



Now I Could Drink Hot Blood

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By A.R. Moler

Chapter 1
Initialization

April 2007

Evan Garrett had just finished forty laps in the pool. He climbed out and reached for a towel. Almost six feet tall, with broad shoulders, narrow hips, and long, slender ropy muscles, he looked every inch the swimmer. He was rubbing a towel across close-cut, curly brown hair, when the dark-haired woman in a neighboring lane popped up from the edge.

"Hey, Evan!" she called out. He turned toward her then walked over and dropped to one knee on the edge.

"Hello, Brie."

"Can you time me on a hundred meter freestyle?"

"Yeah, sure. How's work?" He knew Gabrielle worked for an agency under the Department of Homeland Security similar to himself, but was spending time with FBI at the moment.

"Crazy as ever." She smiled.

"How's the shoulder?"

"Not quite back to normal. Still working on it."

"You want to dive in?"

"Um, yeah."

He offered her a hand. She hesitated a moment before taking it and allowing him to help her out. His eyes followed the remnants of a healing bruise down the back of her shoulder as she bent forward, fingers next to her toes.

"Three, two, one -- Mark!" he said.

She dove in, doing a top speed freestyle to the opposite end with accompanying flip turn, and swam back with a slick, dolphin-like grace. She finished back at Evan's feet, winded, clinging to the edge.

"One minute thirty-four," he said.

"Crap, that's not good."

"I certainly can't pull it off in that time." He grinned at her.

"Hey, thanks for timing me." She waved and turned back into the lane for a few more laps. Evan slung his towel over his shoulder and headed in the direction of the locker room.

Standing in the shower, shampoo bottle in hand, Evan was struck by an image, a memory actually. A petite woman with long red hair was duct-taped spread eagle to a wooden bench. Fiona. Why in the hell was he thinking about that? Maybe it was seeing the bruises on his friend Gabrielle that had conjured the memory. Fiona had been fairly badly bruised when all was said and

done.

He brushed a hand down across his ribs. The pink-white ridge of a bullet wound scar marked his skin. That whole affair had been a disaster from beginning to end. Stuart beheaded by the demon, followed by Fiona being attacked and drugged to be offered as a sacrifice. Evan had gotten shot by one of the men bent on a second go at getting a corporeal demon. All the while, John and Rich were unloading a hail of gunfire on the necromancers while he was lying on the ground, and John was frantically trying to stop the bleeding. Okay, Evan decided he had to get his mind off that and back on track. He had to be at work by nine.

May 1, 2007

John Benchley stared at the heap of paperwork. It was never ending. He rubbed his hands down over his face and rested his forehead against his palms. Stacks of folders littered the top of his metal government issue desk. Beige walls, a spare chair jammed against the wall also heaped with papers, folders and books, and a bookcase of texts randomly mixed with three-ring binders and the odd box, completed his office.

"You know it's past midnight and there's that meeting thing you have to go to in the morning," said a voice from the open doorway. John looked up at his partner, Evan Garrett. Evan was dressed in a white button down shirt and dark slacks. Evan walked in and sat on the edge of John's desk, laying a hand on his shoulder, green

eyes gazing at him.

"I think I've been trying to forget the meeting," John admitted and grinned a little.

"If you don't play by their rules, you're not going to be able to demand more funding for things you don't want to have to explain."

"Too true." John sighed, pushed back from the desk and stood up. As he headed for the door, he paused and ran his fingers through Evan's short brown curls. "Aren't you in need of sleep, too?" Evan shrugged and gave him a bit of a smile, then leaned forward and kissed him softly. They were nearly of an even height. John let out a fractional sigh. He had to be up fairly early and there was little point in asking Evan to stay the night.

"I'll see you sometime tomorrow," Evan said and walked out of the office. John watched him leave, wistfully wishing it could be otherwise.

John trudged up four flights of stairs to the apartment at the top of the building. He used to have an apartment in Georgetown back when he worked for the DEA. But four years in this job... The hours were so insane. When SIS, Special Investigative Services, had moved their headquarters into an unused office building at the edge of Crystal City last year, he'd tried to juggle the commute. There had been way too many nights of crashing in the bunkroom on the third floor, or on the sofa outside his office, so he had a remodeling crew turn half of the top floor into his personal living quarters. After all, being the boss had to have some perks. SIS was loosely umbrellaed under the Department of

Homeland Security, created to deal with... the unusual. Oh, that was a sixty-four thousand dollar description. The paranormal, the lunatic fringe, the supernatural and the extraterrestrial all rolled into one.

May 2, 2007

At the FBI headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, the half-full auditorium held some hundred or so not very enthusiastic people, and John was yet one more restless soul trapped by the excruciatingly boring meeting. Somehow, he'd gotten coerced into this conference between the various branches of Homeland Security. After two hours of useless information, there was a break.

As people were milling around the hallways, drinking coffee, chatting, and making phone calls, John prowled the length of the wide, carpeted hallway outside the auditorium, trying to wake himself up. He noticed a woman perched on the edge of one of the wooden benches lining the area. With shoulder-length, dark hair and bangs, obligatory navy blue power suit and heels, she was bent over with her elbows propped on her knees. Her hands were rubbing her eyes and her body language screamed headache. He'd been on the receiving end of more than a few blinding migraines in his life. Maybe what drew his attention the most was the fact her face was as white as her blouse, and he wondered if she was about to pass out. No one else seemed to notice her at all as he wove his way past several people and stopped in front of her. He dropped to one knee and crossed his arms on the other.

"Excuse me, but are you okay?" he asked.

Gabrielle lifted her head a little and squinted at him. looking vaguely startled by the sudden inquiry. Who was this man? Gorgeous enough to make Michelangelo weep, she thought, he was tall, probably six foot, with unruly brown hair, amazing blue eyes, straight nose, luscious lips and a concerned expression.

"I'm fine. Just a migraine wannabe," she said.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee or a glass of water? Honestly, you look like you're about to pass out."

She hesitated. The pounding pain in her skull was making it hard to think. "A cup of coffee would be nice, thanks, sugar please."

"Back in a sec," he said.

While she waited on his return, she put on her sunglasses, hoping, probably in vain, to cope with the photophobia of her impending migraine. He did come back in only a few minutes, handed her the cup and sat down beside her.

"Thank you," she said. "That was kind." She was still a little mystified by his attention.

"You're welcome. I'm John Benchley."

"Gabrielle Dichenz," she replied and gulped down some

of the coffee. It was typical vat-brewed, industrial strength stuff, but at the moment all she was interested in was the caffeine.

"Is it my imagination or is this just about the most useless excuse for a meeting I've had to endure lately?" he said.

"It's pretty bad. Some bureaucrat's idea no doubt." She set the half empty cup on the bench and rubbed her temples. "I swear my eyeballs are going to fall out. And I'm sure there's at least two more hours of this horrid meeting."

"Turn around," John suggested.

"Huh?"

"Turn your back to me, maybe I can help," he said.

She frowned, not sure what he intended but just about anything that might help was worth consideration. She felt his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs pressing into her neck at the base of her skull. His fingers dug into the knotted muscles there. Oh God, it felt good. And she was mystified again. Letting people touch her was not something she usually allowed. As a telepath, it was generally too... uncomfortable. This most definitely wasn't. Going on gut instinct, she lowered her psychic shields just a little. Nothing. She dropped them a tiny bit more, and she felt just a hint of that running electricity sensation she associated with another psychic. Interesting. Her head leaned forward as his thumbs stroked down the back of her neck. Oh lord, how could such a simple thing feel so good?

There was a murmur as people start to head back into the meeting. Someone was calling her name, and she looked up.

"Hey, Brie. Um, you coming?" said Janet, one of the other women from the forensic group.

"In a moment," she said. She felt his hands withdraw.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes, a little... thank you."

"A little trick I learned from a friend of mine." He grinned at her. Oh lord, he was gorgeous -- tall, built, dazzling smile... And he got up and walked away.

As the meeting finally ended, John ran into Carl Henderson on his way out. Henderson was FBI, a fifty-something, graying, middle management bureaucrat. He occasionally dumped cases on SIS that were more suited to their way-out-there line of work than more traditional investigations.

"I, um... Saw you touch Dr. Dichenz. Do you know who she is?" asked Henderson.

"A lady with a migraine."

"A lady who can read your thoughts like words on a printed page," Henderson said.

"And your point is?"

"She's Division P, or as Roper calls it -- the PsiCorp. One of Homeland's way-out-there side branches. You do *not* let those people touch you."

"I don't think I have anything to worry about," smiled John. Henderson gave him a weird look.

"Suit yourself," the other man muttered and walked off in search of his car.

Crossing the parking lot, John mused on the tidbit of information Henderson had given him. So she was Division P? Yet another facet of Homeland Security that no one ever wanted to mention, not so different from SIS on that front. The "P" allegedly stood for psychic, although if you asked someone involved, they'd deny it. Too silly, "P" was just a designation.

"P" recruited psychic Talent for covert ops and other related assignments. They didn't really do the "team" thing. It was more a matter of lending personnel out to other agencies on particular tasks. John had been screened by them himself and passed well enough for them to send him off for further assessment and training. There had been a mutual parting of ways before he could officially join the group.

John definitely wasn't headblind, that totally unaware of other minds state that most of the population seemed to drift around in, but neither was he a stellar Talent on the psychic end of things. He could generally sense the emotions of people near him if he bothered, and could tell pretty reliably if he was being lied to. All these were

good things for an ex-DEA agent to have. He put a lot of faith in his gut instinct, knowing full well it seldom steered him wrong. To actually pick up on another's thoughts with any real accuracy, John needed to touch them. Without that tactile component, anything further was definitely potluck. He was a hands-on person, rather literally. That bare tentative brush of another mind he thought he had felt from Gabrielle had, apparently, been real.

May 3, 2007

In his office, John stared at the pile of files on his desk, cases that might warrant SIS involvement. Several lay open, but one in particular drew his attention. It concerned some "wild animal" attacks, but the details just didn't quite track. Homeland Security had one Dr. Gabrielle Dichenz listed as a point of contact for the ongoing investigation. His brain registered the name and remembered the lady with the migraine at that God-awful meeting. John leaned out the door and yelled across the room at Richard Ciavelli. Ciavelli was a former cop and shrewd field investigator.

"Hey, Rich. See if we have a file on a Dr. Gabrielle Dichenz. D-I-C-H-E-N-Z. If you find it, forward it to me."

"Okay, on it," replied Rich.

"Oh, did you hear from Fiona and Todd yet? I was expecting email or at least a phone call from them. I would really like to know if the whole reputedly haunted

house deal with the missing children is just bogus crap or what." Fiona Mills and Todd McAffey were two more members of SIS, currently on an assignment in Baltimore.

"I haven't heard from them yet. I'll give them a buzz shortly," Rich said. John returned to the paperwork stack while he waited, only to glance up as Evan walked into his office and slouched against his desk.

"I know her," said Evan.

"Know who?"

"Dr. Dichenz. Brie. She's sort of a friend," replied Evan.

John leaned back in his chair and gazed at his partner. "Really? DHS stuff? Or an old DCPD friend?" asked John, referring to Evan's former position.

"Homeland, in a roundabout way, but mostly because I see her at the pool on Tuesday mornings, doing laps at about the same time I go."

"Know anything about her?" John asked.

"Not a lot. She's a scientist, is on some kind of assignment with the FBI, I think, and she has a wicked flip turn. And..."

"And what?" John fished to see if Evan was aware of the Division P link.

"I think she's a victim of domestic abuse."

John's eyes widened a little. That didn't even come close to what he thought Evan might say. "Why do you say that ?" asked John slowly.

"Come on. I used to be a cop. I've seen things no one should ever have to. Anyway... she's obviously wearing a swimsuit when she's doing laps and sometimes she's... bruised. It's not the kind of black and blue marks you get from banging your shin on the car door either."

"Keep going."

"Sometimes the bruises are really bad ones like you get from a fist. One time, I tried to ask. She just shrugged and said she was a klutz. She's nice. I wish I could do something to help." Evan stared at the floor for a moment. John crossed his arms and chewed on his lower lip.

"Thanks for the info," John said.

May 4, 2007

The window at the side of the office filtered cloudy afternoon light onto Dr. Dichenz's keyboard. John hesitated a moment before knocking on the open door of Dichenz's office. Her desk was littered with stacks of folders and piles of data analysis sheets. A graphing calculator sat on the top of one stack. On the wall hung a corkboard, displaying a maintenance schedule for several pieces of instrumentation, a calendar full of scribbled notations as to when things were due, and a "recipe" labeled HPLC elution fluid. The bookcases

behind her bulged with manuals and reference books. A cup of coffee was parked on an enormous Fisher Catalog.

John had read her dossier. Being Director of SIS had its perks; virtually unlimited access to government personnel files was one of them. Officially a member of Division P, her file said she was on loan to the FBI for an indefinite period of time. This was a little backward from the way "P" usually worked, but there hadn't been any information as to why. She was wearing a charcoal gray skirt suit and appeared busy. Dr. Dichenz wasn't beautiful, not quite. He thought she had that sort of face that would positively light up if she really smiled. Telepath, the file said. That could mean so many different things to so many different people. He knocked on the door frame and she looked up from her keyboard.

"Hello," she said. A minute frown crinkled her brow as if she was trying to place him.

"I need some information, and was told you were the person to see," John said with a smile.

"Agent Benchley, isn't it?" she said.

He nodded and said, "I'm surprised you remembered."

"From the amazingly awful meeting at Quantico...What can I help you with?"

He laid a picture down on her desk. It was a body shot of the victim of the "wild animal attack."

"What can you tell me about this?" he asked. She picked

up the photo and leaned back in her chair.

"Someone told me you're with the SIS group," Dichenz said slowly.

"Yes." He gave her a mental brownie point for doing her homework, just like him.

"Have a seat, please." John settled in the chair in front of her desk. "I didn't do the post, not my thing. I'm a chemist. I did the trace work, though, and glanced at the rest of it. There are things that don't add up." There was a trace of a frustrated frown of her face. This was a woman that didn't like it when science didn't make sense, John surmised.

"My agency doctor says the teeth marks don't look like anything she's familiar with," John commented.

"My odontology knowledge is limited, but I would tend to agree. It's not canine and not feline. There's a small amount of human similarity but not enough to really confirm it. What little DNA we got off of it comes back as unrecognized, too, which I guess is why it landed in my lap. I've been with Homeland a while, before I got loaned here to the FBI. Master of double duty. If SIS is interested, does that mean it's fallen into the officially weird category?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. We're looking into it. But there's not enough... anything, to make a guess at who or what. Which I guess is why I'm here picking your brain for ideas," he said.

She regarded him for a long moment and he wondered

what she was thinking.

"What I told you is really all I have. I can make copies of the DNA analysis for you," she offered.

"That might help a little. Can you call me if you get anything else? Frankly, I'm kind of expecting another body. This sort of thing is seldom a one-off."

"I'll... see what I run across. Any chance of reciprocity?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll get my doc to email you her opinions on this one. Her name's Cecelia Thomas." John stood up to go and held out his hand. She hesitated a moment before shaking it.

"Henderson told you what I am," she said.

"Yes. Division P."

"And still you offer to shake my hand?"

"It doesn't bother me. Check the *rest* of my personnel file sometime." He was still holding her hand and took advantage of the touch to brush his mind against her shields. Just a hint. Her eyes widened a little, and he grinned.

"Call me," he said, dropping a business card on her desk as he left.

May 7, 2007

Dr. Cecelia Thomas was fascinated by the DNA analysis report John had given her. She'd worked for SIS for over three years and the sheer weirdness of some of the stuff they dealt with never ceased to amaze her.

A short, comfortably curvaceous, black woman with her hair in dozens of braids and loosely pulled back into a pony tail, she sat at the desk in her lab on the ground floor of the SIS office building, and gazed steadily at the information.

The DNA analysis claimed the sample was roughly 98.5% consistent with human. She wondered if the variations were primate, but on closer inspection they most definitely were not. They didn't match anything she recognized, and that was a thoroughly unhelpful conclusion. She glanced across the room at the enormous bookcase of texts and reference books. Maybe there was something in one of those that might either jog her memory or point her in the right direction. Could it be canine, feline, or maybe even insect?

She spent a solid hour scrounging both the internet and the heap of textbooks looking for something to compare the anomalies to. This was followed by a stint of pacing the floor, wracking her brain, and staring at the medical equipment along the wall, the hospital bed and the other science equipment jammed on one counter. Frustrated, she walked out the door and up the stairs to the main level. John was sitting at his desk, and Cecelia could see him through the open doorway of his office. She poked her head in.

"I feel a bit like the Cat in the Hat," she said and made a silly face. "You know that totally insane song called Calculatus Eliminator. Dr Seuss and all."

"Um... I think..." he replied uncertainly.

"What I can tell you is what it's *not*. And that doesn't get us any closer to what it *is*."

"Mmm, okay. Give me a list of what you've eliminated then and maybe somewhere along the way, we'll hit pay dirt," he suggested.

Chapter 2

Perpetuation

May 19, 2007

Another body showed up twelve days later. FBI Special Agent Taylor Vanderbilt leaned against the side of his car, talking to one of his people while the rest worked the crime scene. He wore a government-issue, dark windbreaker with FBI emblazoned across the back, and the stereotypical aviator mirror sunglasses.

One male dead body resided in the center of the parking lot behind an office building in Springfield. He still wasn't sure why the local PD weren't handling it, and frankly that struck him as just a little weird. The impression was that the body on the pavement had been attacked by a pit bull or something similar, except the damage seemed to be primarily limited to the throat of the victim. There was blood all over the body and the clothing but virtually none on the ground. Maybe it was just a body dump with the victim killed elsewhere and then moved? That's where the problems began because the coroner's tech on scene had indicated, at least provisionally, that it looked like the man had died exactly the way he laid.

A half dozen cars edged the parking lot near the sidewalk butting up to the office building, and more were arriving as the building's employees continued to report to work. Apparently, the first few employees in that morning hadn't noticed the body straight away. The driver of a Porsche who had parked well away from any other cars had found the body. Motion caught Vanderbilt's attention and he saw someone familiar

walking toward him.

"Well, if it isn't one of the SISy boys, Agent Benchley," he said sarcastically. "Expecting to arrest the boogie man for this one?" The man irritated Vanderbilt to no end. Benchley wielded way more power than his piss-ant little agency deserved to have.

"Director," Benchley corrected him, giving Taylor one of those thin smiles that never quite reached the eyes. "And you never know, it could be the Loch Ness monster."

"The FBI is handling this one."

"Uh-huh. And DHS sent me to have a look, too. That means we get access. You can check if you like," Benchley said.

"My people are bagging and tagging. You can take pictures if you like..." agreed Vanderbilt slowly. Benchley turned and gave his two subordinates a thumbs up sign where they stood a few yards away.

"I want dupes of reports when you're done," said Benchley.

"We'll see," replied Vanderbilt. Benchley gazed at him narrowly and then walked toward the center of the parking lot where a flurry of people were doing necessary evidence gathering.

John lifted the tape at the scene and saw Gabrielle

Dichenz squatting down beside a long smear of something on the pavement. He directed Rich and Evan to examine the body if possible, as he walked toward Gabrielle. She had on the requisite nitrile gloves and was curiously still. John stood with his hands jammed in his pockets for a minute, watching her as she began peeling what appeared to be small bits of flesh out of a crack in the asphalt.

"Something interesting?" he asked. She looked up at him with a start. He held out his hand to help her up, but she stayed put and held up gloved hands smeared with blood and dirt.

"I don't think you want to touch this," she said.

"Mmm, maybe not." He squatted down beside her, trying to get a better view of the area. She fished a pair of tweezers and a fresh evidence bag out of a field kit box, and began picking up shards of glass that were also visible on the ground.

"Windshield glass?" asked Benchley.

"I don't think so. It's not rounded enough. I think maybe a beer bottle," she responded, brushing a stray strand of hair out her eyes with her forearm.

"It's clear, makes me think of a Newcie bottle."

"Newcie?"

"Newcastle Brown Ale. It's an import."

"Something you like?" She gave him a slight smile. John

was tempted to believe she was flirting with him just a little.

"Actually I'd rather have a Sammy Smith. Those are clear, too, but at close to three bucks a bottle, that's a bit upscale to find in a parking lot. I guess it could be a piece from a liquor bottle, too."

"True," she answered.

"Can I get you to send me some lab results while I wage jurisdictional wars with your bosses?"

"I'll... see what I can do," she replied. Her expression led him to believe she would at least make an effort.

"Do you still have my business card?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My email address is on it."

May 20, 2007

From: GDichenz@fbi.gov

To: JBenchley@sis.gov

Subject: Glass from scene

Not a beer bottle. Vodka. Might be the vic's.
More later.

