you’re the only family each of you has. Your father died when you were seven, and your mother died three years ago. What am I leaving out?”

She was shaking her head throughout his recitation. “You’re typical, aren’t you? You’re just like the rest of them.”

“Can you specify the ‘them’? I get tossed in with a lot of groups. Gays, infecteds, redheads, men, nerds, hummus eaters...”

“Being infected is not next to godliness, it doesn’t make us special. It makes us diseased. It makes us freaks. And there’s so many stupid people who want to be infected, who think it will make them super-powered or tragic stars of their own Gothic dramas. They have no idea what it’s really like. They have no fucking clue how horrible it is. And people like you and me keep spreading this fucking thing, making the cult bigger, making it worse.”

“I’ve never infected anyone.”

The look she flashed him was sharp as broken glass. “So you say. But we will if we’re around long enough, if we’re not celibate. We might not even mean to, we might not even have been aware we were sick, and

we could have given it to someone.”

“I’ve been sick all my life. I was born this way. I’ve never infected anyone.”

But she wasn’t really listening to him; she had a faraway, almost crazed look in her eye. This was a speech she’d said many times before, at least in her head. “This has to stop. The number of infecteds just keeps growing, no matter our high mortality rate. Eli doesn’t even believe it’s a religious experience, no matter what he claims, but he won’t stop. He’s an attention whore and he won’t stop.”

“He has to be stopped,” he prompted, feeling that he knew where this was going.

“Yes! But it’s for his own good, and the good of everyone. He’s a menace. Every infected is a menace. We were all people, we started off as people, and it’s up to us to protect them from us.”

Oh dear God. Again, he’d encountered this kind of thing, self-loathing turned to near madness, in closeted gay men before. They were the type who made hating fags a religion, who went out on Saturday nights looking for queers to beat up, who showed up at funerals of AIDS patients to harangue their relatives, and all the while, inside, they were really beating themselves up; they were trying to burn out the thing they most hated about themselves, even though they refused to admit it. Mia had taken loathing her disease to a level of madness; she loathed herself and everyone who had the disease, and she wanted them all dead. She was the perfect foil for Humanity First, as there was no traitor like an insider. That meant she was using Eli, didn’t it? She only started dating him to get into his inner circle. Or had Eli’s hypocrisy pushed her over the edge? He wouldn’t blame her if it did. “What’s the limit of those protections, Mia? We’re infected, but we’re still people too—”

“Fuck you!” she exploded, spittle flying, anger twisting her face into something truly ugly and frightening. The light in her eyes was hard and messianic, so far beyond sanity she couldn’t even see it from here. “You just said you can smell lies, asshole! How normal is that? How *human* is that? It isn’t, is it?! And you were shot! I heard you were shot! And yet here you are, looking just fine to me. You’re worse than most—you weren’t even born human! You’ve been inhuman since day one.”

“Did you infect someone accidentally, Mia?” he asked, going back to what she’d said previously. He’d already searched the car, she didn’t have

a weapon, but it was possible she had one in her purse. “Is that why you hate yourself?”

“I never infected anyone!” she roared. Her face was red, flushed with blood, and she was starting to sweat, cords standing out in her neck. She no longer looked barely legal; she looked every single month of her twenty-six years. “And I won’t! Not like Patrick, not like that fucking bitch Kelly, and they won’t infect anyone else either.”

“Kelly? Who’s Kelly?” She knew Patrick? Was that why he was on the list? “Did Patrick infect you?”

“That fucking son of a bitch!” she screeched, her voice raw with rage. “You men just can’t keep it in your fucking pants!”

“It’s a genetic flaw,” he replied, trying to calm her down. But he sensed the tipping point had been passed; there was no pulling her back down to earth now. He’d pushed her too hard, too fast; he hadn’t realized how fragile her sanity was. He knew from the profilers that there was an actual term for this, when a killer who had previously been slick and together started to lose it—it was called decompensating. And Mia was decompensating right before his eyes.

Wow. Eli really knew how to pick women, didn’t he?

She kept casting furtive glances at him in the rearview mirror, looking between him and the road. “You have to be stopped. You know that, don’t you?” She had lowered her voice to an almost calm register, which he knew was bad. She was probably totally disconnected from reality now.

He had no choice but to ride this, see where it landed him. He could take her if he had to, but he imagined she’d go down hard. She was crazy, after all. At least he wasn’t human. “I know. Are you gonna be the one to do it?”

She didn’t answer that, just swallowed hard, sweat running down her cheeks like tears, flesh colored from her foundation. “You know what I like about this car?”

Yeah, this couldn’t go anywhere good. “What?”

“It has an airbag.” And with that, she turned the steering wheel hard, too suddenly for him to reach over the seat and grab it, and crashed them head-on into an SUV in the oncoming lane.

16

The Animal I Have Become

ROAN knew what was going to happen, but he wasn't sure what to do about it as the wide, red front end of the SUV filled the windshield at a frightening speed. He knew enough to throw himself down on the seat—it was his best chance at surviving without serious injury—but even as he did so, impact reverberated through the car, a shudder like an explosion, safety glass shattering and flying around the car like a sharp whirlwind as gravity seemed to shift violently, throwing him forward into the seat that was also shoved back, and he was vaguely aware of hitting leather-coated metal with his face.