May 21, 2007

John stood staring out the window of his fourth floor apartment into the evening darkness. Behind him were a long, comfortable, navy sofa and a crate style coffee table. Bookshelves lined one wall, holding a mix of fiction and nonfiction, with a heavy number of architecture books. A plasma TV hung on the wall.

The Potomac was barely visible in the distance, a silvery reflection framed by street lights. Gabrielle was in his thoughts a lot, and he wasn't sure why. She was professional, and wary. He found her pretty, not in the cover-girl way, more like easy on the eye. He thought for a moment about the way her hair fell around her face as she knelt down at the crime scene. But more than that, he thought about the texture of that barest brush of her mind across his. It was... alluring, in a totally intangible way. The idea that someone might be abusing her really bothered him.

Soft footsteps on the stairway coming up from the lower floors reached his ears. He felt Evan lay a hand on his back and he turned his head to glance at his partner.

"You look a million miles away," Evan said.

"Just... thinking... Everyone else downstairs gone home?"

"Yeah; you still interested in dinner?" asked Evan.

"I guess. You cooking?"

"If you like."

Evan laid both hands on John's shoulders and he could feel the warmth of his lover's breath on his neck, the slight caress of his mind. Evan's psychic Talent was different than his own, more empathic, but he used it with skill.

"You are wound so tight," Evan whispered and brushed his mouth against John's skin at the nape of his neck. John reached a hand up to lay on top of the fingers on his shoulders. Here was something he could touch. Someone. He turned slowly to face Evan, and a memory danced across his thoughts. It was a brutal one -- the one where he held Evan in his arms, as the life blood seeped out of his lover body through a gunshot wound. The one where he nearly lost the man standing beside him.

He wasn't sure exactly how one would categorize their relationship. Lovers? Friends with benefits? That sounded too... hetero. They worked together, dealt with the extreme stress of the job together and danced around this... whatever... for way too long. After the shooting four months ago, John made a vow to himself to see where being with Evan might lead. They'd both had girlfriends in the past. John had been married for a brief, thoroughly disastrous period of time. What was the stupid term people like to throw around? Being AC/DC. Like people were supposed to make choices purely based on gender.

He turned to face Evan, wrapping his arms around Evan and pulling Evan into a kiss. His lips were warm. Evan threaded a hand in John's hair, cradling the back of his head. John closed his eyes and let himself relish the steady, comforting presence against his body.

"I think I'd rather postpone dinner," John whispered. He led Evan to the bedroom and pushed Evan down to lie on the bed, stretching out beside him. John hooked a leg over Evan's thighs and rolled Evan tight up against his own body.

Kissing progressed to groping and clothing was pitched to the floor. John kneaded the firm curves of Evan's ass as they ground against each other.

"Mmm, ya know, despite the fact I see you damn near every day, it's been close to two weeks since we got hot and bothered," murmured Evan as he nipped at John's lips.

"Some weeks the work load just sucks."

"Uh-huh. Speaking of sucking..." Evan hinted.

John had to laugh a little. "Was that a request or a question?"

"Either, but more of a question." Evan's hand curled around John's cock, stroking him, and John groaned with the increase in friction, followed by the wet heat of Evan's mouth. John's hands skimmed up Evan's ribs, seeking nipples, and encountered the scarring on his lover's chest. The hitch in his breathing had only a little to do with Evan's attention to his prick. God, he'd never be able to forget that horrific night.

John poured out his passion for Evan, knowing that everywhere they touched was a focus point for Evan's empathic senses.

"Am I topping?" murmured Evan as John was getting too close to exploding in Evan's mouth.

"Uh-huh." There was the usual grope for a condom and lube, and John flexed his knees. Evan was slow and thorough and the time he took gave John a few minutes to regain something approximating control. The sensation of Evan pushing into him was amazing and the rhythm slower than usual. John squirmed beneath his lover, getting swept closer to climax. Evan's breath huffed out against John's shoulder and John felt the pulsing wash of ecstasy flood Evan's body a scant few seconds before he came himself.

Both lay spent, plastered against each other by sweat and semen. John ran his fingers through Evan's short curly hair, cupping his hand against the back of Evan's head, delivering lazy sloppy kisses to his lover's mouth.

May 22, 2007

Cecelia Thomas, doctor extraordinaire, was brilliant and very, very opinionated. She was currently arguing with Rich Ciavelli. Okay, she was not so much arguing as reaming him a new one. John could hear the diatribe on the far side of the room from where they were. Cecelia was putting on her lab coat over her jeans and shirt while she was pointedly telling Rich that if he couldn't figure out why his wife was so almighty pissed at him, he ought to consider a divorce post-haste.

"Oh, come on, it was just dry cleaning!" snapped Rich.

"And you forgot. Didn't you say she had a meeting with her boss that she wanted to wear the suit to?" snapped Cecelia.

"Yeah, well, she's got a closet full of nice professional clothes."

John walked across the open room that occupied most of the main level, full of desks and computers, kitchen against one wall, his own office in one corner. "Hey Cecelia, much as I hate to interrupt your 'discussion', I was wondering if you'd read the preliminary autopsy report on our latest victim of a wild animal attack?" he said.

"Yes, it's missing things. No tox screen, it only came with two photos of the bite marks and no DNA analysis. Of course it's really too soon for that to be back anyway," she replied.

"Opinions?" he asked.

"It's reasonably consistent with the first one. That's about all I'm willing to admit to at the moment."

John turned to face Rich. "Any commentary from you on the crime scene itself?"

"There doesn't seem to have been much of a struggle. I noticed you'd penciled in a note that the broken glass seems to be from a vodka bottle. Maybe the vic was drunk. Especially since we don't have the tox screen yet... Not as much blood as I would have thought either," mused Rich.

"I kind of wondered about that," commented John.

"The vodka bottle could be incidental. On the other hand, here's a scenario. The vic and the murderer are walking a dog and having a drink. Maybe this leads to an argument. Suspect sics the dog on the vic. Don't even say it. I know that that sounds like a one-off, not something that leads to three separate deaths. Unless it's awfully premeditated..." Rich trailed off.

May 23, 2007

John dropped by Gabrielle's office building, hoping to snag some additional autopsy information that her bosses were being oh-so-slow in sharing. She was not in, according to Taylor Vanderbilt, who John happened to run into.

"Hey, you know I'm still waiting on a copy of the final autopsy report," prompted John.

"I think I just got it a couple hours ago. No DNA of course. That's not due back for at least three more days. I'll try to get it forwarded to you later today," said Vanderbilt.

"So, is Dr. Dichenz going to be back soon? I had a couple of specific questions for her."

"I think she got pulled into an interrogation. She should be done in an hour or so, I expect. No guarantees, though. It depends on if she actually starts asking

questions."

"Why?" asked John.

"I know she's got some sort of sideline specialty in abnormal psychology, and mostly she just tends to sit there and take notes and stuff during an interrogation. But now and then, she'll ask a question... I swear most of the time, it's something kind of off the wall, but... it'll just completely rattle some of those suspects. Like they think she's really messing with their heads. She's good." This was high praise, thought John, coming from a man who tended to have nothing good to say about anyone not pure FBI. If Vanderbilt only knew exactly what Gabrielle's *specialty* was it would blow his little mind.

"Thanks. I'll go grab some coffee and come back in a while."

After checking through security to let them know he would be back shortly with the same goal in mind -- talking to Dr. Dichenz -- John headed across the street toward a coffee shop.

When he returned, he was aimed down an alternate hallway, and told to try the second door on the left. Gabrielle was in an empty conference room, making stacks of papers on the long rectangular table. There were a couple of scribbled notations on the white board. Her blazer hung over the back of one of the padded chairs butted up to the table. John watched her for a moment; all her movements were hip and shoulder oriented. Odd.

"Planning a briefing?" he said from the doorway. She

glanced at him.

"I wasn't expecting you. No. I'm trying to make sense of some files." She stared at a sheet and laid it with a particular stack. "There was an attack four months ago," she continued. "It got picked up by the locals and I only just found out about it. There are some differences and some similarities. It has the same bite pattern, a mixture of throat wounds, wrists, and groin, all points that elicit maximum bleeding."

John peered over her shoulder, down at the stacks, reading the words on a sketched map.

"Three miles away. That's less than an hour's walk between, in a pinch," he noted.

As she edged past him back in the direction of the whiteboard, she bumped into his hip. John put out his hand to steady her and touched the small of her back. She jerked away suddenly and he sensed a surge of physical pain. An expression of agony was on her face, her lips pressed tightly together.

John looked at her for a long moment. He recalled Evan's opinion that she was being abused by someone. He was suddenly inclined to agree. He walked back to the door and closed it as she stood gripping the back of a chair, trying to catch her breath.

"How many are broken?" he said evenly.

"Excuse me?"

"How many are broken? Your ribs."

"I'm fine."

"I've had cracked ribs. The way you're standing. The pain when I touched you. Been there, done that."

"I'm fine. It's only a bruise," she insisted.

John stood gazing at her, a serious expression on his face. Gabrielle was struck by the intensity of his concern, and she knew he was going to touch her again. He stepped behind her and pulled her shirt loose from her skirt, lifting it just high enough to see the massive discoloration spanning her side and around toward her spine. His fingers grazed across her skin at the edge of the bruising. She could sense his horror and anger at the damage done. It practically radiated from him, along with a heavy surge of outright protectiveness. She couldn't figure out why he would feel that way, and she didn't want his pity either.

"Don't... Just don't... It's not that bad," she whispered.

"Did you get an X-ray?"

"No," she answered.

"Did you get *anyone* to take a look?" he pressed.

"No," she said softly, tucking her shirt back in. Damn, that hurt.

"Get your jacket," he ordered.

"Why?"

"I'm taking you to the hospital." There was no room for argument in his tone.

"No."

"Yes. Now." He picked up her suit jacket and held it out to her as he opened the door.

She reluctantly walked out. The thoughts that raced through her brain screamed this was an appallingly bad idea. It wasn't any of his damn business. Somewhere underneath her anger and frustration, there was a hint of longing. Nobody had cared enough to push the envelope in a long time.

Chapter 3

Seeking Equilibrium

May 23, 2007

At the hospital, Gabrielle was sitting on the table, buttoning her shirt when John came into the room.

"The doc told me you have two broken ribs. They're just hairline fractures. It could've been worse," he said. How the hell had she gotten herself in a situation where someone was hurting her that badly? She just looked at him and finished buttoning her shirt. He stood in front of her, hands in the pockets of his slacks.

"So tell me who did it," he said.

"No."

"He's done it before."

"How the hell would you know? It's not like that!"

"I have a colleague. His name is Evan Garrett. He told me that you do laps in the pool on Tuesday mornings, and that he's seen bruises, marks that could only come from being hit."

"It is none of your business! I shouldn't have..." And she shut up.

"If he broke your ribs this time, what's it going to be next time? Your face? Your arm?"

"Just leave it! I need him, okay?" She slid off the table

and started to bend forward to set her shoe upright.

"Don't," he said.

John put a hand on her shoulder to keep her from bending over. He dropped down and picked up her shoe and put her hand on his shoulder to steady her. She slipped her foot into the shoe and he stood back up. She was not that short. His face was only a couple of inches above hers. He braced his hands on the table on either side of her, and looked at her, deadly serious.

"Nobody needs somebody like him. You have to trust someone to help you, sometime," he said. She was silent. He lifted a hand to cup her face, his thumb brushing across her mouth. "Or it's going to kill you."

May 30, 2007

From: GDichenz
To: JBenchley
Subject: Old case DNA

80% DNA homology between 4 month old bite mark and 2 most recent. Lots of degradation. ID still unknown.

John sent her an email in reply, asking her to meet him for lunch. They met in a café along the river. Lunch was all business, looking at data, speculating. What might be the source of the teeth marks? With some DNA similarities to human, could it be a primate of some sort?

Afterward, as they were walking back toward her office building, he stopped and leaned against the railing, facing the water.

"How's the ribs?" he asked.

"Better."

"Are you going to tell me who did it?"

"No," she replied.

Damn she was a hard person to help, he thought. "He'll do it again."

She was quiet for a moment, then said, "I'm a pariah."

"Huh ? Why?" The idea confused him.

"The few people who know I'm Division P, they treat me with the exquisite care of a nuclear bomb. Everyone else seems to live to the absolute letter of the law in fear of sexual harassment policies. It's all tiptoe softly by, don't touch, ever...The day of the meeting... When you were rubbing my neck... That's almost the only time anyone but him has touched me in more than a year. And I don't mean sex, I mean touched. Yeah, there's an occasional handshake, but hardly anything else. It makes you die a little inside." She turned and started to walk away.

John followed her and grabbed her by the shoulders, turning her back to face him, and he kissed her, hands cupped against her face. A long, sensual, open-mouthed

kiss; his tongue explored her mouth. When he lifted his head, she looked like she was absolutely in shock.

"Nobody, but nobody, deserves to live that way," he said. She just stared at him, before finally turning away again and heading toward the office building

Tuesday, June 5, 2007

When Evan saw Brie at the pool, there were fresh bruises on her arms. He dived into the pool and started another set of laps, thinking about a conversation he'd had with John. Noticing that she had climbed out and started to dry off, Evan decided he needed to talk to her. He finished the last few strokes to the end of the lane and climbed out, crossing the tiled floor to where his towel lay on a bench. Somebody had to impress upon her that she did have options, people willing to help. He approached her, his towel slung over his shoulder.

"How's your lap time going?" he asked.

"Hey! Didn't see you come in. Not bad. I'm kind of at a plateau... I've run into John Benchley several times lately. I didn't realize you were with SIS," she said. It came out sounding a little like an accusation, he thought.

"Small world. I didn't know you were Division P," he returned, and felt a momentary surge of shock from her. Evan immediately felt a little guilty; he hadn't meant to be confrontational, and that was something she surely didn't need.

"Sorry," he apologized. "That came out wrong. I know that John spent a while with them."

"I meant we have more points in common than swimming here. Any thoughts on the oh so strange and deranged case we're trading back and forth?"

"Not really. It doesn't fit, anything actually."

"Yeah, tell me about it," she mused.

"Gabrielle, if you need to talk about other things... I might be able to help," he offered. He laid a hand on her arm above the bruises and she gave him an odd look, as if she would like to open up and really talk to him.

"I'm fine, really. I... Got into it with, um, my boyfriend," she admitted.

"If you need a place to stay..." Evan loathed the idea that she might be feeling trapped by a living situation.

"No, he doesn't live with me. Anyway, gotta go. Bye." She practically bolted in the direction of the locker room.

Evan spent some time thinking while he dressed in the locker room before heading in to work. John had told him about the impromptu trip to the hospital and the broken ribs. Here the problem was rearing its ugly head all over again.

At the end of day, Evan finally caught John alone in the kitchen area, off to the side of the workspace on the main level.

"I saw Gabrielle this morning," Evan said.

"How's she doing? I haven't talked to her in a week." Evan was silent. His jaw clenched as he gazed at John's face. He could predict his lover's response. "Fuck, it happened again, didn't it?" John's fists clenched on the edge of the counter top. "How bad?"

"There were marks on her arms, maybe he grabbed her, maybe he hit her. It's kind of hard to tell for sure. She said she got into it with her boyfriend."

"So help me, if I find out who it is, I'm going to break him in half." John leaned against the counter, arms crossed, an expression of anger and frustration written across his face.

"She doesn't deserve this," said Evan softly. "And I don't know how to get her out of it." He reached out and cupped his hand against John's face. It was a tiny offering of solace to his lover.

Wednesday, June 6, 2007

John dropped by Gabrielle's lab with multiple purposes in mind. The lab contained that odd conglomeration of scientific instrumentation, glassware and heaps of paperwork that went with a science lab. As he closed the door behind him, she was facing in the opposite direction, wearing a lab coat. Gabrielle leaned on the countertop, an Epindorf pipette in her hand, putting minute amounts of liquid into little plastic vials.

"Can it wait for ten or fifteen minutes? I've got samples to prep," she said over her shoulder without looking.

"Wrong person," John said.

Her head whipped around. "Sorry, I thought it was Chris, my boss, coming to bug me about another interrogation," she replied.

He leaned back on the counter beside her. "What do you do in an interrogation?" John asked.

"Watch. Analyze. Dig around inside their head. Get a freakin' migraine from spending an hour determining if what they said was true and what wasn't!" She was obviously annoyed.

"Gee, what fun... What did he do to you this time?"

Gabrielle frowned. "What makes you think-- ah, Evan at the pool."

"I told you he would do it again."

"It's none of your business. It's MY life!" Her tone was practically a snarl.

"I would really prefer not to attend your funeral. Too many people I know have died." A parade of faces marched through John's head. Too many.

"I'll be fine," she snapped, but he could detect a slight tremor in her hands. Her psychic shielding faltered a little and he felt a mix of anger and pain. John took the

Epindorf out of her hand and laid it on the counter. He wrapped his arms around her very gently and pulled her head to his shoulder. She was rigid in his arms.

"Brie. We can get a restraining order... If you need a place to stay..." he began.

"I can't... I just... can't," she whispered. She pulled away and walked over to stand in front of a large blocky chunk of instrumentation parked on the counter that bore the label "Applied Biosystems 492 Protein Sequencer", and keyed in a series of instructions. John didn't really have the slightest clue what the label meant. He also knew she was hiding herself in familiarity of her work.

A blond-haired man in a shirt and tie poked his head into the lab. "Hey, we're about ready," he said.

"I... can it wait about ten minutes? I need to finish talking to Agent Benchley. It's about another case," she said.

"Yeah, a few. But we're waiting on you," the man replied.

The door closed. Brie began to refill a container of liquid that she then attached to the machine.

"The old case, the one from four months ago. I encountered something really weird," she said.

"Someone left one of the organic samples sitting on a counter and the inside of the acrylic test tube got scorched." She handed him an analysis sheet with a photo clipped to it.

"This isn't some sort of fuck-up on the part of locals?" John asked.

"No guarantees. But it doesn't seem like it."

"Okay, add one more 'doesn't fit' piece to the puzzle."

"Run it by your people, maybe they'll have an 'aha' moment," she suggested.

"Maybe."

"All right. I gotta go." She picked up a sample rack and shoved it in the refrigerator.

"I'll call you tomorrow, and let you know if we come up with anything." He stepped directly in front of her and took both of her hands in his and put them over his heart.

"If you need anything let me know. Day or night," he said.

She nodded in silence.

Wednesday evening, late

John was in the weight room on the ground floor of the SIS building. It wasn't pretty -- concrete walls and gray industrial carpet -- but it was functional. The room contained free weights and a bench, a treadmill, a weight machine for upper body and an elliptical, yet another perk of getting to design your own building layout.

When he and the rest of the team had done the brainstorming session about what they really needed to have in the new building, workout room had made the list. With the erratic hours of the job, getting to a regular gym was very difficult. The sometimes weird physical demands of the job made staying in shape a definite plus. Did wrestling a two hundred and eighty pound guy possessed by an evil spirit qualify as weird? Or just plain insane?

They had put in locker rooms, complete with showers, tubs, and ample room for storing extra clothes. A full kitchen, a bunk room reminiscent of a firehouse, an armory, plenty of lab and workspace, and an indoor garage for the two H2's they owned had completed the renovation.

Right now, John was angry, viciously slamming plates onto the bar. He almost didn't notice when Evan walked into the room.

"So, what has you so pissed off?" Evan asked.

"The entire God-damn situation!" John turned around and leaned on the weight bench. He crossed his arms and braced one foot on a twenty-five pound barbell lying on the floor. "I want to kill him. I want to beat the fucking shit out of him. And I don't even know who he is!"

"Gabrielle..." said Evan.

The sound of her name somehow brought forth the image of her bruised body. John turned and punched the

wall. It was concrete and he immediately regretted it, shaking his hand in pain.

"Help me, Evan; help me find out who this sonofabitch is. He's some average rat bastard. We have enough computing power to launch a space shuttle at our disposal. How hard can it possibly be?"

"We have her name, address, and phone number. It's a place to start," suggested Evan.

John trudged after Evan, back up to the main level, heading for the computer in John's office. They spent an hour scrounging through phone records and the like before they came up with a few possibles. John sat in his chair and leaned on the desk in front of him. He laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them. Frustration and anger was surging forth again.

"She's brilliant and professional and sensitive and talented and why the hell won't she walk away?" John snarled, flinging himself back in the chair. Evan was standing behind John. Evan bent forward crossing his arms around John's shoulders, resting his chin on the top of John's head. "And this is what it's all about. Everything she thinks she can't get from anyone else," John said more softly, relishing the familiar touch of his lover.

"What?" asked Evan.

"Touch."