It hurt as gravity threw him back again and the world seemed to slew violently around, and another impact slammed the car, making gravity jump elsewhere once more.

The problem was he could feel the adrenaline spike through him, and he decided to let it ride, letting the partial transformation take care of whatever injuries he acquired. But he never considered the fact of what might happen if he lost consciousness mid-transformation, as his head slammed hard into the door.

THE Audi hit the Ford Explorer at somewhere near forty miles per hour. The front ends of both vehicles crumpled, but the Audi nearly accorded while the Explorer lost its fender and headlights, and the Audi was hit from behind by a Civic that was going far too fast and sent the Audi into a spin that ended with it crashing into a parked car on the opposite side of the road. The Explorer was nudged from behind, but the Nissan behind it had managed to turn away and only gave it a love tap, taking out a brake light and one of the Nissan's headlights.

It was still a fucking bad wreck, and broken glass was scattered

across the middle of the street like rock salt in winter. Darinda Murphy was already calling for paramedics and a black and white for traffic control as she pulled her unmarked sedan off into the parking lot of a fondue restaurant. (Jesus, who went to fondue restaurants?)

Was Roan in the Audi? If she could believe a hooker, he was. And she rather hoped he wasn't, because if he was actually hurt, she couldn't beat the shit out of him.

Paris had called her ten minutes ago, clearly worried about Roan, who was staking out someone named Noah Hammond. Paris admitted they were investigating the killings and he was afraid that Roan, since he'd been identified, might be in immediate danger, and he couldn't get a hold of him. She started to read Paris the riot act, but saved it. He was just following Roan, and Roan knew better than to delve into an open case. What made it so much worse, and so deeply infuriating, was that Roan and his ever-tolerant boyfriend had gotten so much farther on the case than they had.

She was glad that she had just finished up at a crime scene at Blair and 43rd, putting her only a few blocks out from Jefferson Avenue. It allowed her to get down here and find the rental car that Roan had hired for the stakeout. She knocked on the tinted windows in increasing frustration, warning him she was going to bust out a window if he didn't act like a goddamn man right this second. That was when a hooker across the street piped up and shouted, "You lookin' for Officer Roan? He just left in that silver car down there." And she pointed at an Audi that was just rounding the corner.

It was possible that the hooker was just fucking with her because her badge was visible on her belt, but calling Roan "Officer Roan" was such an odd thing to do, Murphy believed her. Must have been one of Roan's skid-row friends from his days on the force. Roan was known as "that" cop, the one who seemed to make friends among the junkies and whores, sad sacks and losers that you ran into more often than not on your rounds. Each precinct had at least one, and she couldn't say she was surprised that the ex-abused foster kid/gay/infected guy was a friend of the outcasts. That was kind of a natural fit, wasn't it? It was a sure winner in the office pool. (Although she'd lost the bet that he was a fan of musical theater — apparently he "loathed" it. So much for that stereotype. Then again, she didn't like it either, but no one went around saying lesbians did. But she didn't like the plaid flannel/she-mullet look, so maybe that was an

equivalent.)

Paris hadn't told her much, just given her the bare bones of what they had, and she chewed it over as she followed the car, three cars removed. A group usually wasn't great at killing unless they were terrorists, but would Humanity First be considered a domestic terror group? Admittedly they simply targeted the infected, which put them in the realm of hate crime, but when you went around killing people, hate was generally implied. They seemed to be going forward on Roan's hunches, but Roan's hunches were another thing that could win you big bucks in the office pool. Maybe it was because he was a virus child—he did have that whole “smelling” thing (a dubious super-power if there ever was one)—but he often picked up on very subtle things that would later break a case. He was scary-good at times, which is why it kind of figured that being a beat cop would be the end of him.

But she needed more. If she was going to get warrants and start running people in, she needed something a bit more concrete, something she could put in front of a judge and not have laughed out of court. She wasn't sure they had anything yet, except for Jordan DeSoto and his gun, and that all depended on how the ballistics tests came out.

But if anyone asked her if she thought Roan was on the right track, she would have said yes. Okay, legally proving it was one thing, but if Roan said the wheel was going to come up twenty-six red on the next spin, that's where she'd put her money. Not that she'd tell him that; he didn't need a big head. Besides, so far, what little she'd dug up on this case made no sense. It had the hallmarks of a random crime while clearly being deliberate, and frankly, a specific group working together would make more sense than a single person. It was just so unusual that it was hard to credit.

And didn't she know, in the back of her mind, that Roan wouldn't let this die? That if she asked for help finding the connections between the victims, he wouldn't just do that and pull back. She knew he'd pry, and she was hoping that with his access to the infected community, he'd get something they couldn't. She set him up, and she did it deliberately. Roan couldn't fight temptation any more than she could and she knew it.

Then the accident occurred, without warning. The car didn't swerve, it seemed to lunge across the white lines as if bound on committing suicide. It happened so fast she couldn't be perfectly sure, but her instinct was that there was no way what she saw was an accident. After calling it

in and parking, she quickly went out to the street to try and get some semblance of order imposed before backup arrived.

Already crowds were gathering, because that's what they did at horrific wrecks, so she began shouting for people to get out of her way and holding out her badge, which allowed her to shove through and be as rude as possible. Of course, being a plain-clothed homicide cop should have given her no special access to the scene, no actual authority, but people were usually glad to hand over control when people could actually die.

The woman in the Explorer, a bottle blonde who looked like she'd just stepped out of the Anne Taylor catalog, was already on her cell phone, loudly explaining that she couldn't be somewhere because some lunatic had just hit her, so Darinda dismissed her as okay—if you could bitch and moan like that, you were in great shape—and headed for the Audi.

There was a tall, slender Arab man with a strangely short mustache and a baseball hat by the Audi. He had opened the driver's side door and was talking to the female driver, who appeared passed out on her airbag. If the sheer violence involved in the crash hadn't made her pass out, it was possible the explosive release of the airbag had—they could do that, especially in smaller people (and this woman was a petite thing). She appeared to have a trickle of blood coming from one nostril, but it was just a smear.

The man was taking her pulse from her neck when Murphy moved up to him. "Sir, I think it's best you step back," she advised.

He looked at her, his brown eyes wide and curious. "Should we move her from the car? In case it, you know, catches on fire or something?"

She glanced up and down the length of the car. The engine wasn't smoking, and she didn't smell gas, so she shook her head. "It doesn't appear she's in immediate danger, so it's best to leave her where she is until the paramedics arrive."

He seemed reluctant, but he was only the good Samaritan and she had the badge, so he nodded and stepped back. Darinda found her eyes drifting back to the woman though, who, save for the blood coming from her nose, could have simply been asleep on a wide white pillow. Didn't she look familiar somehow? She did, she just couldn't place her face at the moment.

“Murphy?” a familiar voice asked quizzically. She looked over her shoulder and saw Paris standing at the edge of the gathered crowd, with a short but powerfully built black man in a gray suit and tie. He had a shaved head and a trim goatee, and also looked familiar. Something about him screamed “hired muscle”, but she assumed it was some detective/executive security friend of Roan’s—at least he had contacts outside the police department. Paris looked pale and drawn in the quickly dying light, almost like a ghost. “What the hell’s going on?”

Traffic was stopped on both sides of the wreck, so their car was probably somewhere in the mess beyond the Explorer. He couldn’t have known where Roan was, so she assumed they’d gotten out and gone to see what the commotion was about, and saw her. Or at least she hoped, because she suddenly realized she hadn’t seen Roan in the front seat. Where the fuck was he?

She was turning back when she heard the growl.

It was funny how you were never prepared for it. In the back of your mind, you expected something from a movie, something deep and ominous, but a big cat’s growl in real life usually didn’t have the same bass notes and wasn’t that loud. Usually. The growl she heard inside the car was faint but definitely deep; it was almost like a well-tuned engine in the distance, roaring as the throttle was released and the car tore off into the night. She saw a shadow of movement in the backseat, and instinctively started retreating from the car. “Everyone back!” she shouted as the lion jumped through the shattered passenger window, and some people screamed and instantly fled the scene. At least it did make the crowd move away.

The lion was as large as Roan was, a bit shorter in vertical height but slightly longer than your average lion, although it had the same tawny coat, large paws, and sleek muscles you would expect from such a thing. But there was a difference here, one she had never seen before, and it almost threw her off for a second.

You could really never tell a real big cat from a transformed infected save for those slight height variations. Otherwise they looked just the same as their wild, more genetically “pure” brethren, and sometimes you didn’t know what you were dealing with until you got the autopsy reports. But this lion had eerie green eyes, ones she had seen before in a redheaded smart-ass, and his thick, large mane was shot through with the same, odd reddish-brown hair, fading into black in certain spots as the thick fringe of

hair wreathed his neck and face and joined his shoulders. His head and face was that of a lion, his jaw protruding and full of jagged teeth that were by no means human... and yet she could almost see him, couldn't she? It had to be her mind playing tricks on her, but she knew this was Roan in his transformed state beyond a shadow of a doubt. But the intellect wasn't there; there was nothing in those slit-pupiled eyes but a nameless, shapeless anger. It was bleeding on its side from some shallow scrapes, probably from broken glass, but that could be enough to make it lash out.

She pulled her service revolver and aimed it, using a steady two-handed grip, and said to no one but herself, "I don't want to do this. Don't make me do this." But it was a matter of public safety. Here was a lion, and here was a crowd full of people. She was not only within her rights to kill him, it was expected. Public safety trumped the transformed infected's right of existence.

Could she wound him seriously enough to keep him down until the guys with the tranqs arrived? She knew she was a damn good shot, but there was a thin line between a paralyzing shot and a lethal shot, and she knew human anatomy a lot better than cat anatomy. A couple centimeters or minutes either way could make the difference between immobilization and death.