Evan's knuckles rubbed across John's chest. "I'm lost. You're not making sense."

John's hand closed over Evan's and he spun the chair around, still holding one of Evan's hands. "Touch. More precisely, lack of. She told me, whoever he is, is the only person who touches her. The whole telepathy thing. The people she works with, well, the ones who have the right sort of security clearance anyway, they know who she is, what she does, and they're afraid of her. Afraid she's going to expose some dark little petty secret of theirs. You know how fucking paranoid some of the FBI personnel are. It's killing her because she can't cope with the lack of humanity." John drew Evan closer and wrapped his arms around his partner's hips, without getting out of the chair. "Tell me it's not my problem. Tell me I'm not supposed to care," he whispered, leaning his head against Evan's stomach.

"No. I won't tell you that. You do care. That's part of what draws me to you. You passionately give a shit about what happens to the people around you. She's a friend. I worry about her, too." Evan bent forward and placed a kiss on John's mouth.

Monday, June 11, 2007

Evan got a phone call from Brie. It struck him as odd, but he wasn't going to turn down any opportunity that presented itself to help her. She wanted to know if he could meet her for coffee after work. He agreed readily. Returning to the now certain knowledge that she was being abused by her boyfriend stirred deep concern in Evan. Had it happened yet again?

As they sat down outside the coffee shop, Evan pondered how to bring up the awkward subject, but apparently Gabrielle was focused on the case.

"This case is making me crazy. Nothing seems to fit," Brie said.

"I haven't read all the data but I tend to agree," replied Evan.

"I think it's, um, well, it should get dumped squarely in the lap of SIS. I have no proof, no real data, just a feeling."

"Have you talked to John about it? I'm sure there's a batch of stupid jurisdictional issues," said Evan

"Not yet. I don't know if he's likely to agree. Most of what we have so far is weird, but could just as easily fall in the category of mundane."

"So, what can I do to help?" Evan asked.

"I just needed a second opinion, before I get myself in the bad graces of the FBI. You know how close to the vest they play stuff. Oh, the power trips, they like to indulge in," she said with a smile and a roll of her eyes.

Evan gazed at her. She was bright and beautiful and how the hell did someone get off on beating the crap out of her? He turned his attention back to her comment.

"Yeah, true, except at SIS we not only tend to play it close to the vest, but also sweep it under the carpet and

burn it," he said with a grin. She laughed a little, and then sobered.

"Are you okay?" he asked, still trying to figure out what the actual point of meeting him was.

"Yeah, fine. I just wanted someone to bounce the idea off of."

"Why me?" he said.

"You don't... push so hard." He assumed she was referring to John's overprotective tendency to steamroller people.

"Thank you. I think."

As she got up to leave, Evan laid a hand on her arm, deliberately. He still wasn't entirely sure why she had asked him to meet her, but anything that offered her a feeling of support was hers to take. He saw her glance down at his hand, and he sensed a hint of gratefulness from her.

"Call me if you come up with any supporting evidence. Or if you just need a hand." he said.

She nodded.

Chapter 4

Exothermic

Thursday, June 14, 2007

There was another body, and this time SIS beat the FBI to the punch. They were already taking photos and taping off the scene when the FBI arrived. The body was of a woman who looked to be in her thirties. Her throat was ripped apart, as was one wrist. She wore a white polo style shirt and khaki pants, both splattered with large amounts of blood. Her body had been tossed behind a dumpster. Although it hadn't been confirmed, it was thought she might have been an employee of the Mexican restaurant the dumpster lay behind. FBI personnel were getting out of two cars and an SUV parked at the far end of the wide alley.

John was squatted down, examining the blood spatter pattern around the body while Evan took photos. There was something not quite right. Yes, there was blood, but it didn't seem like enough given the wounds.

"The feebs are headed this way," Evan informed John.

John stood up and headed in the direction of the FBI people.

Taylor Vanderbilt was issuing orders. His perfectly pressed suit and aviator style sunglasses were a sharp contrast to John's jeans and Oxford cloth shirt. John intercepted him.

"We're taking lead on this one," John said. His hands were jammed in the pockets of his jeans, but he stood

squarely in the way of Vanderbilt's obvious intention to go tromping through the scene.

"Yeah, all right," Vanderbilt consented, which surprised John. He did note the fact that the FBI man definitely looked pissed about it. "But most of the trace will get processed by us. We've got more lab resources," Vanderbilt pointed out.

"Fair enough." John found himself searching the faces of the FBI personnel for Brie. Eventually he saw her, digging gloves and some sampling equipment out of the back of the SUV. She wore a standard issue FBI wind breaker and a pair of dark slacks. He dodged past a couple of agents on security detail to get to her.

"Hey, Gabrielle!" he called. She was wearing her dark sunglasses despite the heavy overcast day. He stopped beside her and laid a hand on her arm. She looked up at him.

"I recognize those glasses. Migraine?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's trying really hard," she answered slowly.

"Give me five minutes." He pulled her against his body and threaded his fingers through her hair, rubbing the back of her neck and the knotted muscles at the base of her skull. Feeling her mind brush across his, there was just a hint of pure pleasure at his touch as her forehead rested on his collarbone.

"Interrogation today?" he asked.

"Yes, better than ninety minutes," she whispered. His

cheek rested against the top of her head, and he noticed that they were receiving a couple of pointed stares. He was amused. He spent a couple more minutes holding her, trying to ease her headache.

"Better?"

"Some. Hopefully, it's enough that maybe my eyeballs won't fall out." She pulled away and started putting on her gloves. John grabbed her field kit box and followed her toward the body where Cecelia and Evan were measuring and photographing. Several FBI people were doing similar things.

This was going to lead to arguments over who got what samples, John suspected. As Brie walked the perimeter, John set the box down and watched her. He slowly realized that she was searching for something, something specific. She knelt down and used a swab to take a sample, placing it in a tube. She stroked her fingers across the spot she had sampled as if she was feeling the texture of whatever it was through her gloves. The sun chose that moment to break through the clouds. She let out a little cry, dropping the tube, which was luckily acrylic, and frantically yanked at the glove on her hand.

"Fuckfuckfuck!" she yelled.

John lunged forward, dropping to his knees, grabbing her wrist, and peeling most of the glove the rest of the way off. There was gummy melted residue on her palm and fingers, and she was grimacing in pain. John looked at her in concern. How badly was she hurt?

"Hey, Cecelia! Get over here!" he shouted. "What happened?" he demanded of Gabrielle.

"Major exothermic reaction."

"Say what?"

"It didn't quite burst into flames," said Brie.

Cecelia dropped down beside them.

"Take a look at her hand. Whatever it was melted the glove," John said.

Cecelia took hold of Gabrielle's hand and started flexing her fingers and trying to assess the damage. "I know it hurts, honey. Just bear with me, I'm trying to make sure only the skin is damaged," said Cecelia softly, patting a hand on Brie's shoulder.

"Ow... ow..." muttered Gabrielle as Cecelia peeled bits of melted nitrile from Gabrielle's hand and started hosing the hand down with saline.

John gave Brie an appraising look, thinking about the way she had seemed to be hunting for something very specific before the incident. "Why do I think you aren't all that surprised at what happened? What is that stuff?" he asked.

Brie glanced up at him. "I suspected it might happen. But not that damn fast. Oxidation yes, but maybe over minutes or a couple of hours... ow... ow..." She grimaced at what Cecelia was doing to her fingers.

"I'm nearly done. Just try to hold still, the nitrile is melted onto your skin. Don't watch. It won't hurt quite so bad." Cecelia suggested. She spent a few more minutes rinsing the hand and bandaging it.

"What *is* it?" asked John.

"Blood. I think."

"Blood that gets so hot it melted the glove." He pondered the sheer strangeness of the idea.

"Um, yes..." Brie appeared a bit tentative at the claim.

John helped her to her feet. "Sounds alien to me," he said softly, hoping that only Cecelia and Brie could hear him. There were things he really didn't want to get into discussing out here with the regular FBI running around. SIS had had a couple of run-ins with extraterrestrial stuff a while back.

"Maybe, but the residue from the first tube... The one from four months ago, there are no unidentifiable elements. I need a metal Teflon lined sample tube for this stuff," said Gabrielle, and she started scrounging in her box. She collected the ruined glove and as much of the sample remnants as she could manage, placing them in a set of metal tubes. She handed a pair of them to John.

"Dual analysis, your lab and my lab," she said.

He nodded.

After the body was gathered up and placed in the

obligatory body bag, the usual clean up was finished. Brie put her field box back in the truck and sat on the edge of the front seat, with her legs hanging out the open door, writing on a clipboard. She awkwardly rubbed her temple with her bandaged hand as John walked up to the truck door.

"Send me some e-mail or give me a buzz when you get the results. We should get together and discuss them," he said.

"Will do."

He took hold of her wrist and lifted up her bandaged hand to look at it. "And be careful with the samples."

"Definitely."

He tipped her face up toward his a little with one finger. "And take something for the migraine."

"That, too." Somehow she seemed just a little amused by his orders.

Monday, June 18, 2007 -- Afternoon

Watching the office building of one Thomas Garner, employee of Tryst Securities, John sat in the agency H2, eyeing the door. Tryst Securities rented the third floor of a very posh building complete with marble tiled floors and a lovely fountain in the foyer. It was very upscale, very... respectable. John's fists clenched on the steering wheel. He could be wrong, but he rather doubted it. All

the facts pointed to this man. Evan and John had spent three days running down, in between the other tasks, leads on the unknown man abusing Gabrielle. A stockbroker named Tom Garner appeared to be the most promising suspect.

John got out and walked into the building. He stood for a moment, gazing at the lobby placard listing the companies in the building. Tryst Securities -- third floor, he confirmed and pressed the elevator button waiting for the burnished steel doors to slide open. On the third floor, he was greeted by a blonde receptionist in a white blouse and a navy skirt. She also had a very well endowed bustline, he noted as she smiled at him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Tom Garner. A mutual friend suggested that I should see him. I'm afraid I don't have an appointment." John grinned at her, lowering his eyes in a little fake embarrassment. She leaned forward a little as she consulted the appointment program on her computer, displaying her cleavage just a little better. John was hard pressed not to roll his eyes at the blatant flirtation; instead, he just smiled.

"I actually think he's free until one-thirty. That would give you twenty minutes to at least introduce yourself and set up a follow-up appointment." She directed him to a corner office.

John cast his gaze into the open office door. There was a huge mahogany desk, a three- hundred-dollar, high-back chair, a slim laptop computer, elegant blinds, matching credenza and bookshelves, all very high dollar. It

screamed money and power.

The man behind the desk looked up as John walked in and held out his hand.

"Tom Garner. The receptionist said you were looking for me?"

"Agent John Benchley. We have a common acquaintance, Gabrielle Dichenz," said John. They shook hands and John studied the man. He was nearly the same height as John, blond, dressed very GQ, was somewhat more bulky but not really fat, the sort of ex-football player build, a man very obviously accustomed to the idea of power.

"Ah, you work with her?"

"Yes, different division," said John, neatly stretching the truth.

"Big place."

"Very."

"You here to invest?" the other man asked.

"No. I fix problems."

"We already have a software maintenance plan..."

"Not that kind of problems." John gave him a truly evil grin.

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Gabrielle, she's your girlfriend?"

"Um, yes..."

"And you get off on beating the crap out of her." John leaned forward with his hands on the desk.

"Listen here, you bastard--"

John cut him off. "No, you listen. If you hurt her again, you will disappear. Nobody will ever find your body; no one will ever see you again. Do you understand?"

"Get out! I don't have to put up with this shit!" the stockbroker yelled at him.

"Be seeing you." John sketched him a half salute, turned on his heel and walked out.

At SIS headquarters, John stared blankly out the window of his office, hands in his pockets, not seeing the cars streaming down the road toward the beltway. Evan walked up behind him and leaned on the wall facing John.

"You look... worried," said Evan.

"I've either solved a problem or just made it ten times worse."

"Gabrielle."

"Yeah. I paid a visit to Thomas Garner. Told him if he ever hurt her again, I would make him vanish," John admitted.

"Much as I want her to be safe, was that wise?"

"I don't know. Either she'll be safe or I've just put her in a hell of a lot of danger." It had seemed like a good idea when he'd done it. John wielded enough political clout that he was used to people obeying him. But that was work and case related issues, this was personal.

"You could call her," suggested Evan.

"Which might not be a bad idea," replied John. He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and thumbed the number. All he got was her voice mail.

"Hey, Gabrielle, it's John. We have preliminary results on the flammable samples. Call me as soon as you can."

"No answer?"

"No," said John slowly.

Evan picked the keys to one of the H2's off John's desk and held them out to him.

Chapter 5

Entropy

Monday, June 18, 2007 -- Night

In the darkness, John drove toward the address listed in the file for Brie. His fingers drummed restlessly on the edge of the steering wheel as he pulled up in front of the house. It was a small brick house at the edge of Georgetown. Expensive neighborhood. In the darkness he saw two cars parked in the driveway. That was not a good sign. There was a light in one window to the left of the front door. He got out and started up the walk. There were angry voices shouting inside the house. He sprinted for the door and pounded on it with his fist.

"Brie? Brie! Open up!" he yelled and rammed his shoulder against the door repeatedly until he forced it open. He stumbled through the house following the noise into the kitchen area. The stove and sink lay at one end of the room, the opposite end held a table, chairs and a bookshelf. Garner was facing Brie as she stood beside the table.

"How dare you! You bitch! Who the hell does he think he is?" Garner screamed.

He backhanded her hard. She was flung against a bookshelf and fell to her hands and knees.

"Your worst nightmare!" shouted John. John charged at Garner and slammed him back into the wall, hands around his throat. There was an exchange of blows. John staggered backward, and fell to the floor on his butt, blood running down his face from his nose.

Garner grabbed a knife from the block on the counter and John heard the snick-snick of a round being chambered, followed by the overly loud bang of a gun firing. The window behind Garner shattered and Garner froze, an expression of total disbelief on his face. John glanced backward. Brie was standing with a 9 mm in her hand, pointing it at Garner.

"Get out," she said, her voice flat.

"Defending your new lover, you cunt?"

"He's not my lover. He's a friend. And you will not hurt him."

"Fine, I'll kill *you* first." Garner raised the knife. Brie fired again, this time into the wall. John realized she was holding the gun in her left hand, and that her opposite hand was dangling at an odd angle at her side.

"The next one just might go through your skull," she said.

Garner hesitated and then took a step forward. Brie fired again. A thin line of blood appeared along Garner's cheek. Garner actually looked terrified this time and bolted out the back door.

Brie emptied the rest of the rounds into the wall beside the door, one at a time, a continuous concussive sound. John was still sitting on the floor. In the deafening silence, he stared up at Brie. She stood with her arm outstretched, pointing the gun at... nothing. John dragged himself to his feet, and laid a hand on Brie's arm, pressing it toward the floor.

"He's gone," he said softly.

Brie was almost immobile, her finger continuing to pull the trigger repeatedly on the empty chamber. John carefully wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled the gun from her hand. With her body sagged against his, her breath was a harsh rasp on his cheek.

"It's okay. You're safe," he whispered, and he felt her knees begin to buckle. He eased her to the floor. She looked up into his face and raised her hand, touching her fingertips to the blood on his face.

"You're hurt." Her voice was toneless.

"It's just a bloody nose."

Through the barest contact of her fingertips on his skin, he could suddenly feel *her*. Her usual shielding had collapsed, her mind a numb chaos of shock and rage... and pain. Her mouth was bloody and the skin around one eye was beginning to darken. Looking down at her wrist, he saw it was swollen and still drooped at a strange angle. John gave about two seconds thought to taking her to the emergency room. That just so wouldn't work. There was no way she would be able to handle the eight to ten different people touching her in an ER. In the brief time he had spent in the Division P program, it had been repeatedly drummed into his head that psi processed trauma differently than "normals." Being touched by many people, specifically many headblind people, on top of injury was a very bad combination. He dug his cell out of his pocket and dialed Evan, hoping he was still at the SIS building.

"Evan! Find Cecelia. Get her to come back to the office. I need her help... No, I'm fine. Gabrielle's injured. Broken wrist, some other stuff. I'll see you in twenty or thirty minutes." John hung up. Within the circle of his arm, Brie was beginning to shake.

"Stay right there. Don't move," he said. He strode across the room and went to the sofa, pulling off a quilt that lay there. He brought it back and wrapped it around her. He folded her injured arm up to her chest and placed her opposite hand over it, to hold it in place and scooped her up. Carrying her out to the H2, he gently placed her in the passenger seat.

The drive back to SIS was silent. Gabrielle was huddled in the quilt, just staring. John parked in the garage, then picked her up out of the seat and carried her toward the room that doubled as a cross between Cecelia's lab and an infirmary. Cecelia was waiting with Evan.

"Holy fuck," Evan muttered and moved to help John ease Gabrielle down onto the exam table. Cecelia seemed less ruffled, and immediately began to exam Gabrielle.

"I'm pretty sure her wrist is broken, I need you to make sure that's the only major thing," John said.

"John, honey, you're not looking so great either. Let Evan help you wash off the blood while I examine her," said Cecelia gently as she continued her assessment of Gabrielle.

"Yeah, whatever. I'm fine. I've just got a bloody nose," John said dismissively.

After checking blood pressure and pupils on her patient, Cecelia started taking X-rays, and John noted not just of Gabrielle's wrist.

A few feet away, John shrugged out of his blood-stained shirt and dropped it on the floor. He was incredibly worried about Gabrielle and hoped he had made the right choice. Evan's hands on his shoulder stole John's attention, and he could tell that his lover was both angry and concerned. Evan pushed John back to sit on a stool, then wrapped his arms around John, just holding John for a long moment, obviously reassuring himself that John was still mostly in one piece.

"What the hell happened?" Evan demanded.

"Garner. I'd rather talk about it later," muttered John. He closed his eyes for a moment, letting himself connect with Evan's steady, comforting presence.

"Okay, I guess. God, you're a mess!" said Evan, and he proceeded to help John clean the blood off while Cecelia was setting Gabrielle's wrist and wrapping it in a fiberglass cast.

Evan picked up John's hand in his own. The outside edge along the pinky was purplish-red and swollen, and the finger itself seemed to be a little off center.

"Ya know, I think it's broken," Evan said.

"Nah, just hurts like hell," replied John. Evan gently wiggled the little finger. *Oh fuck that hurt!*

"Nope, I'm pretty sure it's broken." Evan brushed his fingers along John's face, a gesture of concern, and combed his fingers through John's hair.

"Do I need to do some more X-rays ?" called Cecelia from across the room.

"I think so," said Evan.

"How's *she* doing?" John asked.

"She's in shock. There's no overt sign of brain trauma, but short of a CAT scan, I can't say for sure. There's evidence of something like a dozen old fractures. Then there's the stuff from tonight. Nothing lethal, but not good," Cecelia said.

"Why am I not surprised?" said John softly. He slid off the stool and shuffled over to the table where she was lying. Gabrielle's eyes were open and she was staring blankly at nothing. John took hold of her uninjured hand, his thumb stroking across her knuckles.

"Gabrielle?" he said. She was unresponsive. He placed her hand on the skin of his chest, over his heart. She actually focused her eyes on him for a moment as he tried brushing his mind across hers, then nothing. John rubbed his finger along the back of her hand. She trembled then returned to the blank stare.

"Your turn," said Cecelia. She pushed John down onto a stool, took X-rays and aligned the broken bone before

doing the fiberglass job on his hand.

"I'm probably going to have to redo the casts on both of you once the swelling goes down."

John merely nodded, rubbing his free hand over his face, trying to draw his thoughts together. "So, give me a run down of her physical damage," he said.

"She obviously got hit in the mouth. Only a split lip from that. There's a hairline crack along the lower edge of the eye socket. Both radius and ulna are broken. *Lots* of bruises. Not all of them new. She probably has a mild concussion and she's still in shock. What the hell happened? I haven't seen this level of catatonic behavior from the assault of an adult in ages..." Cecelia trailed off.

John blew out a breath of frustration. "Her boyfriend happened. Listen, I'll give you all the sordid details tomorrow, okay? But for now... She's a telepath. That's a reason for the whole unresponsive thing."

"Okay. What are *you* going to do?" Cecelia pressed a little.

"It's a psi thing. I'll handle it," he said.

Cecelia laid both hands on his shoulders and gave him a penetrating look. She shook her head and sighed as she walked out of the room. John gazed back down at Gabrielle. Only in a place like this could he say, "she's a telepath" and not only be taken at face value, but also not receive any dubious looks.