But the lion was just standing there, as if protecting the car, still growling, and she thought that maybe this stalemate, this inaction, would prevent her from having to shoot him. But then the lion's large head turned back toward the injured woman in the driver's seat, the black pad of its nose wrinkling as it smelled the blood. Oh shit.

She had braced herself to fire—she was going to have to give the paralyzing shot a try—when Paris said suddenly, "Roan." His voice wasn't questioning or angry; it had just the mildest tone of pleading in it, like insisting gently on his attention.

She spared a glance over her shoulder and saw him walking up beside her. "Get the fuck back!" she snapped. "He can't hear you!"

But Paris barely glanced at her; his intensely blue eyes were fixed on the lion. "I'm not so sure about that."

The lion was looking back at both of them now, and its growl was loud enough to make the crowd that was still here back up another two feet. She and Paris were now the only ones on the street with it. Him.

Paris was talking low to the lion, his tone calm and measured, but there was a certain tension in his shoulders and across his back as he approached it slowly. To stop him she'd have to reach out, and such a sudden gesture could set the lion off.

"Roan, I know you're in there. I know you can hear me somewhere in there. You're stronger than it, I know you are, and you have to fight it."

The lion continued its rumbling growl, but it was focused on Paris now. Paris had also now crossed into her line of fire, so she no longer had a clear shot. She just knew he'd done that on purpose. "Get out of my shot," she snarled.

"If you shoot him, you might as well shoot me," he replied quietly, sounding strangely resigned to it, as if he expected to die one way or another. But in a moment she got her shot back, as Paris sank to his knees on the asphalt.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she asked, fighting to keep her voice to a whisper so as not to startle the cat.

Paris didn't answer her, so she wasn't sure if he had heard her or not. He kept his hands loose at his side, limp, and he was holding his head at an odd angle, his head tilted to the side and raised slightly up. It took her a moment to realize he was showing his throat to the lion, sending a clear signal of submission; nothing that showed its throat to you could be a threat. But it also meant that if the lion was going to lunge at Paris, it would have a damn easy kill. She probably wouldn't get a shot off before it killed him, and he probably knew that. Bastard.

"You know me," Paris insisted quietly to the cat. "You know my voice, you know my smell, you know who I am. And they're gonna kill you if you don't stop now. You have to take over, Roan; fight it back."

A weird hush had fallen over the street, allowing her to hear the distant scream of sirens. What fucking idiot turned on sirens when there was a big cat loose? That could only make it panic. Her grip was so tight on her gun her palms were starting to sweat, and she felt slightly queasy at the possibility she was going to have to shoot a friend. He wasn't even doing anything wrong—he'd just picked a really bad time to be a cat. But wasn't Roan usually smarter than that? Didn't he know when he was entering the high point of his viral cycle? It didn't really make sense.

(Come to think of it... if he'd entered the car as a human, when the

hell had he had the time to transform? That was too fast; no one transformed in minutes. It took about an hour or so. So what the hell had happened here?)

The lion was slowly approaching Paris, still growling, like he was prey. But Paris didn't move, and his voice didn't waver. If he was scared, it wasn't obvious. "Roan, come back to us. I know you can hear me. You're running out of time."

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath as the lion neared Paris, and there was a general unspoken consensus that they were all waiting for the lion to kill him. It seemed inevitable, like waiting for the mirror ball to drop in Times Square on New Year's Eve, and Darinda felt oddly paralyzed. She knew she should do something, shoot Roan before he got any closer to Paris, but her mind kept stalling on "shoot Roan." She really didn't want to do that, but she knew she had to suck it up and do her job, even if it meant killing a friend.

The lion was within a paw's swipe of Paris, and she knew she'd fucked this up. Oh, the Chief would let it slide because she'd understand the reluctance to shoot a former colleague, but she knew she'd fucked up. She should have shot the lion as soon as she had an unobstructed view.

Time stretched out to impossible lengths as a few seconds seemed to take hours, and the lion seemed to move slowly toward Paris's throat, and she tensed to fire, wondering if she really wanted to see the lion ripping his throat out. Paris, for his part, didn't move at all—she didn't know if he was absurdly calm or paralyzed with fear.

The lion went for Paris's throat, but she wasn't sure she was seeing things correctly, as the lion seemed to rest its head on Paris's shoulder instead of biting deep into his neck. But then the lion seemed to collapse, one of its rear legs twitching like it was having a type of seizure, and Paris wrapped his arms around its throat, burying his face in its thick mane. He was saying quietly, "Thank you."

Gasps started running through the crowd, which almost sounded disappointed that it had missed out on a good bit of violence, but there were also small comments like "*What the fuck...?*" On several levels, this didn't make sense. Cats had no higher consciousness—they were just cats. They couldn't understand a person, they couldn't respond to a loved one. (Much like they couldn't transform in under an hour.) She had no idea what the fuck had just happened here, except it felt impossibly wrong. It

was like the world as she knew it had suddenly shifted ever so slightly sideways.

It was coincidence or the cat was hurt or... *something*. But she couldn't believe that Paris had actually managed to reach Roan, because that was impossible. A transformed human wasn't a human at all, and everybody knew that.

So what if they were wrong?

The sirens were much louder now, the aid cars only a block or so away, and she reluctantly holstered her weapon, her mind snapping back into containment mode. "Paris, get him off the street. I have an unmarked sedan in the fondue lot, get him in there." Of course she had no idea how he was supposed to do that, but she figured it was his problem. After all, the lion seemed to respond to him, so....

Jesus Christ, how fucked up was this? She found herself trying to imagine what she'd put on her report about this incident, and realized she had no idea what she was going to say.

Then again, did it matter? No one would believe her anyway.

17

Pigeon Camera

THERE was nothing more disconcerting than waking up with the certain feeling that something had gone horribly wrong.

Roan opened his eyes to complete darkness, and he would have started panicking, except this dark place was familiar. He also felt warmth, strong arms around his chest, a body conformed to his, breath against his neck. He was at home, in his bedroom, the clean smell of Paris's skin confirming the identity of the man spooning him. But how the hell did he get here?

The last thing he remembered was... what? It took a moment for him to recall being in Mia DeSoto's car. Okay, right, she crashed the car to try and kill him. And then... what? His memory felt scattered, fragmented; he only had a solid feeling of dread.

He moved to look at the digital clock on the nightstand—it couldn't have been a dream, could it? No way. That thing with Mia was way too weird... and that's when Paris stirred.

"Finally awake, sleepyhead?" he murmured, giving him a small kiss on the back of his neck. "I thought you were going to sleep until the weekend."

Roan saw that it was just after midnight, but he couldn't believe it. Wasn't it just sundown when he'd got in Mia's car? "What happened?"

"You don't remember?" He nuzzled his neck, an affectionate gesture that could become amorous with repetition. Roan was suddenly acutely aware he smelled like cat, and wondered what his pheromone level was.

"I remember Mia trying to kill me. I assume she didn't succeed."

"No, but not for lack of trying. She could have hurt you badly."

"How much did I transform?"

Paris hesitated, lightly stroking his abdomen with his fingertips. “All the way.”

“Oh shit.” That was the worst possible scenario: full transformation out of cycle. He was now officially the biggest freak possible. Just call him Roan, the Cat-Faced Boy. “Why am I here now? Did they tranq me?”

“No, I talked you down.”

“What?”

So Paris told him, and it sounded so surreal he would have thought that Paris was teasing him if his sense of humor was that cruel. There was no way in hell that could have worked, and also, it was fucking nuts. “Why the fuck did you do that? I could have killed you!”

“No you wouldn’t.” He sounded so calm and so certain.

Roan rolled over to face him, wondering if Par had decided to start taking Prozac or some other kind of mood stabilizer. “How can you say that? In cat form, I’m a big dumb lion.”

“No you’re not. Do I really have to explain you to you?”

“Probably.”

His eyes had adjusted enough to the dark that he could see Par’s sly, bittersweet grin. “Infecteds like me get invaded by the cat and the virus alike. We go through life alone, and then suddenly we have another thing inside us, something that overwhelms us and takes us over. We have to learn to live with this... this other, no matter how much it hurts, but it occurred to me that you virus children have things much differently.

“From the beginning, the cat has to learn to live with you as much as you have to learn to live with it. You know how Michael Henstridge is more often a cat than a human, and no one can figure out why? What if that’s the way he wants it? He’s too brain damaged to say, but that doesn’t mean he can’t impose his will on the cat, and maybe he finds life easier and less painful as a cat than as a human. And if that’s true, if he can will the cat, why can’t other virus children? Okay, you can’t break the virus cycle, that’s a given, but what if the cat really isn’t that separate? What if it’s an integrated aspect of you? Most virus children are too ill or too damaged for this to be investigated in any meaningful way, but not you.” He touched his face, and Paris had such big hands that his palm covered just about all of Roan’s cheek. “See, when you told me you could force a

partial transformation, it got me thinking. Yes, it's a purely physical process, and it has to be jump-started by pain or adrenaline, but you can switch it off. And that's the key."

"Umm... I was with you until now."

"How do you shut it down? When you let it start, you stop it after a certain point. How?"

This was what Roan both loved and hated about Paris. He knew him better than he knew himself, and such a thing could range from touching to downright creepy. This seemed to fall in between those extremes. "I just... force it to stop before it goes too far."

"Force. In other words, you will it to stop."

Yes, exactly. This felt like a "D'oh!" moment. "You're going to make me hit you, aren't you?"

"Bring it on, pansy." Paris lunged forward as if he was going to bite off his nose, but just kissed the tip of it instead. "Look, I'm not saying you can totally dominate the cat at all times; I'm just saying the cat has to make as many accommodations for you as you do for it. And I was counting on it when you were in your transformed state. Would it make you feel any better if I said I'd never try that if you were in the transformational stage of the virus?"

"A bit. But you risked your life on a supposition."

"Not a supposition. I risked it on a belief that you were stronger than the cat. And I was right. So no more busting my balls about it, okay?"

Roan ran his hand through Paris's hair and smiled, wondering what he'd ever done to deserve someone like him. And how he could understand something so naturally, something Roan should have got but somehow didn't. Everything he said made a curious sense. Maybe Paris really had missed his calling as a detective. "You scare me sometimes."