One of the things John had insisted on doing as part of the management of the team was make sure that every single person knew all the career information about everyone else. Personal stuff was whatever anyone *chose* to tell, but knowing what your teammates had experience with or had encountered made an enormous impact in a job this weird. They all knew he had spent some time in the Division P training program, just as everyone knew that Todd McAffey, their weapons and explosives expert, had been forcibly retired from the Green Berets after a bomb had injured him severely enough to leave a permanent limp.

Evan laid a hand on John's shoulder. "Will you be okay? Anything I can do for you or her?" His face was serious.

"This is going to take a while." John gave him a sad half-smile. "I'll see you in the morning. Don't expect it to be early. Oh, and call Fiona and Todd, and get them back from Baltimore. There are only just so many crises I can juggle at one time. I need you to take point on this 'animal' case for at least a day or so."

Evan nodded and kissed John very lightly before departing.

John was still naked from the waist up. He scooped Brie up in his arms and carried her toward the elevator, toward his quarters. Damn, that definitely made his hand hurt worse.

Upstairs in his bedroom, he pushed the blankets down with a foot and set her on the bed. She was still catatonic. He stretched out beside her and pulled her into his arms as carefully as he could and drew up the

blankets. She was rigid, motionless. Her face rested on his shoulder with her uninjured hand, palm flat, on his chest. He held her and waited.

A healer would have been helpful, but it might take hours to find a way to contact the right people of Division P, much less get them here. They had taught him rudimentary skills during his brief foray into that world. Her skin against his, all he could feel was a half-numb, seething chaos. He knew she needed someone to ground into, to re-establish that calm connection to reality and sanity.

The really gifted ones got lost when the damage was bad. It was one of the downsides to being that sensitive. When the shielding failed and the building blocks of conscious thought were in chaos, the sensitive ones failed miserably at picking up the pieces on their own. John definitely didn't qualify as good at this sort of thing, but he was better than nothing. He did devote a moment's thought to whether adding Evan to the mix would improve the situation.

John carefully dropped all his own psychic shielding and brushed his mind across the disaster of hers, schooling his thoughts into a comforting neutrality, easier said than done. As minutes ticked past, her muscles began to relax just a little at a time and she drifted into the edge of sleep. Suddenly, she jerked and he was flooded with images, emotions, memories. It was a little like drowning.

Being beaten by fists, rough sex, excruciating loneliness, work, terror, lab, reluctance to go home. She was crying quietly in his arms, his own face as wet with tears as

hers. He held her as tightly as he dared. Eventually, she fell into an exhausted sleep, and so did he.

Chapter 6

Bonding

Tuesday, June 19, 2007 -- 2 a.m.

Pain slowly dragged Gabrielle back to consciousness. Her face and her wrist ached the worst. A soft, comforting warmth radiated from the body beside her, a familiar presence. John. It was dark, only a faint silvery hint of streetlights outside a window casting deep shadows. His breath blew softly against her hair. So close, one arm wrapped protectively around her body, she could feel him dreaming.

An image of a field. A blond haired man was running full-tilt after a werewolf, gun blazing. Her house, the snarl on Tom's face morphing into the werewolf. John was running, wrestling it, choking it. The dream faded into another. John and Evan locked in a kiss. Evan's tongue exploring, swiping along his teeth, one hand wound in John's hair, gasping breaths as they let the heat of the moment reign. An open grave, John staring bleakly at the coffin, grief, faces sliding by, a parade of the dead.

John woke to an unusual sensation. He could feel her inside his head. She was exploring, delicately, carefully. She was equally vulnerable, all her shielding gone, still in tatters from earlier. He opened his eyes slowly and looked at her lying curled against him. He felt her uncertainty and embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't..." she whispered.

He touched a finger to her lips. "Anything you want. Just... some of it's pretty unpleasant."

"There have been others who played inside your head."

"A few. It's... not exactly a casual experience," he said.

"No, it isn't." She closed her eyes, and gave him images of three different men. One had been Division P. He had been Gabrielle's lover and died in the line of duty. His death had been absolutely devastating. The next two were ones she had attempted a relationship with. One had broken off their interaction immediately after experiencing the sensation of her mind in his during an intense kiss. The other had actual scrambled backward over a chair in near terror at the feeling. And then she had settled for Tom Garner, who thought the whole thing a monumental turn on. Gabrielle started to pull away, but John kept his fingers against her face.

Love doesn't have to hurt.

Gabrielle gasped at the coherence of the contact. Even Tom, who was perfectly willing to let her see inside his head, was never like this. There hadn't been anyone like this since... Grayson. For a moment, she wanted to crawl inside John, revel in the touch of his mind, wrap his presence around her like a protective blanket. Suddenly, she was scared. There was a time when she so ached for a human touch, Tom's was the best she had, and then it became so twisted -- his rage, his possessiveness, his violence...

I will never hurt you.

She was astounded at John's perception, his ability to sense her as she could sense him. Somewhere in among the wonder, she did hurt, the physical kind. Her wrist throbbed in time with her pulse and her face hurt and so did at least a dozen other places. She was aware he was in pain, too, his hand, his nose, and across his cheekbones.

Yeah, we're both a wreck. Roll on your side, so you can lay your wrist on the pillow. I think it'll help.

She twisted slowly and stretched out her arm a little. It did help. She could feel John spooned up against her back, his arm around her body, the feel of his breath on the side of her neck.

Tuesday, June 19, 2007 -- morning

The main workroom of SIS was almost vacant when John came downstairs. Only Evan seemed to be there. The bruising from the bloody nose had spread across John's cheeks somewhat. He had the thumb of his casted hand half shoved in his pocket to partially support it.

Evan was slouched at his desk, on the phone. He waved a couple of fingers at John and beckoned John over, hanging up as John sat down on the edge of the desk.

"You look like shit," Evan said as he laid a cautious hand on John's leg.

"Gee, thanks."

"I was on the phone to the feebies and told them that Brie was being *borrowed* for a few days by us. It seemed like the easiest way to deal with it. How is she?" asked Evan.

"Actually sounds like a great idea and she's better. Well... okay, at least she's functional. But she really needs some recovery time. Anybody make coffee yet?"

"Yeah, I threw some on. Fiona and Todd should be back in a couple of hours."

"So, did they actually find anything useful about the supposed haunted house and the three missing children?"

"I don't think so," Evan replied.

"Okay. Hey while you're dealing with stuff this morning. Can you round up the paperwork for a restraining order? We have got to get some legal protection for Brie."

"Yeah sure."

Cecelia came up the stairs from her lab. "You owe me a story," she said to John as he leaned on the kitchen counter, drinking a cup of coffee.

John sighed. "Okay, but first tell me how many Advil I can take without killing myself because my hand hurts like hell."

"Start with 1000mg, which is five. Do you have any or do I need to go get some from the lab? And you ought to

eat something, too." Cecelia pointed in the general direction of the refrigerator.

"In my desk. Drugs first, story second." He walked into his office and came back with a bottle and then stared at the stupid childproof lid and the cast that covered his hand, wrist and outer two fingers. "Oh... Well, shit."

Cecelia laughed at him and took the bottle from his hand to open it. She handed him the tablets and he gulped them down with a swig of coffee.

"Hey, Evan, help me out with the background details, okay?" he said.

Evan walked toward them. He poured his own cup and leaned on the counter beside John. John hung an arm around Evan's shoulders. It was as much to reassure Evan that he was coping as it was support for himself. Together they told her what they knew of Gabrielle and the abusive boyfriend, with John giving the details of the incident from the night before.

"That's not the whole story," she said pointedly.

"No, I guess it's not," admitted John. "She's a telepath for Division P. You read my CV. They tried to recruit me, but I wasn't exactly a cooperative pupil and we parted ways. Anyway, that part's complicated. Last night... all I can think of to describe it is like having all your skin ripped off. Certain types of trauma tend to disintegrate a psi's defenses. The more gifted the psi, the harder it is to patch them back together."

Cecelia cocked her head and gave John a long searching

look. "So, *is* she okay? Her psi stuff?"

"Passable, barely," said John.

"Is she still sleeping?"

"Yeah, or at least she was as of half an hour ago." He picked up the Advil bottle off the counter. "Can I give her five of these things too? Or should it be less, since she doesn't weigh as much as me?"

"I'll give you some Vicodin for her. She has more broken bones than you."

"Oh, no, bad idea."

"Is she allergic?"

"No, just narcotics and psi. Stuff like that tends to wreck your defenses and hers are in bad, bad shape. I know she takes stuff like that for migraines. But right now... Just, no." John had never really discussed in depth the whole ups and downs of psychic shielding with Cecelia.

"Okay, give her four. I'll try to dig up some other non-narcotic stuff if that doesn't cut it."

John looked back down at the bottle in his hand. Cecelia, by habit, had put the lid back on.

"This is going to drive me crazy!" he groaned.

"I've got a solution," said Evan. He took the bottle out of John's hand and dug a Leatherman out of his pocket. He used it to crack the top child-proofing portion off the lid,

leaving only the liner part on the bottle cap. "Problem solved." He handed it back to John.

"Well, damn. I guess that works."

When Gabrielle woke again, she was alone in the bed and she sat up slowly. In the daylight, she glanced around the room. This wasn't her bedroom, and she wasn't entirely sure where she was. John had been with her, hadn't he? Or was that a dream? She was lying in a queen-sized bed, covered by a navy blue blanket. The bedroom held the standard furniture, dresser, chest of drawers, night table all in dark wood. There was a stack of books on the night stand. A cell phone lay tossed on the top of the dresser along with a handful of change and a set of keys. She tried to stretch a little.

Everything hurt. Memories of the previous night flooded her brain -- firing her gun at Tom, knowing that in his rage, he truly intended to kill her and John, too. There was a small sound, soft footsteps. Where was she? Was that Tom? Had he come back? Was he hunting her down? Would he finish the job? She made a mad scramble toward the headboard of the bed.

John came through the door carrying a cup of coffee, the bottle of Advil jammed in his pocket. He saw her frozen expression, as she sat huddled at the top of the bed, looking like she was ready to bolt. She relaxed marginally as recognition lit her eyes. All he wanted to do was comfort her. He set the coffee cup on the bedside

table and crawled onto the bed, putting a careful arm around her shoulders.

"It's okay. You're safe. He can't get to you here," he said softly.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"My place, in the SIS building, top floor. You don't remember much of last night, do you?"

She shook her head slightly. "You... were here, holding me, sleeping beside me. I was in your head. I didn't mean to... after Tom... and then he..." She stared down at the blankets.

"Hey, it's fine. I have nothing to hide from you. I brought you here so my staff doctor, Cecelia, could take care of you. I knew better than to take you to a hospital for anything less than absolutely life-threatening injuries. Too many people would touch you. And there's no way you would've been able to handle that," he said.

She swallowed hard and leaned against him.

"Evan's digging up the paperwork to press charges. You will press charges, won't you?" he asked softly.

She nodded just a little, against his shoulder.

"And then we'll get a restraining order. In the mean time, you're in protective custody. Nowhere outside this building without one of the team. Okay?" His mouth brushed along her forehead. He could feel the brittle tension of her body and the barely stable shielding of her

mind. He threaded his fingers up through the back of her hair, tipping her head back to look down into her face. "I brought you a caffeine fix, and some drugs," he said.

She smiled a little and accepted the cup he handed her.

Gabrielle took a shower in John's bathroom. That was not an easy task, trying to keep her cast dry. She had only the blood spattered and crumpled clothing from the night before. She was inches taller than Cecelia, so couldn't borrow anything from her that would really remotely fit. John had handed her some of his clothes, a button down shirt and a pair of sweats. She rolled up the sleeves and the cuffs to approximate a fit.

Feeling a little closer to sane, she went down to the main level, empty coffee cup in hand. Evan was putzing away on some paperwork at his desk. He nodded in her direction. Cecelia came into the big open room from the stairwell door moments later.

"You seem better," said Cecelia. "Mind if I take a look at your arm?"

Brie nodded acknowledgement and Cecelia motioned her toward the sofa jammed against the far wall near the kitchen.

"I'm glad to see you seem to be aware of everything this morning. Last night... You worried me."

Gabrielle sat on the edge of the sofa and let the doctor have a quick look at her arm and other damage.

"Did John give you the Advil?" Cecelia asked. Brie nodded. "Did it help?"

"I'm fine," Gabrielle whispered. She hadn't minded being close to the doctor, until the woman touched her. At the moment, that was just too much. Gabrielle steeled herself to remain still for the next couple of minutes that Cecelia needed to finish checking her out.

"I'll find a sling for your arm and bring it up to you," Cecelia said before departing toward her lab.

John came out of his office and sat down on the coffee table facing her and laid a hand on her leg. That touch was so much more welcome.

"I'm going to send Evan to get some clothes from your house. He'll arrange for the window to get repaired, too, and the door I broke. Anything specific you need?" he asked.

"Not immediately. I need to call work though."

"Already done. They have been notified that SIS is 'borrowing' you for a few days. Anything else?" She shook her head. He touched his cast to hers; they both had bright blue fiberglass. "We match," he said.

She had to laugh just a little, it was too ironic not to. He traced a fingertip down her nose, then got up and went back into his office.

Evan sat down on the sofa beside her and laid a set of papers on the coffee table. His presence was almost as

comfortable as John's and that mystified her. Perhaps it was merely because she had known him casually for months.

"Want some more?" he asked, gesturing at the cup. She shook her head. He then tapped the paperwork. "These are for requesting the restraining order and to file charges against Garner. All you have to do is sign them. I'll make sure they get delivered to the domestic violence unit's office," he said.

She gave him a solemn look and held out her hand for the pen, awkwardly signing with her left hand.

"I wish I had taken you up on your offer to help a few weeks ago." she said softly and laid the pen down.

"Hindsight and all that."

"You... John... I don't know what I'd do without friends like you."

"Anything you need. Let me know. I worry." He held out his hand, palm up. She laid her hand in his and he squeezed her fingers gently.

Chapter 7

Kinetics

Tuesday, June 19, 2007 -- Late Morning

Fiona Mills, IT whiz of SIS, jammed her thumb drive into her computer and began uploading photos and data from the case she and Todd had been working in Baltimore. Three children had disappeared, all from the same neighborhood. Rumors were that all three had last been seen on the property of a reputedly haunted house. She and Todd hadn't turned up any leads that seemed to make a definite connection, but neither had they found anything that went against the idea either.

Her desk faced the door to the stairwell and held more than the usual share of tech. A scanner, a printer, external drives for everything from floppies to zip disks, two monitors, and a dozen boxes for media storage all fought for space. Cecelia walked by, heading toward the kitchen.

"Hey, Fiona. I didn't know you were back. How was Baltimore?" Cecelia asked.

Fiona picked up a hair band off her desk and used it to pull her waist-length, flame red hair back into a ponytail. "Fine. Boring. Unhelpful. I heard there's been some stuff going on around here."

"You mean case-wise?"

"Yeah, I did, but Evan implied there was other stuff, too."

"There is. Where's Todd?"

"Down in the armory, where else? I wouldn't expect to see him for at least half an hour. I swear that man treats his guns like they're living things. Would you believe he took five different weapons with him on our jaunt over to Baltimore?"

"Deep doo doo has been going on around here," said Cecelia and proceeded to update Fiona about the events of the past few days.

When Gabrielle told John she wanted to study the files for the case they were sharing, he gave her a slightly dubious look, but decided perhaps it was for the best if she had something else to think about for a while. He carried a stack of folders up to the conference room for her and left her alone to peruse them while he went back to his office to deal with e-mail.

He was a little uncertain if a bit of solitude for her was a good thing or a bad one. She was obviously trying to give the illusion that her injuries were only physical. He fretted while trying to type an e-mail to a contact at Homeland. The presence of other people could be like sandpaper on sunburn, but she was holding it together by such a thread, he worried that she might shut down into that catatonic state again. There was no easy answer.

Brie paced the length of the conference room, reading data sheets as she walked. Suddenly there was a tiny light bulb of a maybe in her brain. Exothermic plus blood plus organic substances... there just might be a connection. She dropped the pages on the long table and hunted down Cecelia, asking if she could use the equipment in the SIS lab. Cecelia agreed and showed her where it was, including pointing out the location of certain supplies.

As Brie started prepping microscope slides, she decided the limited use of her right hand was infuriatingly annoying on top of the pain. She examined a piece of the nitrile glove remnants with the microscope, then spent a while waiting for the Gas Chromatograph Mass Spectrometer to spit out some info.

A dark-haired man she hadn't seen before poked his head into the lab, and spent a minute talking to Cecelia. Gabrielle did notice his final comment to the doctor was "What's she doing?" as pointed in Gabrielle's direction.

"Beats the hell out of me," was the reply.

An hour later Brie hit a sticking point in her investigation.

"I need allicillin," she told Cecelia.

"What for? That stuff's so weak it has very little antibiotic power."

"That's not the point. I'd settle for garlic."

"Try the kitchen. Every so often Evan gets in the

cooking mode... What am I *not* seeing here?" Cecelia mused to herself as Brie trudged back up the stairs toward the kitchen.

In a little while, she was back down in the lab again.

Cecelia had told John that Gabrielle was in the lab rather than the conference room where he'd originally left her. He was uncertain why she was down there, but it was as safe a place for her as any here in the building. She probably felt more comfortable in the semi-familiar surroundings of science.

In the lab, Brie was frowning at her samples. A line of Petri dishes sat on the counter in front of her, and the surrounding bench top was littered with flasks and pipettes... and garlic skins. She was sitting on a high stool, her broken wrist propped carefully in front of her.

John had questions for her. He leaned his chin on her shoulder and reached in front of her to lay her gun on the bench top. She jerked a little.

"Evan retrieved it from your house," he said. She was silent. "You're a scientist. Why do you have a 9 mm?" His hands lightly rested on her shoulders from the back.

"The FBI requires all personnel to be weapons qualified. Even though I'm on loan, I still have to comply," she said.

"You didn't look... uncomfortable with a gun in your hand. Well, given the situation."

She glanced back over her shoulder at him, her face unreadable. "Have you got ammo to fit?"

"Yes."

"I think I heard something about this place having a gun range."

"True. It's in the basement." He wasn't sure where she was going with this idea.

"Then let's go."

John was wearing ear protection and safety glasses, as was Brie. She was loading her gun in silence, with some obvious difficulty given the broken wrist.

"Gabrielle, is there a point to all this?"

"Yes." Her tone was sharp.

She pushed the button to send the target to the far end of the tunnel, some seventy-five feet away. Standing sideways with her eyes closed, her gun hanging at her side, she took a deep breath and raised her left arm. Her eyes opened and she squeezed off the entire magazine in succession, then she laid the gun down on the table and pushed the button to bring the target back. As it drew close, it became apparent that there was a frowny face perforating the head of the target. John's mouth dropped open.

"Do not assume that because I had a violent relationship with him that I don't have the skills to make him very, very dead," she said. She laid the glasses and earphones on the table and walked out of the gun range. He stood for a long moment staring at the target then chased after her.

She had walked back to the lab and was cleaning up some of her sample prep mess. John laid a hand on the back of her neck, his thumb stroking a path along her hair line. He could still feel the absolutely brittle texture of her shielding.

"Remind me not to piss you off," he said. A rueful half-smile curved one side of her lips. "I'm a pretty decent shot, I'm not sure I could do that, especially with my left hand."

"It's a... concentration thing. I think it's a side effect from spending too much time inside other people's heads," she replied.

He turned her around and looked down into her eyes, his hand cupping around the side of her neck and his thumb traced along her jaw. The left side of her face was deeply bruised, especially along her cheek and eye, but the swelling had receded some. He dipped his head toward hers and kissed her very softly, trying to make sure he didn't hurt her bruised mouth. He felt her mind brush ever so lightly across his own. There were hints of anger, though not at him, and pain. The whole event down in the firing range had ramped up her discomfort level again.

"You need more Advil or something. I'll go hunt for

Cecelia." He slowly walked away, emotions churning through him.

Why did he feel this way about her? Insanely protective. He had never felt that way about Liz, his ex, but then again, she had never been in any real danger. Loan officer wasn't a real high-risk job. Liz was a tall, leggy blonde, cover-girl beautiful, and very good in bed. That had been part of the problem; because that had been just about the sum total of their relationship -- screw each other senseless, end of story. Cecelia had accused him of thinking with his dick. In retrospect, she hadn't been wrong. He couldn't talk to Liz about work, only partly due to security issues. And she volleyed between angst and fury at his erratic schedule. And her jealousy... that had led to more than one screaming match. Looking back, he supposed he really hadn't been surprised to find out she was boffing some second string football player while he was out chasing a vengeful poltergeist.

That brought his thoughts back around to Brie. She was pretty but not beautiful, and that had so very little to do with it. She was brilliant. Liz had been average at the best of times, and stereotypical dumb blonde at the worst. He couldn't even imagine her with a gun in her hand, much less knowing how to use it. Touching Gabrielle was like... honey, like silk, like cold iron. The feel of her mind in his... He felt confused.