"You scare me too, so we're even. And before I forget, Murphy wants you to know that you're no longer on this case, and if you even try and resume investigating any of this, she'll throw you in jail so fast your ass will get windburn."

"Ah. I guess I should have expected that." It wasn't the worst thing that had happened; that had to be learning he could fully transform out of the viral cycle. But hadn't he always suspected he could? If he could force

a partial change, there was nothing stopping him from a full change. It was just unforgivable that he'd had to learn it in front of Murphy and a crowd full of strangers. He was just lucky Paris had been there to get him under control and keep him safe, and lucky that Paris was a hell of a lot smarter than most people gave him credit for. Even him. "She's going to want all our case notes, isn't she?"

"Yep. She said she'd swing by about nine tomorrow to pick 'em up."

"So we have less than nine hours to fool around?"

Paris smiled seductively, his sky blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "Looks like it."

"Damn. We'd better get started." Roan drew Paris's face to his and kissed him passionately, letting Paris's body swamp his. He knew he should worry about the public transformation and all the fallout sure to come, but he just wasn't up to facing it right now. He'd face it in the harsh light of day when he absolutely had to, but if he could avoid it for a while, he would.

Sometimes denial was a fun place to be.

PULL one piece out of a group dynamic, and the group could fall to pieces. That's what happened, but not quite in the way Roan had expected.

He assumed Mia took care of Jordan on some level, and she did, but what he hadn't considered was that Jordan looked after his sister as well. He must have known about her fragile mental state, and in his drive to protect her, he destroyed everything. The best intentions and all that.

Murphy had arrested Mia on suspicion of vehicular assault. At first Mia claimed that Roan had grabbed the wheel and done it while they were struggling, but while Paris was in the back seat of her car, searching through Roan's bloody and shredded scraps of clothing for his SIG Sauer, he found the microcassette recorder he'd been using to document his conversation with Mia. Rewinding the tape and playing the last bit of it for Murphy, they all heard Mia's obvious threat and no sound of a struggle, so Murphy slapped the cuffs on her and suggested she might change the charge to attempted homicide. Mia apparently had a bit of a meltdown as she was thrown in the back of a cruiser, screaming bloody murder and

attempting to kick anybody within reach. She was such a commanding loon that, rather than keep her in a holding cell, as soon as she was processed she was taken to Greenwood for observation (the hospital for the criminally insane).

She'd had the gall to call Eli to bail her out initially, but when he showed up at the station house with Stovak, Paris told him that Mia was in with the group killing off infecteds and was deliberately trying to frame him. Stovak went off on one of his anti-gay rants, but Eli was convinced enough to turn around and leave without even attempting to see Mia. Needless to say, she was never bailed out.

Jordan, being held on the bench warrant, heard about this and was pretty upset about it. Murphy took advantage of this, pointing out anything that he could tell her might help clear the charges against Mia, and he reluctantly took the bait. He confirmed that Mia knew Noah Hammond and that he didn't like the kid because he was "weird," although he couldn't say precisely why or how she knew him. But he thought Noah was a paranoid "gun-nut" type, although Mia claimed he wasn't. Still, Jordan had bought the gun found in his tool kit from Noah. He claimed it was only for "protection," since he worked around "damn cats" all the time, and had nothing to do with Eli. It was a street gun, the barrel filed down and the serial number gone, and while the ballistics tests cleared it in the "kitty killings," the bullet looked like a good match for one discharged in a convenience store robbery three months ago. Jordan said he'd only owned the gun for a month, and besides that, he did have a good alibi, as he was working at the church that day, in full view of a lot of people. But it gave Murphy enough cause to bring Noah in, and get a warrant to search his place for more illegal weapons.

Noah denied all of this, but the cops did find a couple of other "hot" guns in his apartment, as well as a couple of other interesting things: a computer with a surprisingly capacious hard drive, and a UPS man's uniform. They also found a scrap of paper with the names "Patrick, Christa, Melissa, Ashley, Kelly" written on it, with the first four names crossed out. (Kelly was never identified, but the fact that her name wasn't crossed out was a positive sign.) His computer was so clean it was squeaky—Noah apparently knew his stuff, and gave that thing a computer enema, leaving no trace of anything—but there was little doubt that he was the hacker, they just couldn't legally prove it. Not that they needed to; not only were the guns reason enough to hold him, but he had no alibi for

the day of the robbery, and no one believed his excuse that the UPS uniform was an “old Halloween costume.” Murphy didn’t really believe he did the robbery, but she was willing to have him charged with it if they couldn’t get any murder charges to stick.

Noah refused to give up a “client” list of people who bought guns from him, but some solid detective work turned up the name of the Campbells. When questioned about knowing Noah Hammond, they denied it, and denied even owning a gun, but Murphy pegged them both as liars, and her partner, Dubois, decided to stake out the house for a bit, and since he actually had an in-law that lived in the Campbells’ neighborhood, he had a perfectly legal reason to be there. He saw Reese carrying a satchel to his Range Rover before driving off rather late at night. He noted Reese was speeding and driving a bit erratically, so he notified a black and white that stopped him only a couple of blocks down the way.

This is where they lucked out in a big way: Reese failed a Breathalyzer, and he seemed so agitated that the cop arrested him on the spot. In the leather satchel that Dubois noticed? A gun—the same gun used by the killer. It was a perfect ballistic match. Reese had been on his way to dump it.

And that was that. The group all started attacking one another, blaming the others for the killings, and Murphy played them like violins. Tim, who must have seen the writing on the wall as soon as Mia was pulled in, had fled town—so quickly, he had abandoned his family. There was an APB out for him, though, since Reese had fingered him as a co-conspirator. Roan had heard a rumor that Amy was working out a deal to sell her husband and Noah up the river in exchange for a much milder charge, but Murphy refused to confirm or deny that one.

Humanity First wasn’t dead; far from it. It sunk below the radar once more, but in some wacky places on the Internet they were branded as “heroes of humanity,” along with Reese, Amy, Noah, and Tim. Somehow Mia was left out of the equation, which figured. Jordan was working hard to get her declared mentally incompetent due to insanity so she would remain in the hospital and not face prison, which most people seemed to think was best; most people thought her sane days were behind her. Eli had intended to press harassment charges against Jordan, but Murphy convinced Eli to drop it, mainly because Jordan was suffering enough. Roan assumed blackmail was involved, because Eli wasn’t known for his generosity of spirit.

Speaking of which, Murphy seemed happy to pretend his transformation hadn't happened, and he decided to leave it be, although he lived in fear of the day when she and Gordo compared notes and figured out something was wrong with him. Paris was a little peeved that Murphy and Dubois were getting credit in the media for breaking the case, but behind the scenes Murphy did give them credit when possible. That reporter who talked to Paris about the Nakamura case called them up again, apparently having heard the scuttlebutt that they were involved in this one too, but they refused to talk to him about it.

Luckily, by the time the case was nearing what would surely be a lurid media circus, he and Paris took some time off to go to Vancouver so Par could reconnect with his family. Paris had pretended he wasn't a nervous wreck about this, but he obviously was. In some attempt to calm him down, Roan made a small vacation of it.

They drove up, as the border wasn't far, and they listened to The Tragically Hip all the way there, in some attempt to get in the mood. They'd been to Canada quite a few times, but mostly on runs for beer and prescription painkillers they really couldn't get in the States without a lot of hassle. Or, as Paris liked to call them, "the staff of life."

They reached downtown Vancouver on a cold but clear early afternoon, the sky a high blue between buildings, and Paris had dragged him to a Tim Hortons because he insisted Roan had to try the "Timbits." The place was steamy warm, and smelled of coffee, soup, and pastries. "I know how it sounds," he claimed. "But they're like crack. You'll love them."

Roan stared at him from across the table of their tiny window booth, and actually found it hard not to smile. He was nervous, sure, but Paris also seemed energized, as if being back in his hometown was good for him. "There's two things wrong with that statement."

Paris didn't kick him under the table, but nudged his leg in a way that implied he'd get a kick next time. "Oh come on, we all know you're fearless. Don't prove the rumors wrong."

"You know I'm a bad cop. I don't like doughnuts." He didn't; he generally found them way too heavy, and had no idea how people could scarf them for breakfast. This included Paris, who could positively inhale a raspberry cream cheese Danish like it was nothing. "Or crack, for that matter."

“Timbits are not just doughnuts—just you wait. Now, stop stalling and tell me what you want to drink.”

“Can’t I order a beer here? I thought this was Canada.”

“Be a good boy, and I’ll take you to this brewpub I know about in Victoria for dinner. There’s a pale ale you’ll kill for.”

“Don’t make me kill again, Par.”

That made him chuckle, which was what he was hoping for. Paris scrubbed his hands across his scalp and leaned back in his seat, favoring him with a fragile smile. “What the hell was I thinking by taking you home with me?”

“I assume you were high at the time.”

He grinned and shook his head, looking away to briefly watch other people order their overpriced coffees and leave, and Roan sensed the shift in his mood before he glanced down at the table, clasping his hands together nervously. “Ah shit, I don’t know if I can do this.”

He almost made a joke about the difficulties of ordering frou-frou coffee in a foreign land, but he knew he was talking about going home again. Roan had had to cajole him into calling Annie back and arranging the time of his visit. Paris had seemed to swing back and forth between nervous excitement and total hysteria at the prospect of the meeting ever since. “You can. You remember what Annie told you; they all want to see you. They miss you. How great is that, to have people who miss you? I’m jealous. Most people are glad to see me leave.”

“But if they’re expecting the old me...”

“How likely is that? You told me they were smart people. So many years have passed. They know that time doesn’t stand still. They won’t expect you to be the college student who walked out the door and never returned.” He reached across the table and put his hand over Paris’s. “You’re going to be okay. Take it slow, and remember you don’t have to tell them anything you don’t want to right now. I’ll back whatever you say.”