That line of thought was not being exactly helpful. Focus on the task. Go search for Cecelia.

In the main workroom, John leaned against Todd's desk,

discussing the Baltimore case. There were a few loose ends to check but nothing had shown any distinct indications that forces other than the normal depressingly awful signs of child abduction and probably murder were at work.

"We left the digital recorders on in the house for a full twenty-four hours, hoping for some EVP or even something mundane. Nothing," said Todd. Electronic recording media was sometimes capable of picking up sounds or voices that appeared to be communications from the "other side." It was one of those far fringe radical ideas that were pretty universally discounted by the public. SIS used any and every means they could lay their hands on when it came to unraveling the cases they got involved in.

John rubbed a hand across his face. Todd was in front of him, Fiona was at her desk with Rich. Cecelia had passed through on her way to her lab to talk to Gabrielle. There were too many people and it was grating on his nerves. He had spent too many hours with his shielding either down or lowered in intensity, trying to provide support for Brie. It was like having multiple radio stations turned on at the same time. Someone touched his shoulder. Startled, he slammed his shielding up hard and fast, his body jerking a little. It was the psychic equivalent of a slap. Belatedly, he noticed it was Evan who had touched him. Evan gave him an odd scrutinizing look, and John brushed his fingers lightly against Evan's chest in apology.

"Are we all doing dinner here or is everyone bailing out around five?" Evan asked.

"I've got dinner plans unless there's a crisis brewing," said Todd.

"I think we're still in analysis mode for the time being with this animal case thing. We'll knock off at a normal time," replied John.

Tuesday Evening

It was time to face the music so to speak, John decided as he walked toward Evan's desk. He made a hand motion, beckoning Evan to follow him, and they went down two flights of stairs to the basement firing range. John shut the door and locked it.

"We need to talk," John said.

Evan was leaning on the wall, hand in his pockets.
"About?"

"Us. Gabrielle. What's happening. And I really am sorry about earlier," John said. He felt like he was fumbling for a way to explain.

"She's injured. Floundering, trying to cope..." said Evan.

"That's not what I mean! I'm spending time inside her head. It's like sex only more so. You're not headblind, you know that!" John snapped.

"And?" said Evan.

His reply was calm and John couldn't figure out why. "I

wanna know why you're not pissed as hell at me!
Especially after I practically backhanded you for
touching me upstairs earlier!"

"Should I be?" asked Evan.

"I know we don't usually talk about this sort of stuff. But after you got shot, I said I was interested in pursuing something with you. Now here I am, tearing my hair out trying put Gabrielle back together, trying to keep her safe, trying to keep her sane! And you're just watching!" John knew his voice was getting louder and he was pacing.

"Do you still care about me?" said Evan.

"Yes, of course!"

"Then there's no problem."

"Evan, you are making me crazy! Why aren't you screaming at me? Why aren't you telling me to fuck off! Get lost!"

"Like Liz?" asked Evan.

Oh God, that brought back bitter memories of his ex, thought John. "Well, yeah."

"Come here," said Evan. John walked toward him. Evan took hold of his hand and pulled him tight against Evan's body. "Calm down," he whispered. "You cannot ground for her if you're about to fly apart."

John leaned into the embrace, head resting on Evan's

shoulder, an arm around his waist. The emotions flowing from Evan were mostly calm and controlled and caring. Evan spoke softly against his temple. "I was raised Pagan. You know that. You met my parents, who have absolutely no problems with the idea of you and me. They belong to a Coven. A very tightly knit group. Most people don't care about just one person. I have four sisters. You don't ask parents to love only one child when they have five. You love them all, probably for different reasons, but you love them all. Do you really think I'm going to up and ditch you after all we've been through? When someone else needs you as badly as Gabrielle does, you need more support, not less."

"I am never gonna figure you out," John said.

Evan laughed just a little. John's arms wound tighter around his lover's body, letting Evan's steady presence lull him into some semblance of serenity.

It was late, past midnight. Brie was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the conference room, piles of papers surrounding her. John stood in the doorway and watched her. She looked absolutely exhausted, and she was still in the clothes he had loaned her fairly early that morning. Her broken wrist lay in her lap and she was awkwardly scribbling something with her left handed on one of the sheets. He walked in and sat down on the floor, facing her.

"You could probably con Fiona into making you a spreadsheet," he said.

"It wouldn't help," she replied.

"Why?"

"My brain doesn't work that way. Call it a tactile response if you like. If I shuffle paper around, scribble stuff down, my brain sees the connections. Parallel processing or whatever."

"You should probably get some sleep. You look really tired," he said.

She glanced up at him and then scribbled something else down. "Are you going to give me a lift home?" she asked.

"No. I don't want you anywhere near that place for at least seventy-two hours. We talked about this earlier. The restraining order hasn't gone through yet. You can sleep in my bed or you can use one of the ones in the bunk room."

"Last night..." Her words trailed off and she went silent.

"You were in shock. Today, you're burying yourself in work, trying to avoid your emotions. It's going to catch up to you, in a big way. You need some rest. If you need someone to ground to, it can be me. I could even suggest Evan. Or, you can sleep alone if you're more comfortable."

She considered him. There was a flicker of something in her expression. Need, maybe just pain. He could almost see her lock it away.

"Talk to me, Gabrielle," he begged. She shook her head. "Then at least come get some rest."

He sighed and got up, pulling her to her feet and guided her up the stairs to the bunk room. She sat on the bed, one arm around her knees while he stood with his hand on the door knob to leave.

"Try to get some sleep, please," he said and started to pull the door shut.

"Don't go," she whispered, almost inaudibly. He hesitated. She looked up at him. "I want... you to touch me... Even if it's just holding my hand," she said.

He sat on the bed beside her and took her hand in his. "Will it help?" he asked. He felt a faint hint of her inside his head. It felt raw, damaged. She was losing some of the composure she'd had earlier in the day.

"Maybe. Please," she whispered, and he wondered if she was about to cry.

"My bed is a whole lot bigger," he said.

She followed him up the stairs, her hand still in his. In his bedroom, he stood in front of her and held open his arms. She leaned against him, her face pressed into his shoulder. He could tell she was just barely holding herself together at this point. There was a hint of her aching need to feel skin on skin, to connect to him, and try to put her battered Talents in some kind of order. The sheer intensity of the chaos coming from her was nearly overwhelming, and he drew a breath and held it for a moment, steadying his own mind. He started

unbuttoning his shirt, an awkward motion with the cast on his hand. She was motionless. He pulled off his shirt and T-shirt, letting them fall to the floor. His fingers touched the buttons on the shirt she was wearing.

"Usually if I'm undoing the buttons on this shirt, I'm the one wearing it," he teased her very gently. She giggled a little, but there was a sharp edge to it. She took his hand and placed his fingers around the first button. He undid them very slowly; pulling the shirt tail loose from the pants before easing it back off her shoulders. He could see the bruises on her back, beginning along her shoulder blade and continuing down one side of her spine, disappearing inside the waist band of the pants.

"Yes, they go farther down my hip, halfway down my leg," she murmured at the unspoken question.

His hands paused. He wanted to pull her into his lap but was afraid it would hurt her too much, so instead he stretched out on the bed and pulled her gently against him. Her arm slid around him and she practically melted against his chest. His arms were around her, one hand on her hip.

He could tell she was drowning herself in his touch, using his presence to give her a sense of stillness and safety. As her breath fluttered on his collarbone, her mind was an intensely intimate softness along his, and she let go of what few shields she had in place. Fear lingered in the background like heat lightning, the weight of memories, tightly shut down.

Oh God, it was never like this. She said as she drew a breath in. Gabrielle twisted just a little, pressing the

length of her torso to his, and he noticed a spasm of pain zinged through her arm. She jerked and he felt her compartmentalize and shut that sensation into the background.

You do that way, way too easily, he said.

Too much practice. The exhaustion was overcoming her as she nestled in his arms, and she began to shut down into sleep.

Chapter 8

Phase Transitions

Wednesday, June 20, 2007

Early morning chaos. A phone call had pulled John out of bed at 5:45 a.m. Another body had been found that might fit the profile they were tracking. It was in Rockville. Being across the state line into Maryland was going to cause a whole batch more of jurisdictional issues that he so did not feel up to dealing with.

He called Cecelia, Fiona, and Todd, telling them to meet him at the scene. Brie stumbled sleepily into the den of his apartment, where he was yanking on clothes while he talked to Evan on his cell.

"Yeah, listen I'm sure it's gonna take quite a bit of time. Do that first, then come on out. 'Kay. Bye." He glanced at Gabrielle and tossed his cell on the sofa.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"A body. It might fit the pattern we're following. Throat ripped apart and all."

"Give me a few minutes to get dressed."

"No."

She appeared annoyed. John took her hand and pulled her gently to stand in front of him. His hands cupped around her face as he looked down into her eyes.

"Gabrielle, there's no way you can handle my people,

plus probably six or eight Maryland state cops plus another half dozen forensics techs in a heavy equipment rental lot at six in the morning," he said. He brushed his thumb along her temple and deliberately drew up all his psychic defenses, walling her out. She flinched. "Evan has people coming to replace the window in your house and the door. I paged Rich. He'll be here in half an hour. All of this building's doors are magnetically locked and thumbprint coded. No one but the team can get in. You'll be safe. Go back to bed. I'll call you in a few hours. I gotta go." He kissed her gently, grabbed his sneakers up off the floor, and headed for the door to the stairs.

The body had been dead for days. It was the smell that had alerted someone to its presence. Greenbelt Construction Rentals leased out bulldozers, cherry-pickers, backhoes, and a variety of other large pieces of equipment. They parked all their equipment in a graveled lot surrounded by an eight-foot chain link fence. One of their cherry-pickers had been sitting in the back corner of the lot for a few days. At five a.m. one of the employees had been sent to inspect it prior to a rental pickup that was supposed to occur at six a.m. The intensely awful smell emanating from the bucket had inspired the employee to have a look. He had expected to possibly find a dead rat or bird. He had been thoroughly unprepared to find a human body.

At six-thirty the sun was just beginning to truly warm up the air. There was a still closeness to the morning that hinted at one of those nasty, stagnant days that led to air quality warnings on the beltway. Todd stood balanced on the lip of the bucket, taking photographs down into

the opening. The body of a young black woman was piled in the bottom. She wore a green spaghetti strap dress, now liberally splattered with dried blood. Her throat had been torn apart as well as one arm. The blowflies were merrily crawling all over the open wounds and, to a lesser degree, on the rest of the body. Fiona held up a hand, so Todd could hand her the camera before he jumped down. The smell about gagged her.

John was talking to one of the Maryland state police officers while they waited on the forensics people to be done and the ambulance to show for transport. Cecelia took samples of dried blood and tissue much to the annoyance of the local forensics techs.

Fiona noticed that the drive-thru ATM on the far side of the rental lot actually faced in the direction where the body lay. She started making phone calls to see who could get her access to the ATM's camera logs. Anything to get away from the smell.

Gabrielle was sitting in Cecelia's lab examining microscope slides that she hadn't gotten to the previous day, and thinking about some things she really wanted from her house. Evan had brought her some clothes, undies, bras, a couple of T-shirts, jeans, and a nightshirt. The jeans were annoyingly difficult to do up with her cast. She really wanted some makeup too, in the hopes of appearing less... well, like death warmed over. And there was a cell biology textbook that she wanted to look something up in.

Rich was a bit dubious about taking Gabrielle back to her house when she asked. He knew full well John would chew him up and spit him out if anything happened to Dr. Dichenz, as such were the nature of the instructions he had been left. But, she pointed out, if he took her and simply hung out in the house with her for the half hour or so it would take, she wouldn't be in any danger.

At Gabrielle's house, three guys were installing a replacement window in her kitchen and two more men were repairing the front door. Evan was on his cell in the front hall, pacing while he talked and keeping an overall eye on the proceedings. He was rather stunned when Rich walked in with Gabrielle.

"She said she needed some stuff from home. As long as one of us is around, I figured it was safe," Rich blurted out.

"Hey, I'm not invisible!" snapped Brie.

"I wasn't expecting you," replied Evan. "But it should be fine." He gazed at her, thinking she looked both annoyed and tense. As she strode off in the direction of the library, Rich sat on the stairs.

"Don't look at me like that. John said 'Keep her safe. Know where she is at all times, but don't hover, it's gonna wig her out.' He didn't say keep her in the building," Rich said.

"It just... I don't know. This just doesn't seem like a brilliant plan." Evan felt rather doubtful about the idea.

"She said she needed make-up and a book and some specific stuff. I'm married. You're not. Believe me, even if she gives you a list of stuff to get, you will get the wrong thing or there'll be something that was just supposed to be understood that if you get this, you have to get that, too."

Evan grinned a little. "You and Trina. I will never figure out why you're still married."

"I love her, but God, sometimes I could just strangle her."

Gabrielle sat on the floor of her library with a textbook in her lap. Some people had dining rooms. She had a library; after all, with a couple thousand books, she had to store them someplace. The walls were lined with bookshelves. Some held paperbacks stacked sideways to maximize storage space; others held textbooks and hardbacks. There were a couple of scattered photos. A cheap oriental-style carpet was on the floor. A handful of ceramic dragons lined one top shelf.

She was searching for a reference to the mechanism of bacterial cell envelope degradation. The sounds of the workmen and the sheer background static of extra and unfamiliar people were grating against her psychic shielding, not unlike fingernails on a chalkboard. She shut the text, grabbed another one, and headed for the

stairs, balancing the books on her hip with one arm. She'd spend time hunting for the exact information later.

Evan and Rich were talking in the hall and they looked at her as she started for the stairs.

"Find what you were looking for?" Rich asked.

"Partly."

"I'll take those for you," Evan said, holding out his hands for the books. She handed them to him.

"How long is it going to take for the repairs?" she asked.

"A couple of hours, but the locksmith can't do his thing until day after tomorrow.

So as long as you're here anyway, get stuff for a couple more days," Evan stated.

Brie nodded and headed up the steps. It was marginally quieter in the master bedroom. She grabbed her gym bag off the floor, dumped the contents into the hamper and set about pulling out clothes she wanted. The pounding of a hammer startled her and she yanked on the drawer handle too hard. The entire drawer pulled out too far and tipped off its track. It dangled halfway out at an angle, dumping a couple of shirts onto the floor. Great, just great. She'd probably have to get one of the guys to put it back in for her, because with the cast she probably wasn't going to be able to get enough leverage.

She reached into the drawer to get a camisole she wanted. Where was the little artist manikin that was usually kept in the same place? Tom had given her a ten

inch tall, poseable wooden artist manikin for her birthday, because she had said she was thinking of taking an art class. There was that whole trying to get in touch with the more creative side idea. She used to keep it on the dresser top but it kept tipping over so she had put it in a drawer -- with the Ken doll he had later bought. Tom used to leave it and the manikin in lewd suggestive positions in different places around her bedroom. It had become a running joke between her and Tom. The Ken doll wasn't there either. She'd hunt for it some other time.

In the bathroom, she gathered up makeup and her hairbrush and headed back out to dump them in the gym bag. Halfway through the door, something on the bed caught her eye. Her bedspread was a subdued pattern of deep green leaves on a lighter green background. There was a small pile of something in the center. She stepped closer.

The little wooden manikin had been dismembered, each articulated joint broken and the pieces separated. The pieces were piled together and the Ken doll sat at an angle on top of the pile. She froze, scarcely able to draw a breath.

Downstairs, Evan was still talking with Rich. They were discussing the cordless nail gun one of the window repair guys had walked by with. Suddenly Evan's empathic Talent was aware of fear, naked abject terror. Gabrielle. He bolted up the stairs with Rich about two steps behind him. The first room he looked in was empty. In the next room, Evan found Brie standing near

the foot of her bed, eyes wide, trembling slightly, but otherwise looking unharmed.

"Brie?" he said. Fear was still flowing from her like water. He said her name again. There was still no response. He stood in front of her and touched his fingers to her cheek. She jerked and stumbled back a couple of steps, suddenly gasping for breath. "What happened? Are you okay?" he demanded.

Gabrielle held up a hand, fingers splayed indicating she needed a moment. She backed up against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor, her butt against her heels, and the palm of her hand to her forehead.

"Do I need to call the paramedics?" demanded Rich. Evan got a full head slap of Rich's panic on top of everything else.

"No, no, just... go back downstairs. Make sure none of the workmen come up here," replied Evan, pushing Rich toward the doorway. Rich gave him an uncertain look, and then departed. Evan dropped to his knees in front of her.

"I'm okay." She whispered. "Just rattled."

Evan held out his hand to her, palm up. She took it slowly, still teetering on the edge of hysteria, her fingernails digging into his skin. Her eyes closed and she drew a shaky breath. He could feel her attempting to calm herself, her shielding next to nonexistent.

"You can ground to me. John often does. I'm used to it," he said softly. She shook her head, but didn't release his

hand. "Tell me what happened."

"Look on the bed. There's a doll." Her eyes opened.

"Yeah."

"Underneath it there's pile of broken wooden stuff."

"Okay," he said patiently.

"It used to be this little artist's manikin. Tom bought it for me. The Ken doll represents him." She swallowed hard.

"And the manikin is shattered," Evan offered.

"He broke it. He left it for me to find."

"A statement."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Have you got everything you need?"

"I guess." She was still thoroughly rattled.

"I think you need to get out of here." He helped her to her feet, noting that her fingernails were still practically embedded in his hand. "Gabrielle, it's okay. You're safe. I'm here. Rich is here. Tom can't get to you." She nodded vaguely. He reached to pick up the gym bag of clothes and the hammering started up again. Brie flung her arms around his neck in startled panic.

"Shh, it's okay. Calm down," Evan murmured against

her hair as he held her tightly, feeling her heart thudding hard and fast. He dropped all his shielding and offered a spot of comparative tranquility in his head hoping the fact that he was worried about her wouldn't defeat his attempt to ground her. His concern probably paled though in comparison to her fright. Evan took a slow breath and willed her to reach for the stillness within him. If it had been John in his arms, Evan would have kissed him, but as right as it felt to comfort Brie, Evan thought she was too vulnerable to offer that sort of solace.

It took her several minutes before she calmed enough to ease her near strangle hold.

"Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't apologize. It's going to take you awhile to get everything back together. Come on, downstairs," Evan suggested.

"I dropped my makeup case."

"Got it."

Rich seemed anxious as they came down the stairs. Gabrielle was clutching Evan's hand, still looking very spooked.

"So, what's the deal? Is she gonna be all right?" Rich asked.

"Tom Garner left her a... threat. Tell you about it later. Listen, we need to trade. You hang out here 'til the workmen are done. I'll take Brie back to the office,"

Evan said. Rich nodded and handed Evan the textbooks that were sitting on a step.

Evan guided Gabrielle out to his car, tossing the bags and the books into the back seat as he climbed into the driver's seat. When he glanced at Brie as he started the car, she looked a little bit calmer, no longer fighting the edge of outright hysteria. As Evan pulled the car away from the curb, his cell phone rang.

"Hey, Evan, where are you? I thought you were going to be out here at the scene before noon. And it's quarter 'til," said John.

"Sorry, change in plans. I'm halfway back to the office with Brie," Evan said.

"What? Why isn't she still in the building?" John demanded. Evan could hear the anger in his tone.

"She had Rich bring her by her house to get some clothes and stuff. Something happened."

"Is she okay?!" John asked.

"Yeah, more or less."

"What the fuck do you mean by more or less!? So help me I'm gonna kill Rich!"

"Garner left her a... token."

"A token? Like what? Dead cat or something?"

"No, no, nothing that grotesque. Something symbolic.

He broke a little artist's manikin of hers into pieces. She's... just kind of shaken up." He heard John make a growling noise over the phone, followed by a long string of muttered obscenities.

"Let me talk to her," said John, and Evan handed the phone to Gabrielle.

In the seconds that it took for Gabrielle to take the phone, John attempted to convince himself that as long as she was physically safe, anything else could be dealt with.

"Be honest, Brie, are you okay?" John asked.

"I'll live," she replied.

"Damn it, that's not what I asked!"

"It frightened me. I panicked. Evan noticed. If he hadn't been there... I understand why you ground to him. He's good at it. He held me for a while, so I could pull myself together." Her words sort of tumbled out, stream of consciousness.

"I, um. Good. Go back to the office. *Stay there*. I'll be back as soon as I'm done here. Give me back to Evan."

"You still want me out there at the scene?" asked Evan.

"No. Stay with her. Where the hell is Rich now?"

"Brie's house, waiting for the workmen to be done. We

swapped."

"Okay. I'll call him, and tell *him* to get his ass out here. And Evan?" John said.

"Yeah?"

"Take care of her. She still sounds... well, not quite with it."

"I will," Evan assured him.

John stared at the phone in his hand for a moment, while he leaned back against the chain link fence surrounding the rental lot. The body was being loaded into the ambulance. Forensic people were still combing the area. Why did he find it disconcerting to envision Gabrielle in Evan's arms? God knew, he'd spent enough time there. She was right. Evan was very good at holding him together mentally, psychically. But doing so also carried with it a certain level of intimacy. Okay, he needed to get off this track of thought right now. If Evan had no problems with him and Brie, he needed to be equally fair. Time to call Rich and chew his ass but good.

It was mid-afternoon by the time John and the rest of the team made it back to the office. John found it hard not to take the stairs two at a time to go find Gabrielle. If Evan had found things beyond his ability to handle he would have called, or so John told himself.

As he came up out of the stairwell onto the main floor, on the far side he saw Brie curled sideways on the sofa

outside his office, knees drawn up, arms pulled defensively in toward her chest, eyes closed, a not quite fetal position. His heart practically froze in his chest. He started to lunge toward her, but was grabbed from behind. John whirled, fist drawn back, ready to punch whoever had grabbed him. It was Evan. Rethinking just a little, John shoved Evan back hard against the wall, cast-bound forearm pinned across his throat, fist balled in the front of Evan's shirt.

"What happened?! Why didn't you call me?" he snarled. Evan grabbed John's wrist and slammed his opposite palm up against the elbow on his shoulder, twisting John's body and slamming him face first into the wall. Evan held him, one arm locked behind him, his hand clenched in John's hair, immobilizing him.

"Back off! She's fine!" snapped Evan. John jerked, trying to twist free and Evan put a knee into John's back. Fuck, this wasn't the first time he'd had to physically restrain his partner in a rage. "Chill!" Evan waited until he felt some of the tension go out of John's muscles. "You do that to me again, and next time I won't be nice!" As Evan let go, John turned around to face him, slowly, trying to flex the fingers protruding from the cast. He glared at Evan for a moment then closed his eyes. Evan could feel him trying to will his temper to calm.

"Why's she asleep? She looks..." John's voice trailed off.

"When we got back from the house, she started reading stuff in her textbooks, which seemed fine. Then she

started pacing. I could tell she was still kind of wired from what happened at the house. I fixed her some lunch, and yes, she did actually eat some of it. But she started looking just absolutely exhausted and she was still wigged out. I tried to convince her to go upstairs and go to sleep, but she wasn't having any of it. Christ, John, she's worse than you at grounding when she's upset! So I held her for a while, let her use me. She's fine. I have no idea why she's all curled up like that. Maybe it's habit. So just leave her sleep, okay?"

John drew a deep breath and let it out. "So where were you when I came in?" he asked.

"Bathroom."

"Oh." John shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned his head back on the wall. "It's been a really shitty week."

The sheer exasperated frustration from John inspired a little sympathy from Evan, and he kissed his lover. By the passionate response from John, Evan surmised it was a welcome gesture.

Conversation and footsteps from the returning SIS team wrenched Gabrielle out of sleep. She sat up blearily on the sofa and glanced at the clock on the wall. About forty minutes had elapsed since she'd lain down on the sofa. The nap had helped a little but not really enough; her body was still trying to play catch-up.

John was standing behind Fiona as she sat at her desk,

peering over his tech's shoulder at one of the computer screens. She was pointing out to him a partial view of a heavy equipment lot.

"I wish the ATM camera had had a better angle, but I guess I should be happy we've got any footage at all," said Fiona.

John nodded, and then he glanced over his shoulder at Gabrielle. She supposed he had noticed that she was vertical now.

"If you find anything that looks promising, see what you can do to get a decent image," he said to Fiona and left her to it. He crossed the room to Gabrielle. She was wiggling the fingers that stuck out of her cast. Maybe the swelling was changing inside the damn thing again because the pressure and discomfort seemed to be in a new spot. John squatted down in front of her.

"Why don't we go upstairs and hunt down the bottle of Advil?" he said.

She gazed at him. At the moment she had her battered shielding drawn up as tight as it would go. That seemed to translate to about half of what she was normally capable of and that was just one more source of frustration. Brie watched his eyes rake down over her. There was concern on his face, except that was too light a word. He stood up and held out a hand to her. She took it and let him lead her toward the stairs, grateful for an excuse to get away from the extra people.

John watched the stiff motion of Gabrielle's movements, all too familiar with that "everything aches worse about twenty four hours later" concept. If only he could take away her pain... He found himself wanting to choke the living shit out of Garner all over again.

In his quarters, John retrieved the bottle from the bathroom and handed some of the tablets to her along with a glass of water. She paused in her wander around the room to wolf down the drugs and handed him the glass.

"Talk to me, Gabrielle. Tell me what happened," he prompted. She softly told him of the broken doll in her house as she paced. He could only guess the restless movement was a way of diffusing her stress.

"It's okay. It shouldn't have freaked me out so much. It's just a thing..." she finished.

"Which he knew damn well would upset you. The locks'll be changed in a couple of days, but even then I'm not wildly thrilled about you staying there alone."

"It's my house. I live there. Anyway, he's just trying to frighten me. He likes to feel in control," she said.

"Brie, he beat the crap out of you, broke your arm, cracked a bone in your face, bloodied your mouth, and that was just this time!" John growled.

She stopped pacing for a moment and faced him. "Okay, okay, I know. I signed the paperwork to press charges. End of story. It's done," she snapped.

"I doubt it. I think he's a sadistic bastard," John replied.

"He's... maybe..." She looked frustrated. "What do you want from me? An admission of stupidity? Fine! I was stupid and I paid for it! I was willing to trade a little pain for the ability to actually touch someone! You try existing like that for a while and see just exactly what you're willing to sacrifice!" She was yelling by this point.

"Would you die for a touch?" John demanded.

"No, of course not!"

"Because he would kill you."

"Says you!" she yelled.

"Gabrielle, I want you safe. I want you alive. And sane would be nice, too."

"Oh yeah, and that's why you poked the snake with a stick in his office!" she shouted.

John flinched at little at the sharpness of her anger. That had been a serious miscalculation on his part, and he decided he'd better own up and try to deal with it. "I'm sorry. I thought if Garner was aware that somebody knew what he'd been doing to you, that he'd back off, at least for a while."

"Oh yeah, that was just a fucking brilliant plan," she muttered.

"Yes, I fucked up, but if my confrontation with him

hadn't been the fuse that lit the dynamite, it would have been something else."

Gabrielle glared at him for a moment then her gaze fell to the floor. "Yeah, you could be right. Why does it matter to you so much?"

John gazed at her for a long moment. "Because you need *someone*. Because I care. And I won't lie, I'm attracted to you. If that's not what you want, that's okay. You still need someone to help put you back together, and unless I'm very mistaken there isn't anyone else."

Brie stopped pacing and stared out the window. On the street below, traffic was building toward rush hour. Leaning her forehead on the window, she struggled against rage and the burn of unshed tears in her eyes. Brie felt John's hands on her shoulders and she wanted to slap him for making her face her mistakes, but instead she found herself shaking, uncertain if it was anger or fear. He turned her, cradling her face in his hands and kissed her very softly. His lips against hers, his mouth was open and his tongue parted her lips. She gasped at the intensity as he explored the inside of her mouth with his tongue. He was so gentle and she was submerged in a very careful passion. He lifted his head and looked down into her face.

"Was he ever gentle?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

Thursday, June 21, 2007

John walked into the bathroom, naked except for a towel tucked around his waist, intent on a shower. He found Brie was standing in front of the mirror, a make-up sponge in her hand, wearing only undies and a bra. He stopped dead, scanning the entire length of bruises down her back, past her waist, nearly to her knee. Her body was long and lean in a way he'd not realized, in a way that suggested a lot of gym time. She saw him in the mirror and froze.

"Sorry, I thought you were already downstairs," he said, not having intended to intrude like this.

"I... this is taking longer than I thought it would." The look she gave him in the reflection had a hint of amusement in it.

He stepped behind her and nuzzled his face into the side her neck. "You smell like my shampoo."

"Which is damnably hard to get out of the bottle with one hand," she said. There was a wry smile on her face and her mood appeared to be a bit lighter than the previous few days.

"You should have asked for help," he teased. John brushed his mouth across a spot just below her ear. Her head tipped back and she gulped in a breath as he slid his arm around her waist and nibbled on the side of her neck. His tongue traced a little path and he leaned against her just a little. Being this close, with her more together and less vulnerable than the previous day was a

serious engine rev. He was pretty sure she could feel the hardness of his erection pressing into the back of her hip, because she suddenly blushed furiously.

"I let you muck around inside my head, how can you be so embarrassed by the fact I'm turned on?" he whispered. She stared down at the sink, her hand braced on the counter. He laughed, dropped his towel on the floor and got in the shower.

When he got out, she was gone, all her make-up neatly stowed in a single bag.

Chapter 9

Precipitation

Thursday, June 21, 2007

Showered, dressed and makeup on, Brie went hunting for Evan. She found him in the garage, busy unloading the back of one of the H2s.

"Are you busy?" she asked.

"For a few more minutes. It's my turn at stocking the kitchen. Weird hours and all, we try to keep a fair bit of food and stuff around."

"Bunk room, kitchen, garage. It's a bit like a firehouse around here."

"More than we'd like to let on at times." He snagged the last bag out of the back and toted it in the direction of the stairs. Brie trailed after him back up to the kitchen.

"I have a new theory," she said while watching him jam things in cupboards.

"About the case?"

"Yeah, but I need your computer."

"Have at it." He gestured in the direction of his desk and stepped over to type in a password. Brie sat down and started searching in the internet. She was aware that he was watching over her shoulder. That was probably good, it might save that much more explaining. He laid a casual hand on her shoulder, and she jerked, surprised at

the touch.

"Sorry," he said and started to pull his hand away. She reached back and laid her fingertips on his hand. His touch was welcome.

"It's okay. I'm... too wound up," she said.

He nodded slightly, and left his hand on her shoulder. "So, tell me what you're hunting for? Something about garlic?" he asked as he continued to read over her shoulder.

"Yes, the main, oh, call it active ingredient, in garlic is allicillin. It's a sort of natural antibiotic. It attacks, no scratch that, interferes with the cell envelope around a bacteria." She was fumbling for a way to describe the effect to a non-scientist.

"And exactly *why* are you hunting the net for this?"

"In bacteria, it causes lysis. It swells up and bursts, a little like a water balloon. Well, sort of..."

"Pop goes the bacteria?" he deadpanned, and she laughed.

"Yeah, kind of. The blood sample from the glove that melted... It's showing similar behaviors, but it's not bacterial."

"So?"

"I'm trying to connect some ideas. Some really odd ones in fact. That's all I'm willing to admit at the moment."

Her mind was churning while she waited for the computer to spit back some more information.

The feel of Evan's fingers on her shoulder was somehow a comforting presence, totally different from the feel of touching John. When she had been so scared by the whole event with the broken manikin, he'd been exactly what she needed. He was steadier, less intense, calmer. She was coming to realize his psi Talent was mostly empathic, keyed in on emotions. He had always impressed her with his quiet personality and quirky sense of humor even when she had only known him as an acquaintance from the gym. It was obvious he cared, really cared about what had happened to her. Having spent enough time around him and John in the past week or so, she knew he and John had an arrangement. No, maybe it fell into the category of relationship. John has a mix of raw Talent and some training. John's emotions ran so close to the surface. God, she could just drown herself in his touch. Did she really want to be that dependent on another person again?

Evan left her at the computer and drifted off to deal with putting the rest of the groceries away. Gabrielle spent another thirty minutes scrounging through the internet, hunting for promising links. Eventually she gave up in frustration and attacked her work e-mail by remote access. There were six messages from her boss, Chris, two from a tech in the trace department, and a dozen of miscellaneous nonessential garbage. She was going to have to deal with some of the requests from her superior. Sooner would be better than later. She sat and stared at the computer for a number of minutes. Maybe she could kill two birds - sort out some of mess in her FBI lab and use the equipment there to dig a little deeper into the

allicillin issue. John had left on business regarding the current case, along with Rich. She went hunting for Evan, again.

"Can you give me a lift to my lab over at the FBI building?" she asked him.

"For?" he asked.

"I need the phase contrast microscope to double check some slides."

"Is this a particularly good idea?"

"It's the FBI building. If I'm not safe there, our country is fucked! Plus I need a lift, 'cause it's late, and I'm not in the mood to walk to the metro station."

"That would be a bad idea. We haven't heard anything back about the charges on Garner yet. And yesterday was..." She could tell he was trying to give her a gentle version of "no."

"I know, such an amazing success. I need to check on some work stuff, a murder case in Alexandria." That got him a little; she knew he understood the importance of case evidence.

"John is going to ream you *and* me a new one."

"Yeah, I know. Let me borrow your cell. Mine's still at home."

Text to John

GONE 2 WORK GOTTA CHECK ON A CASE
BACK LATER - BRIE

John and Rich were at the medical examiner's office, waiting on a preliminary report for the body from early that morning. John's cell vibrated and he pulled it off his belt. It took him about ten seconds to read the message and go from calm to fury. He walked toward the far end of the hallway and viciously punched the numbers for Evan's cell.

"Where the fuck is Gabrielle?!" John said with a growl in his voice.

"At the FBI building," replied Evan.

"Why? Especially after the last fiasco! She's not alone is she? God damn it, Evan!"

"We're in her lab. In a security controlled building. And no, she's not alone. I'm sitting here on a stool ten feet from her, watching her do science-y stuff," Evan snapped sarcastically.

John exhaled slowly, fighting his ever present temper. "Mother-of-God. Just make damn sure you stay with her," he ordered.

"Gee, I was just going to leave her here and let her catch the metro home. Fuck John, how stupid do you think I am?"

John felt somewhere between annoyed and relieved as

he hung up. Rich gave him a curious look as John walked back toward him.

"Do you really think she's in danger from that guy?" asked Rich.

"Considering what he left her at her house, I think he's a psychopathic sonofabitch."

Thursday, June 21 -- evening

A meeting of the minds was in order, if for nothing less than to simply compare notes and pick each others' brains. Gabrielle was the first one into the SIS conference room primarily because she 'd left a heap of pages with her notes on the table. She pulled one of the chairs out and sat down, gazing for a moment down at her clothes. The leggings, tank, and long-sleeved overshirt made it look like she was geared to spend the evening watching bad movies on TV rather than participate in a staff meeting. Dragging her thumb carefully along her aching cheekbone, she wondered if the makeup she had applied earlier in the day was really doing any good at hiding the heavy bruising at this point.

John arrived next, obligatory coffee cup in hand, and the rest of team filed in over the next minute or two.

"Gabrielle gets the first shot, since she seems to think she might have a new angle on this whole case set," said John.

"Sooger... Folley," she said.

"Excuse me?" He gave her a stare like she'd lost what brain cells she had left.

"Sooger Folley, or Chiang-shih or Brahmaparusha," she continued.

"Okay, that's not English, or any other language I know."

"Gaelic, Chinese, and Indian. Try vampire if you want English," she suggested. John choked on his coffee.

"Sorry," she apologized. There were some raised eyebrows around the table.

"Why?" John asked.

"It fits the profile."

"Okay, back to why?" said John, still coughing. "I thought we were leaning toward extraterrestrial."

"No. *You* said it was extraterrestrial," replied Brie.

"ET or Dracula, that's an interesting set of choices," said Cecelia.

"Why is it so hard for you to wrap your brain around this? Didn't I hear a couple of you discussing how to dispel a demon at some point yesterday?" countered Gabrielle.

John laughed and rubbed his eyes, "Yeah, you probably did. So, back to the why."

Brie held up a finger. "One, all attacks have been between dusk and dawn. Okay, I know that's really, really circumstantial, since eighty percent of all assaults occur at night." John gave her a solemn look and she supposed he was thinking about her own assault.

"Continue," he said.

"Two, all bite marks have some resemblance to human bite marks. The most notable difference being the incisors are elongated, curved, and closer in proximity to the central line than is conventional. I'm waiting for a report by an odontologist I'm consulting. He may be able to help with modeling of the facial structure."

"Don't discount in-house help. Fiona, do you have any 3D modeling software?" asked Cecelia.

"I have one program, but I can dig up some other ones," Fiona replied.

"Three, the organic substance at the scenes, which I originally thought was blood. Now I think it's saliva, mixed with human blood. It generates a profound exothermic reaction upon exposure to UV radiation." Gabrielle scanned the faces at the table. John was giving her one of those squints of non-comprehension.

"Read this; it catches on fire in sunlight, for the scientifically impaired," said Cecelia, and John stuck out his tongue at her.

"No, well, yes, but I also used my UV/VIS source and that works just as well. The key component being the

UV wavelengths," Brie continued. "Four, allicillin sensitivity. Pure is great, but I did some extraction and a batch of serial dilutions. Even the 1-5% range has some effect."

"So, what's allicillin?" asked John.

"Basically garlic," Fiona said. John raised an eyebrow. "A friend of mine is into the whole herbal meds thing along with astrology, crystals, and Ouija boards," quipped Fiona.

"1-5% is roughly the concentration in garlic," said Brie.

"Time to break out the wooden stakes?" said Rich.

"So, what exactly does the garlic do, besides taste good and give you bad breath?" asked John.

"Cellular lysis," answered Evan. Now everyone was looking at him and Brie was amused. "I do pay attention," Evan said. "Even if I'm not sure how effective the whole garlic thing is likely to be."

"It appears to be concentration dependent," said Brie.

"The problem with all of this is, even if we think we have an ID, How do we find it -- him -- them?" proposed Fiona.

"Even more important, how do we stop it?" asked Rich.

"Break out the wooden stakes and the C-4," said Todd.

This produced an eye roll from Fiona and she punched

Todd in the shoulder. "You always want to blow something up," Fiona complained.

"Really, I'm not sure I'm kidding," Todd said.

They all turned their attention to Brie with questioning looks.

"I haven't got that far yet. I'm not even sure I'm right. You have to admit, it's pretty farfetched," Brie said slowly.

Evan slouched backward in his chair and cast a serious gaze at John. "Oh yeah, and the demon that likes to rip people's heads off wasn't?" The fact that not a single person at the table laughed made Gabrielle feel disconcerted.

"Don't ask. It's a really long story, that doesn't have a happy ending. We need a game plan," said John.

"I'll start the 3D modeling right away," suggested Fiona.

"Okay, you work on that then. Rich, I think you and Evan need to hit the street and start asking questions. Really weird questions. We're looking for someone that is never seen during the day... No, wait a minute. Do we even know if this is a guy? Or if assuming it's a guy, does he look remotely human?" said John.

"No data," said Brie.

John growled in frustration and ran his hand through his hair, making it all stand on end.

"No, actually we do," piped up Fiona. "I've been working on the images I retrieved off that ATM out in Rockville. Yeah, the quality sort of sucks rocks but I have this person, I use the term loosely, that fits the time frame. He appears to be carrying something big enough to be a body and is moving fast, way faster than a guy carrying a dead body should be able to. There's two arms, two legs, a head, a face that doesn't exactly have the right proportions, I'm still messing with some enhancing software. I might yet be able to pull a halfway decent picture out of it."

"Keep at it. We need all the intel we can get," said John.

"I think we need a map to plot where all the murders have occurred, or at least where the bodies have been found, then we can try to estimate times and see if we have a radius," said Evan.

"Cecelia, search the hospital databases. Maybe there's someone we missed, or someone who didn't die from an attack," said John.

"Missing blood from the blood bank?" asked Todd.

"Okay, I wasn't going to say that because that's so very B movie, but sure why not?" replied John. They all parted to go in separate directions.

An hour later, Fiona noticed Gabrielle sitting in John's office using his computer, scribbling things on a pad at random intervals. She wondered exactly what the woman was up to. Cecelia had given Fiona the basic

rundown on the events that'd occurred while she and Todd were in Baltimore, but Fiona was still a little mystified at to exactly what the relationship was between her boss and this woman.

She watched John walk into his office and sit on the corner of his desk. He was obviously talking to Gabrielle, a somewhat serious expression on his face. Fiona couldn't hear what was being said. Gabrielle nodded and pointed at the pad. John reached forward, cupping Gabrielle's face in his hands, then he leaned down and kissed her. It was definitely not a chaste kiss, but neither was it aggressive or impassioned. Fiona thought it somehow looked... careful, like he was afraid he would break her.

At the end of the evening, Fiona and Cecelia were walking out to their cars together.

"Do you think John is sleeping with her?" asked Fiona.