Paris flashed him a frail smile. “I know. Thank you. I just... how do I put it exactly? ‘Mom, Dad, remember how I was such a ladies’ man in high school? Well, I was seeing guys on the down low the whole time. I’m bisexual, but the love of my life is a man, and oh, people seem to be

always trying to kill him, possibly because he's an irredeemable smart-ass. Also, I'm infected, and better yet, it's the tiger strain, so I'm a dead man walking. What's new with you?" He let his head fall to the table with a dramatic thump, just barely missing their hands.

Roan stroked his hair, wanting to say something comforting, but not sure what. Going for the joke was always easier. "You could say 'Hi' first."

Paris just moaned miserably, not in the mood for jokes right this second.

"They'll probably just be glad to see you after all this time. You can just say you want to catch up with them, and you'll explain your missing years later. Don't worry so much. No one's expecting you to blurt out your sordid life story as soon as you get in the door."

Roan had a feeling he would respond to that, and he did. He lifted his head and looked at him curiously. "Sordid?"

"Oh yeah, totally X-rated. I really would advise that you not tell your mother about your college foursome unless you think she'd be really cool with it."

"Foursomes, plural."

He stared at him. "You're making that up."

"I swear, I'm not! I told you I was a man whore. If it had a pulse and was reasonably attractive, there's a very good chance I'd sleep with it. Do you know how many cases of the clap I got in a three-month period? The pharmacy just had a standing prescription of tetracycline for me. It's probably a shock that it took me so long to get infected, as I was just asking for it."

Roan took his hands away from him like he'd suddenly just realized Paris was a venereal disease farm. "Remind me to burn our sheets when we get home."

Finally Paris laughed, his shoulders losing some of their tension as he slumped back against his seat. "You knew I was a reformed whore when you started seeing me, so you can't claim you're shocked now."

"I don't know if I'm horrified or slightly jealous. I've led such a vanilla life, and you've actually attended an orgy, which I'd assumed died off with the Roman Empire."

“Orgies are really overrated. You can only enjoy them while high, and once it wears off, you realize how many people there have flabby asses and pinched faces, and it loses some of its luster.”

“I really do hope this is a comedy bit, 'cause I'm starting to lean toward horrified.”

“And you call yourself a gay man? Sister, please.” Paris gave him a big, smart-ass grin that was dazzling in its brightness. It lit up his whole face, making him look painfully handsome. He could see why people were eager to invite him to an orgy. “You know what we should do? We should get married. Just think of the reaction of my folks when I tell them I'm married, and then introduce you as my husband. After that, telling them I'm infected would be a drop in the bucket.”

“You can't be serious.”

“What? Why not? I'm still a Canadian citizen.”

“You know how I feel about marriage. I don't know why it exists; I've never seen anything but misery associated with it. Hell, I make a living on broken marriages, on spouses who cheat and lie to one another, who break prenups and cat around town with the Dallas Cowboys or their cheerleading squad, or both. I mean, if gays want to be as miserable as straights, fine, let 'em marry, but I think it's a disaster no matter the gender.”

Paris was still grinning. “You're such a romantic.”

“You just want a reason to get yourself a Cowboy. Or a green card.”

“Just think of how many people we'll upset if we come home and claim we got married in Canada. Eli would probably have a stroke, and Stovak's head would explode. I bet Doctor Braunbeck would stop offering us gorp.”

“That's no fair. You know I do most things out of spite.”

“I know! And this would be the ultimate act of revenge.”

He was serious, wasn't he? Weird. But time wasn't on Paris's side, and that's why Roan had pressed him to reconnect with his folks. Roan tried hard not to think about it, but Paris's last transformational period had probably been the worst one yet; he'd lost way too much weight (at the end of the cycle, he had looked like a starvation victim), and the pain was so bad they'd had to up his drug dosage to levels so ludicrous he ended up

sleeping most of the day. He even missed three days of work after the cycle was over; Roan thought he should have taken the whole week off, but Paris refused. He was just starting to look like his normal self again.

He didn't want to think about this. He didn't want to think that Paris's assessment of himself as a "dead man walking" was correct, but he knew it probably was. He didn't know how much time he had left now, but it couldn't be measured in years. He couldn't imagine life without him in it, and yet he knew realistically he was going to have to prepare himself for just that.

How did you do that? How did you brace yourself for the most important person in your life dying on you? And that was the tragedy that almost everyone faced at some point in their life. He just thought it would never get to him because he'd tried so hard not to let anyone get that close. He preferred being alone, he really did... only now he wasn't so sure. He kind of hated himself for it, and on top of that he hated himself for hating himself over it. He just couldn't win.

Roan looked at Paris and wondered where they would go from here, and if there would be any light at the end of the tunnel before it collapsed on top of them.

Too bad there was really no such thing as a happy ending.

ANDREA SPEED writes way too much. She is the Editor In Chief of Comixtreme, where she reviews comics as well as movies and occasionally interviews comic creators. She also has a serial fiction blog where she writes even more, and she occasionally reviews books for Joe Bob Briggs's site. She might be willing to review you, if you ask nicely enough, but really she should knock it off while she's ahead.

Visit her web site at <http://www.andreaspeed.com>. She tweets at <http://twitter.com/aspeed>.

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