"Who? Gabrielle?" asked Cecelia.

"Yeah. She's been here three full days, 'protective custody' and all. Have you noticed the way he looks at her?"

"Mmm, like he's afraid she's going to shatter. I don't know, if it was someone other than John, maybe Rich, I'd say yes, despite the fact he's married. But with John I really don't know. He can be so -- white knight -- sometimes. For a guy who's pretty drop dead gorgeous, he doesn't flirt all that much," said Cecelia.

"You know, I kind of thought he and Evan... Maybe I'm reading too much into the touchy feely thing," mused Fiona.

"No, you're right in part. He and Evan, well... have a thing... It's not like it makes a difference. Are we practicing the governmental don't ask, don't tell? Don't you have any gay friends?"

"Only a couple," said Fiona.

"So, does it make a difference whether your boss is gay or in the closet or swings both ways?"

"No, of course not. I'm just dying of curiosity. Then there's the whole telepathic thing thrown in. I'd forgotten about John having a go at that."

"He's done some widely varied things," Cecelia said.

"You ever watch him in between the stress times when he's not doing the ultrafocused or the on autopilot thing? Every now and then, he'll get this look like, oh, I don't know, like it's all he can do to hold it together. I think that's a big piece of what he depends on Evan for."

"Fi', you have no idea how many people he has watched die. And I don't mean just Stuart and the whole demon thing," said Cecelia.

"You do?"

"Some. He was my patient before he was my boss. Sometimes, he says things, personal things, about his

past."

Fiona leaned against her car and looked thoughtful. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said and climbed into her car.

Chapter 10

Rate

Friday, June 22, 2007

Cecelia spent an entire morning combing NIBRS (New Incident-Based Reporting System) for any references to victims of throat trauma. She had to get some help from Fiona to correlate the hits she found with locations and hospitalization records. After dozens of dead ends, she finally found a reference to a woman who had originally been listed as a mugging victim, later changed to unsolved homicide. There were differences of course, but some of the details were eerily familiar. The victim was female, mid-forties, and had severe damage to throat and femoral arteries. The wounds were suspected to be bite related, but the damage had been severe enough that it was uncertain if they could have been inflicted by a human. She survived about thirty hours after admission to the hospital ER. Cecelia went hunting for Gabrielle, with the hopes of getting her help with comparisons.

Brie was on the treadmill in the weight room, MP3 player hanging on a lanyard and ear buds in. She glanced at the mileage; it was barely past one and she was just beginning to break a sweat. Cecelia came into the room, waved at her and made a hand motion toward her ears. Brie pulled her headphones off, but didn't stop the machine.

"What's up?" Brie asked.

"Is this a good idea?" Cecelia gestured toward the treadmill.

"Why not? My arm's broken, not my legs."

"Because I think you need more recovery time."

"I'm used to working out for at least an hour a day. I can't really do the weights easily, can't swim, so it's this or go stir crazy," Brie said.

Cecelia sighed. "I need to pick your scientific brain."

"Okay."

Cecelia held up a post-mortem photo of the female victim she had found. "This is Lauren Mitchell, age forty-seven, found by a shopper in the parking lot of a grocery store. Paramedics were called. There was trauma to the throat area and inner left thigh. The attending physician first suspected attack by a dog." Brie raised her eyebrows in comprehension of the hint. "Uh-huh, first connection. During wound cleaning the doctor changed his assessment to include the possibility it might have been a human bite, so it went into the NIBRS database as a violent assault."

"I'm assuming she's dead, otherwise you'd be off interviewing her," said Brie.

"Oh yeah. It starts getting weirder, too. She's stitched up, given a transfusion to compensate for blood loss and pumped full of antibiotics. Human mouths, well, mouths in general, have mass quantities of bacteria."

"Knew that."

"And she's sent off to ICU. She never fully regains consciousness. At that point, she's stable, more or less for a few hours, then things start going downhill. Somewhere along the way, somebody starts to suspect necrotizing fasciitis."

"Keep going."

"There's no fever, which is unusual. Some of the wound edges are red and hot, but no swelling. So they swap antibiotics, drag her off to surgery for debridement and try to keep her alive. Things get worse. The tissue starts darkening; lack of perfusion they think. Someone else suggests it's actually gangrene, and they start trying to make arrangements to find someplace with a chamber for hyperbaric oxygen treatment, and then it's too late and she's dead," finished Cecelia.

"Okay, so she's missing a few of the usual symptoms. Is that profound? My clinical knowledge is kinda weak."

"Yes and no. The autopsy report is more interesting yet. None of the bacterial cultures are positive for anything remotely recognizable as being responsible for necrotizing fasciitis *or* gangrene. Fact in point, the bacterial cultures are barely positive at all. Remember her body's chock full of like six different antibiotics by this point."

"So, when did she die?" asked Brie.

"Nearly eight weeks ago."

"Oh, so no chance the body's still in a morgue somewhere."

"Doubtful. Fiona's trying to find out for me. We still might be able to exhume. Not that that idea is really turning me on."

"Eeww."

"Uh-huh," agreed Cecelia.

"Unless of course she's risen from the dead and is participating in the ongoing chomp fest?"

"Shit. That's so... I didn't even think of that. When am I going to get it through my thick skull that reality as I used to know it and reality as I *now* know it, just don't mesh?"

"Hey, I could be wrong, just tossing the idea out," Brie commented.

"All right. I'm going to go back and see how Fiona's progressing. You... exactly how long are you planning on doing that?"

"I've two more miles to go."

"And then what, bike ten miles?"

"I was thinking about a shower actually."

Cecelia shook her head. "If you keel over, hopefully someone will notice and come find me." She headed out of the room and up the stairs.

Evan poked his head into the weight room and found Brie was sitting on the edge of the treadmill, wiping her face with a towel.

"You dead yet? Cecelia asked me to find out," he asked.

Brie rolled her eyes and smiled a little. "Not yet," she said.

Evan sat down on the treadmill beside her. "I guess swimming is out 'til the cast comes off."

"Unfortunately... I really need a shower." She rubbed the towel back across her sweat damp hair. Evan focused on her face. Her makeup had mostly rubbed off onto the towel, and he saw that some of the bruises on her face were fading toward greens and yellows.

"Makes me look like Frankenstein, doesn't it?" she said, apparently noticing his gaze.

"Maybe his bride," he replied.

She made a mock grimace at him. "Cecelia may have a lead on a survivor."

"An interview could be really helpful." Evan said, thinking they had finally caught a break on the case.

"Maybe I should have said temporary survivor. She lived about a day."

"Oh... bummer."

Brie hauled herself to her feet and flung the towel over her shoulder. Evan looked up at her from where he was still sitting. Despite the workout, he sensed she was restless.

"You know you're safe here," he said.

"Yeah, but I'm not a big fan of the gilded cage mentality. Maybe you can convince John of that."

"I doubt it. Right now he and I are... not seeing eye to eye on that issue," Evan admitted.

"I'm a grownup. I swear," she made a sketchy little scout's honor gesture.

"I know. He's... protective, and believe it or not, it's not just about you. I've been on the receiving end, too," said Evan. "When I got shot, it took weeks before he'd let me out of his sight or let me do my job or even believe I was safe. Speaking of which, do you feel safe here? I assumed, and didn't bother to ask, which was stupid."

"Yes, I do."

"After everything Garner did you, it occurred to me maybe having John and me, as well as Todd and Rich around might, well, make you feel less than safe." He felt a little hint of affection from her.

"With John and you being psi, I feel like I would be able to tell if I was in any sort of danger. The other two, I don't think they'd even be with SIS if John didn't trust

them pretty damn far."

Evan considered her words and the emotions he sensed behind them. She apparently felt as comfortable with the entire situation as she was likely to get given her past.

Casted hand leaned on the wall, out of the way of the spray, Gabrielle stood in the shower. She was tired, borderline exhausted, but then that was kind of the point. That was always the point. If she drove her body hard enough, too hard maybe, then her exhaustion would overrule the relentless churning of her brain. Maybe it would distract her from thinking about the way John held her when she slept, the way he looked at her, like he would hold back the world for her. Yet she was subtly annoyed. She might be a wreck now, but she *would* eventually get it in gear. She need support, not protection. Nope, that wasn't exactly what she meant. The whole idea of actually feeling safe from Tom did have a certain appeal. The whole situation was just too damn complicated.

Evan was in the kitchen on the main floor, digging a soda out of the refrigerator. John walked in from the stair well, crossed the room, and leaned on the counter that separated the kitchen from the rest of the room.

"Have you seen Brie?" John asked.

"I think she went upstairs to take a shower. She just got

off the treadmill."

John raised an eyebrow. "Is she ready for that sort of thing?"

"No, I doubt it, but I think it's how she copes," Evan speculated. John's jaw clenched and Evan guessed the very thought of Garner was inspiring violent thoughts. John turned to go. "I think you need to lighten up a little," Evan said.

"About?"

"She said she's feeling a bit overwhelmed by your concern."

"I think *you're* feeling like I'm overly concerned!" John said.

Evan shrugged a little. Provoking John wasn't going to solve the problem. "It's what she said. I think you're forgetting just how little control she had with Garner."

"I am nothing like him!"

"I didn't say you were," said Evan.

John glared at him and strode off.

Chapter 11

Melting Point

Friday June 22, 2007 -- Evening

The number of hours Gabrielle had spent in the SIS building over the past number of days was generating a certain amount of cabin fever. It was evening as she began walking down the street toward Starbucks. It wasn't so much that she needed a caffeine fix, it was more a matter of getting away. There was a fair amount of foot traffic, with people coming and going, post-work type of running around. Coffee cup in hand, she leaned on the railing, staring out at the cars zooming along on the far side of the parking lot, trying to sort her thoughts.

Here she was, floundering from one emotional disaster to the next. How the hell had she let herself stay around Tom? She should have had the bastard arrested a year ago. She should have taken Evan up on his offer to help. It was perversely funny how it took Tom threatening to hurt someone else to make her see reason. The knowledge that John had been injured trying to protect her was gut-wrenching.

She hugged her broken wrist against her body, wiggling stiff fingers. When John touched her... Oh God, it might qualify as better than sex. His fingers on her skin. The sensation of a really slow electrocution. How stupid could she be? He was kind and gentle and... flexible. Oh yeah, that was a good word for it. She knew John had been involved with other people before Evan.

Who was the idiot who thought plundering through someone else's head was easy or fun? For years it'd been

close to a curse. There were the migraines, the crap she wished she'd never "seen", and all the while, a quiet desperation. John's memories were as much a chaos as hers. There were images of people that she'd seen in his head, all the people he had loved or just plain cared about who had died. Some whose deaths he had actually witnessed, some not. It neither lessened the grief, nor the guilt.

She'd felt the texture of John's loneliness. It was different than hers, but no less painful. She knew he felt responsible for her, and she was not entirely sure why on that one. He was so sweet, so intense. It would be easy to fall for him, hard. No, no, no, she mentally kicked herself. It was time to get her shit in gear and get her life sorted out. Work the case, be professional, count herself lucky to have a friend who cared that much. She thought about him almost literally dragging her to the hospital to have her ribs X-rayed.

Brie heard running footsteps and turned her head. She was still leaning on the railing when John practically skidded to a stop beside her. Where the hell had he come from? He grabbed her, nearly crushed her in his arms and kissed her. Actually it was more like devoured her, sucking on her lower lip, his tongue inside her mouth. She was nearly overcome by his breathless wave of relief.

When he finally lifted his head, he whispered, "Oh God, Gabrielle, I was afraid he..." and he couldn't complete the sentence. There was fear in his eyes, real fear. He leaned his forehead on hers and drew a shuddering breath. She "saw" him replaying the image of seeing her struck in her kitchen, of watching her body impact the

shelving. There were other memories, too, older ones, holding people dying, watching people get shot. She comprehended just a little better his never ending fear of losing... everyone.

They walked back to SIS in silence. He tightly held her hand, like he thought she would run away or vanish. She was stunned by the force of his emotions.

No one else was in the building, just the two of them. John and Gabrielle sat on the sofa in his quarters, drinking brandy, feet propped on the coffee table. His thumb traced a circle in her palm. It was a very psi thing to do. She could see his hand tremble just a little as he knocked back the rest of his brandy.

"I'm okay. There were lots of people outside. Tom would never do anything in public. It would ruin his image if someone ever had proof he wasn't perfect," she said bitterly.

John regarded her with a very serious expression. "I've lost too many people. Please, let me hold you," he pleaded. He gestured with an open hand.

She stood up and took a step, settling carefully in between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her and laid his head on her chest, listening to her heart beat. She ran her fingers through his hair. She felt him drop all his shielding, leaving himself completely open and vulnerable.

"I want you. In every sense of the word, and I'm so afraid I'll hurt you," he whispered.

She was hesitant, torn between what her brain was telling her and what her heart wanted. "I'm fine. Broken arm and all," she said, touching her cast against his.

"That's not the point. You are still so bruised. When I watch you move, you have this brittle motion, like you'll cringe if you bump into something too hard. And I grabbed you outside. I'm so sorry. I was so worried." He began to kiss her again.

She unclenched her control on her Talent, letting her only partially mended defenses slide down. This kiss was softer, all passion. Without any shielding, his or hers, it was reminiscent of an inferno, slow motion electrocution, zinging nerves, setting them on fire.

Their bodies shifted on the sofa and she was sliding off the edge. He gripped her just a little tighter to prevent her from falling. She grunted in pain at the pressure on her bruised hip so he eased her off the edge, to the floor.

"Sorry..." he said.

She giggled a little, but it was perilously close to a sob.

"Come on, we need a bed, or this is going to hurt you too damn much." John held out his hand and she took it, both of them getting to their feet. He led her toward the bedroom where he stretched out on the bed and pulled her down on top of him. One hand was threaded in her hair, the other pulled her shirt loose in the back. His hand slid under the fabric of her shirt and grazed carefully across her skin.

Her mouth was on the side of his neck, moving along

the lower edge of his jaw. Her thighs slid along the outside of his and she could feel the hard length of him through the fabric. His breathing sped up as she let her mind sink against his. It was more intimate than what their hands and mouths were doing. His fingers pushed her shirt up and unhooked her bra. She struggled with the buttons of his shirt, her fingers less nimble than usual with the broken wrist.

In exasperation she sat up, straddling his thighs. It took allowing him to sit up also to solve the problem of their shirts. Her bra departed moments later. John eased her backward to lie flat, one hand braced beside her head, so he wasn't lying on top of her.

"It's okay, the bed is flat," she whispered, knowing he was doing his best to be careful.

Gabrielle linked her hands around his body as best she could and pulled him down to her. His mouth was hot on hers and their shared psi link was raging. His fingers threaded through hers as she squirmed beneath him, wanting more contact, more friction. It was overload. They were both gasping and a tidal wave climax crashed through them. He collapsed halfway on top of her, struggling to breathe, he rolled sideways pulling her with him.

"Somehow I think we were actually supposed to take our clothes off," he gasped out.

"Don't blame me. It takes two," she whispered and laughed, then sobered. "It's been years since I was with another psi."

"It's different. So much more." He wrenched his belt buckle and fly loose, and squirmed out of his pants. Brie watched him, aroused there was even a gentle care to his actions.

"What?" He stroked a hand along her face.

"I... He..." Suddenly her eyes filled with tears. "He was such a bastard, and I was too damn desperate to remember there could be more," she sniffled.

He held her close, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her mouth, brushing away her tears with his fingers. She buried her face against his throat, relishing the sheer presence of his body and mind against hers.

"We're not done. You still have clothes on," he murmured.

"But you..."

"Yeah so? There are lots of things to do for a little while, while we wait for a biological reset." A what? Her brain wasn't hitting on all cylinders.

"A little while?" she mumbled, trying to connect the mental pieces. John was done. They could snuggle and kiss maybe.

"He must have been a real one shot wonder," John said sarcastically and she was suddenly embarrassed by the comprehension that he was implying he could get another erection given a little recovery time. How could she be so dense?

"Forget him. Forever." He was unzipping her jeans and easing them down over her hips. She lifted up so he could pull them off, and they were deposited on the floor along with her underwear, his hands tracing along her stomach, down her hips, between her legs. She groaned as his fingers did amazing things. His mouth wandered over her skin. Every place they touched was like living electricity. Her hand slid down his back and her fingers grazed along the base of his spine. He was gulping for air, grabbing her wrist.

"Reset accomplished." There were a few moments of groping for a condom. He rolled onto his back and pulled her into a position straddling him. He was rock hard against the front of her stomach.

"You drive," he said.

He lifted her hips. She slid down on top of him with excruciating slowness. His fingers clenched around her waist. The rhythm was achingly slow and she bent forward to kiss him. Within a few minutes, the inferno was raging again. With complete skin contact, the crescendo ended with something akin to a lightning strike.

John heard his name, distantly.

"John! John! Are you okay?!" His vision was all twinkling blackness. Fingers were touching his lips. Little zings of electricity were still flying through his nervous system. He could feel *her*, her mind a worried caress on his. His vision slowly cleared and he could see

Brie, looking down at him in concern.

"I think for a moment there you might have blacked out. I was afraid I had hurt you," Gabrielle said.

"Dying in action, what a way to go. Me and Genghis Khan." She snickered a little at his comment.

"You are unbelievable," he whispered, sealing his mouth against hers. She snuggled against him, tired, satiated. Groggy from the system overload, he buried his face in her hair and drifted into sleep.

When John woke later, she was all warmth against his body. He was spooned up against her back, his arm around her. She was hugging his arm to her chest, her fingers folded around his. There was so much skin contact. Skin on skin was that ethereal connection between psi that deepened the intensity of all emotional responses. As his hand slid down her leg, he could feel the definition of her muscles. She must spend some serious time working out. She emitted a sleepy sigh, and he could feel her stretch carefully.

"Morning," he murmured. Brie made a contented little sleepy sound and her fingers stroked along his, her thumb making a circle in his palm. From someone else, this would have been a casual gesture; from her, it was intense. His breath caught and he swallowed hard. She stretched again and twisted slowly to lie on her back. He ran a finger along her lips.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"It's nine-thirty and we are so, so late." He closed his

eyes and pulled her into a kiss, caressing his mind across hers. It felt... smoother... calmer.

Connection at this level can go a long way toward piecing a telepath back together. Her words were a subtle whisper in his head.

Thirty minutes later, John walked into his office and sat down at the desk, his hair still damp from his shower. Evan came in, coffee in hand.

"Late night?" Evan asked.

"Um, yeah," replied John, suddenly feeling somewhat guilty. He and Evan had talked about his involvement with Gabrielle, but when push came to shove was it going to get painfully awkward? Instead Evan looked vaguely amused as he ran his fingers through John's hair.

"You look less stressed," said Evan.

As he started to walk away, John grabbed his wrist. "This doesn't change you and me," he said.

Evan gave him an appraising look. "I can share, but can she?" Evan replied as he left the office.

Chapter 12

Intermolecular

Saturday, June 23, 2007

Feeling calmer than she had in days, Brie met Cecelia in the conference room, where they began poring over the details of the victim she'd been researching.

"I can't believe Lauren Mitchell was cremated. No chance of exhumation, second autopsy or anything," said Cecelia, making a face of frustration.

"So where does that leave us? We have some hospital records and an autopsy report and a tox screen and... that's it?"

"I guess. Let's hypothesize with what we've got. She was found in a parking lot. With the kind of wounds she had, she couldn't have been too far away when it happened, blood loss and all. Let's say, he/it got interrupted and didn't get to finish the job. So Lauren staggers or crawls maybe a couple of hundred yards max?"

"I really can't imagine too much more than that, especially given the groin injury," commented Brie.

"She was probably headed toward where she saw street lights in the parking lot. An unknown amount of time elapses before the victim is discovered and rushed to the hospital. There's IVs, X-rays, stitches and the usual, and the police are notified. There is a record of a sexual assault kit being processed. Fiona dug that up for me. Nada. No sign of rape."

"Didn't you tell me she had a blood transfusion?"

"Yes," replied Cecelia.

"So they took a sample of her blood for typing?"

"Oh, I see where you're going. Nope, type and cross match samples are only held for thirty days. We're outside the window."

"What about the whole bacterial culture thing?" Brie asked, fishing for possibilities.

"Something they suspect is necrotizing is probably gonna get autoclaved in less than ten days."

"She was autopsied."

"Yes."

"What about samples stored in formalin? For frozen sectioning or something like that?"

"Hmm, maybe. That's going to take some more hunting. If they were kept for say a survey study on necrotizing fasciitis or gangrene they might still be around. It's kind of a long shot. Guess I'll be needing more help from Fiona again."

"While you're doing that, I have to call my lab over at the FBI. My boss has sent me four more e-mails, and I guess I ought to deal with that," Gabrielle said with a sigh.

Gabrielle's lab was a quiet and familiar environment. Blissfully, on a Saturday, there were fewer people around and that would hopefully mean fewer interruptions. She spent the entire day trying to catch up on the stuff that had accumulated during her time at SIS. John had filed a request that she be allowed flexible scheduling, as her expertise was needed at SIS with the ongoing case. That had *not* thrilled her boss, but John knew when to pick his battles and this apparently was one of them.

However, neither SIS nor the FBI were going to have her for the next few days. Division P was pulling rank for multiple reasons. She had missed her weekly check-in and that was a distinct no-no. Director Andrew Bottman, who ran Division P, had received a tip from one of their precogs that could lead to solving the case for SIS. He always leapt at any chance to prove the worth of his group of psychics. She couldn't really blame him; P's shadowy existence was always under scrutiny by the political bigwigs.

As she loaded vials in the autosampler, her brain darted back and forth between work tasks and thoughts of John. Sleeping with him... Was that a good thing or a mistake of near epic proportions? The sex itself had been amazing, that magnificent combination of a good lover and psychic connection. Tom hadn't been exactly bad, but it had seldom been epic either. With Tom, it had been about having someone to touch, someone who wouldn't freak at the sensations generated by her psychic Talents. She should have known better. Psi needed psi. At Division P headquarters, it tended to lead to astounding proportions of relationships in house. God,

we're such an inbred bunch, she thought.

There was a soft knock on the door frame of her lab. She looked up. John stood there in the doorway, smiling at her.

"It's pushing toward six. Want some dinner?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose. Let me finish loading this."

"That sounded rather non-committal. I figured you'd be starving."

She sighed as she put the last dozen vials in. "I have to go to Suffolk for a couple days."

"Back to Division P?" John asked.

"Yes, I need to see a man about a vision."

"That sounds more like a line I would utter."

Gabrielle did realize it was a fairly bizarre thing to say. "Anyway, I know a precog there who has some information that may tie into this case. And my boss is distinctly unhappy with me. Rules and regs stuff. It's not really the kind of thing I can do on the phone or by email," she said.

John frowned at little. "When do you have to leave?"

"It's at my discretion, but I really ought to leave first thing in the morning. It's probably going to take a good four hours to drive down there."

"Okay, then grab your stuff and we'll do dinner before you have to pack."

Gabrielle needed some additional clothes and other items not at the SIS building, so John accompanied her back to her house. It was an odd combination of uneasiness and comfort to be in her own home. She was nearly done packing when John took her hands and pulled her down to sit on the bed beside him. His hands were threaded in her hair, and he kissed her, with a slow burning passion.

"I know it's just a drive, and that you're going somewhere you know, but I don't suppose I could convince you to let me go with you?" he suggested.

"As if you could just drop your entire job for a few days, but anyway, no."

"I don't like the idea of you alone."

"I'll be fine, and you know perfectly well Division P has security that rivals Fort Knox."

"Okay, okay. I'm still worried about the drive. You could take Evan with you."

"John..." She felt just a little exasperated at his paranoia.

"Please promise me you'll be careful, and take your gun," he said.

"I will," she said. Her fingers ghosted across his lips and he caught her hand, pressing his mouth to her palm. He sucked softly on the skin there, taunting her mind gently

with hints of what he wanted. She watched his pupils dilate with arousal.

"Do you think we can get as far as the getting naked part?" he teased softly. "And maybe *not* knock me practically unconscious?"

She gave him a rueful grin. "The first part -- probably. The second part... I can't... My control isn't very good at the moment anyway. But, you can't be in my body and not have me in your head. That's one thing I'm not capable of. I can't separate my psi Talents from my emotions during sex. If you... if I have an orgasm, you get to experience it, mine and yours. Your nervous system needs bigger fuses," she teased. This produced a hearty chuckle from him.

"I'm not sure that's something I can fix." He tipped her back onto the duvet and stretched out beside her, head propped on his bent arm. Slowly, he pulled her tightly to his body. His hand glided gently down her arm and across her hip, cupping around her behind, then he began kissing her softly, sucking on her lower lip, tongue sliding inside her mouth as she opened it to him. His mouth moved to the side of her face, down the side of her neck, a trail of heat. Her pulse accelerated, and she could feel the throb of it between her thighs. John pulled her blouse loose from her slacks and his fingers slid up beneath the fabric, stroking along her spine. She arched into the caress, reveling in his touch. His face was buried against the base of her throat.

More, she whispered in his head. Clothes were shed and kicked to the floor. His fingers wandered across her skin. Everywhere they touched was the subtle sensation

of electricity, building. She squirmed beneath his attentions, breathing hard. His tongue was doing things that made her want to scream, while his fingers slipped inside. The tension crested and her senses were awash in ecstasy as her body spasmed hard.

Her eyes opened slowly. John was looking down at her, raw desire written in his eyes. Gabrielle groped in the nightstand for a condom.

Fuck, Gabrielle's fingers rolling the condom on him felt like a tease that threatened to make him come right then. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to draw a couple of slow breaths before he eased into her. In another minute his muscles were trembling, the rhythm driving flits of her pleasure through his nervous system. His climax left him gasping and momentarily blinded.

They lay curled together, naked in every way, their minds as much a drowsy tangle as their bodies, drifting toward sleep. Gabrielle stretched out a hand and switched off the bedside lamp. John could sense snippets of memories from her, and some of them weren't nice.

"You okay?" John asked softly, wanting to help but uncertain if it was desired.

"Yeah. I just..."

"Keep going."

"There hasn't been anyone other than Tom in a long

time. Sometimes it was good, but now I'm feeling like I was too stupid to live. I was so damn desperate. Now there's you, and it's so different but..." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm not him. I won't hurt you. I won't leave you, unless you want me to. I care about you Gabrielle. Let me be the one who you can always turn to."

Just hold me, she whispered. She wanted to give in. To promise him everything and eternity, but her trust level was still on shaky ground, and being with Tom had never really been about trust, it had been survival, and what a mistake that had been. She should have been stronger, been able to live without such desperation for contact.

Sunday, June 24' 2007

"You want to tell me about how this happened?" prompted Peter Vithoulkas as he examined Gabrielle's cast and the X-rays he had taken. Gabrielle found herself reluctant to confess the details, they made her sound so... weak. She felt the flow of hot tingling energy into her arm. Peter was Division P's senior healer, a man of amazing Talent who daily performed feats that defied normal logic. Right now, she knew, he was working on speeding the healing of her broken bones.

"My boyfriend threw me against a set of shelves," she choked out.

Peter raised an eyebrow but didn't comment for quite a while. "I'm hoping he's now your ex-boyfriend," Peter said carefully.

She gave him a small nod. "Some friends are helping me out, and there's a restraining order in place... now," she added.

"You need to talk to someone professionally. It can be me if you like, but Stephen would probably be a better choice." Stephen Benford was the Division P staff psychologist. As much as she didn't really want to unearth all her emotional issues for someone she barely knew, she did see the unfortunately necessary wisdom in the advice.

While Gabrielle was at the Division P complex, she exchanged several text messages with John.

RESTRAINING ORDER = DONE DEAL. HOPE IT WORKS. LET ME KNOW UR OK? -J

M FINE. BORING DRIVE. THINKING ABOUT CASE DETAILS -B

CELI MAY HAVE SAMPLES 4 U -J

Monday, June 25, 2007

Text Message to John from Evan

DINNER MY PLACE 6:30 BRING BEER.

John stood outside Evan's apartment, six-pack in his hand. He hadn't been there in weeks, not that that was completely unusual. Work had been crazy, but there was the whole thing with Gabrielle lying like a pink elephant between them. He knocked.

When Evan let him in, he followed Evan toward the kitchen and stuffed the beer in the fridge.

"Aren't you gonna drink any?" asked Evan.

"With dinner. Since the last thing I ate was donuts at the 7-11 at nine o'clock this morning, if I drink one now I might end up face down on your floor," said John. It all sounded relatively normal, yet somewhere underneath there was tension. Evan smirked. John peeked over Evan's shoulder down into the pot.

"Whatever it is, it smells good," said John.

"Barley and mushroom stew. There's salad stuff in the refrigerator. Can you dig it out for me?" John complied but couldn't quite fathom why Evan was making stew in June.

"No meat?" John asked.

"Next time I volunteer to help Cecelia hunt for pathology samples, just shoot me okay? It's not like dead bodies bug me that much, but I spent four hours trailing around after her through the pathophysiology labs at the medical examiner's office. I saw stuff being sliced and diced that I don't even wanna think about. So no, no meat," replied Evan.

John was amused by Evan's claim of squeamishness.

John and Evan sat in front of the TV watching a baseball game after dinner. Evan's den was cluttered and lived in. Artwork, mostly of horses, hung on the walls, along with photos, primarily of his family: mom, dad, four sisters. An overstuffed comfortable couch backed up to one wall, along with a desk strewn with digital camera equipment and a laptop. Magazines were stacked on the floor.

Evan sat with his legs stretched out in front of him, watching John, not the game. The tension was almost visible between them. Usually if they watched TV, John was sprawled halfway in Evan's lap, Evan's fingers in his hair, and it was all about touching. Tonight, John was slouched in the corner of the sofa, apparently absorbed in the game, but the way his hand restlessly messed with the beer bottle betrayed him. Evan leaned forward and pushed the mute button on the remote.

"You have to decide what you want," Evan said evenly.

"What I want?"

"You mess around inside her head. You sleep with her. I appreciate the fact that she needs you. She needs someone to help her piece her life back together, but you're acting like I don't exist. If it's over, it's over, just give me a straight answer, so I can get on with my life."

"I thought you said you didn't care if I had a relationship with her," John snapped.

"I don't. But that wasn't supposed to mean only her and not me. You're running around acting like I'm the enemy half the time, and basically ignoring me the rest. Even when you're with me, you're with her. I want you, and no, I'm not interested in just a quick fuck against a wall. Occasionally, I just want you to actually look at me and remember I'm still here."

"You're jealous!" John shouted.

"No."

"You're jealous because I slept with her!"

"Sex is just sex. You're giving her one hundred percent of your emotions!"

"Is that what this is about!? That I care?"

"John..."

"Could you maybe wait until I feel like her life's not in danger before you throw this shit at me?!" John yelled and he stormed out of the apartment. Evan was left sitting on the sofa, head tipped back, eyes closed. Oh, that had just gone so well, Evan decided.

Evan sat blindly staring at the TV, trying to sort out his emotions. His cell phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket.

"Talk to me, bro'. Are you okay?"

Evan relaxed. It was his twin sister Brigid. They shared a fairly tight psychic link, and he was thoroughly unsurprised that she would be aware how hurt and frustrated he was feeling.

"Physically, I'm fine. The rest, I don't know," Evan confessed. He spilled out the details of the past few weeks to her friendly ears.

"You still care a lot about him right?" asked Brigid.

"Yes, I do"

"Think about John's personality and his history. This is a guy who you told me has had damn near everybody he's ever loved die. I'm not saying there isn't a possibility that whatever you two have or had is over, but it's also possible that once he thinks Brie is going to come out of this okay, he'll realize he's being an ass."

"I suppose..."

"He did come have dinner with you when you invited him. He didn't make up an excuse, he showed up. Okay, so it ended in an argument, but I think he's trying to make things right in his guy sort of way."

"Oh gee, thanks; you make it sound like being male is a handicap," Evan groaned.

"Just saying."

Tuesday, June 26, 2007

Cecelia was in her lab, metaphorically ankle-deep in analysis. She had tracked down a couple of frozen samples at the pathophysiology lab that had come from Lauren Mitchell's body. She had basically commandeered them using her federal status and toted them back to her lab. One was a tissue sample taken from near the original wound site. After much careful thought about conversations with Gabrielle and what data had been discovered so far, Cecelia decided they need to know more about the effect the vampire bite/saliva had on living tissue.

So, time for a game plan. She had samples that presumably contained saliva from the body in the cherry-picker. The problem was that the victim had not only died, but the decomposition had run rampant and the sun had shone on the body a fair bit as well. Nothing from those samples was going to be useful, so back to the frozen samples. Time to do a little frozen slicing and see if she could determine a few more details about Lauren Mitchell's last hours.

Chapter 13

Boiling Point Wednesday, June 27, 2007

Gabrielle spent three days at Division P. When she got back, she ditched all her stuff at home and headed in the direction of the SIS building. Swiping the security card John had given her through the lock, she then quickly punched in her access code, and walked through the garage toward the stairs up to the main level. The first person she saw was Evan, parked in front of his computer, typing.

He gave her a smile when he saw her. "Hey, you're back! So, how was Suffolk?" he asked.

"Busy. Chaotic. But useful."

"Old home week for Division P?"

"Something like that. Is John around?"

"I think he's up in the conference room." She started toward the next set of stairs, but Evan grabbed her fingers. "Forewarning, he's in a piss-poor mood."

Brie walked quietly up the stairs and toward the conference room, nodding at Rich as she passed him. He was standing in the hallway talking to Fiona. She paused in the doorway to the conference room, looking at John's back. He was facing toward the window, a sheaf of papers in his hand. She let her gaze linger on the broad shoulders, the muscular torso, and the nice, tight, blue jean clad butt. Brie leaned on the doorframe.

"I have intel about our creature. Well, sort of," she said.

John's head whipped around, evidently startled by her voice. For an instant she thought maybe he was going to jump across the huge table. But he strode around it and wrapped his arms around her. He ran one hand in her hair and pulled her into a passionate kiss. This progressed to backing her against the doorframe and practically giving her a tonsillectomy.

God, I have missed you, he said.

Me too. Especially feeling you this way.

Outside in the hallway, Richard glanced from the sight of John and Gabrielle to Fiona. They stared at each other in shock.

"Guess he's banging her. What with a lip lock like that," said Rich.

John finally lifted his head and loosened his hold on her.

I think we're drawing stares, she said.

Let them. His arms were still wrapped around her and he breathed in the scent of her hair, before he forced himself to return to the matter of the case.

"Okay, tell me what you found out," he said aloud and

finally let her go.

"There will be another attack. No big surprise there. But I was given a prediction on the when and where," Gabrielle said.

"And this took three days?"

"No. I had... other Division P stuff to do, too," she admitted, running a hand back through her hair. Huh? She was no longer wearing the cast. He gently took hold of her wrist.

"You. don't have the cast?" he said.

"One of the few true perks of going home. Peter fixed it for me."

"He's the staff healer, right?"

"Yeah, he's good. Very good."

"Did he fix everything else, too?" John asked, making a gesture toward her cheek and ribs."

"Pretty much."

"Gee, I need to get him to mend me." He waved his own injured hand. He had managed to convince Cecelia to swap the cast for a metal splint and a heavy Ace bandage. "Okay, give me the when and where."

"A warehouse off of Foster, tomorrow before midnight."

"That's a little vague."

"Don't complain. For a precog, that's more specific than a set of GPS coordinates. I can find the warehouse if I see it. He gave me a sketch. Foster's only a couple of miles long; if I walk it, I can find it. And Reed is also moderately sure that it's somewhere close to where the vampire is camping out, or at least most likely near where he sleeps."

"Wow. If it's true that could really help us nail this thing... We have maybe two hours of daylight left. Come on, I'll drive." They walked back down through the main floor to collect the keys to one of the H2s and encountered Cecelia.

"Where're you going?" Cecelia asked.

"Out on a hunt for a building. One of the Division P precogs gave Gabrielle a tip on where the next attack is supposed to be," said John.

"Oh. Guess that could be extremely useful. Brie, when you get a chance, I have some cryoslices you might want to look at. They're from Lauren Mitchell's body. Very... Tissue Necrosis Factor type stuff, except weird, of course," Cecelia commented.

Gabrielle laughed a little. "Isn't it all on this case?"

Rush hour was dwindling as the SUV exited the beltway. Gabrielle nursed a cappuccino snagged from a coffee shop with a drive-thru on the way. The industrial

neighborhood they needed to search was partially deserted, and John glanced at the GPS to find the next turn that should put them at the end of Foster Road. He pulled off to the side of the road at the T-junction and they got out. Out of habit, he checked his weapon. Gabrielle stood, gazing down the street. It was lined with warehouses and a couple of self-storage places. Not much activity in evidence. A semi was backing into a loading dock area at the nearest building on the left as a typical end of the workday lull was settling over the street.

"So, do you want to just walk until you see something that's looks familiar?" John asked.

"Yeah, I suppose," she replied. They moved slowly down the street.

"So, what'd you do at Division P?" he inquired.

"Routine stuff mostly."

"Like?" He was fishing and he knew it was obvious.

"Debriefing. Paperwork. The healing thing took up a significant amount of time," she said and shrugged. He could tell she was trying to avoid a straight answer.

"How long did you train there before you got assigned?"

"Roughly a year," she replied.

"Wow, I thought the standard program was ten to twelve weeks."

"I got involved in some of the research while I was doing the training. Things got drawn out."

"Mmm, you have a thing for research. Has Tom made any effort to contact you? Harass you?"

"He sent me one e-mail. It said he wanted to talk to me. I didn't reply. Hey, stop a sec." She stood, analyzing the gray building for a moment. "Nope, wrong one."

"That's all? Nothing threatening. I'm having a hard time believing this guy is capable of taking a hint."

"You sound like Stephen," she commented.

"Stephen Benford? Is he still doing staff psychologist stuff for Division P?"

"Yeah. When did you meet him?"

"During the standard screening test rounds," John said.

"Oh. Guess that makes sense."

"Did you get sent to him for counseling?"

"Yes. John, I do *not* want to talk about this." There was definite irritation in her tone.

"Okay fine, but, promise me, if Garner calls you, sends you more e-mail, tries to see you, anything, that you'll tell me."

"Yeah, whatever. Can we concentrate on the task at hand?" She walked toward the next building. It took

another thirty minutes for Gabrielle to find the specified warehouse -- a cinderblock base with corrugated metal, the small sign on the door read Gelsey & Co. Inc.

"This is it?" he asked.

"I think. Let's walk around back, so I can make sure." It was getting close to dusk and the building appeared deserted. Connex boxes lined an alley leading into the rear loading docks. Everything seemed quiet.

"I'll get Fiona to track down an owner and see about a floor plan," said John as they headed back toward the H2.

The SIS team gathered in the conference room with floor plans laid on the table. The current discussion revolved around which entry points they wanted to use and exactly what weaponry might be useful.

"I think everyone needs their sidearm. Since we have no idea what we're looking for, anything bigger is liable to get one of us caught in crossfire," said Todd.

"Are we going for wooden stakes, too?" asked Richard.

"That's just so... Buffy!" said Fiona, rolling her eyes.

"Throw a few in one of the hummers, or does anybody not remember just how amazingly happy we were that we took some silver bullets with us last May?" said John.

There was a moment of silence as they all looked at each other.

Arriving just after dusk at the designated warehouse, both Hummers were loaded with SIS personnel and gear. All seven people climbed out. Guns were checked. Headsets were put on.

John started giving orders. "Maintain radio contact. Evan, Fiona, and I will head around back. Richard, Brie, and Todd will fan out along the front. Cecelia, you're on back up. Stay with the vehicles. Everyone watch for... Well, anything. Movement, sounds, anything that might signal this thing is here, or the alleged victim we're expecting. Maybe we can prevent another death." His eyes locked on Brie.

"It won't happen. If Reed saw it, it's a done deal," Gabrielle said regretfully.

John was silent for a long moment, "Okay, be on your guard, people."

The team spent more than two hours in a slow, systematic search of the building. Brie crossed paths with Fiona at one point and later with Todd. She was walking softly across the predominantly empty second floor when she noticed something on the floor over toward the north end of the building. From a distance, it looked a bit like a tarp wadded up. She headed toward it slowly, flashlight aimed. As she drew close, it was all too apparent it was a man's body. She edged closer and dropped carefully to one knee.

Brie touched a finger to the blood pool and then the body. The blood was still mostly fluid and the skin was somewhat warm to the touch. What the hell was that weird noise? A movement of shadows caught her attention, and she slid her hand behind her back, reaching toward her gun. She dropped her shields, seeking an identity for the shadow. It must be Todd she rationalized; he was the last person she had seen. Suddenly, all she "saw" were eyes, and it was like falling into a vat of raw sewage and nitric acid all at the same time. She fell forward over the body, clutching the sides of her skull, screaming.

The sounds of feminine screaming echoed in the stillness. John glanced at Evan, an expression of fear in his eyes. John started yelling into his headset.

"Fiona! Brie! Answer me!"

Fiona's voice crackled through the headset, "I'm in the hallway. Who's screaming?!"

"Fuckfuckfuck! Find Brie NOW!!" John shouted. He sprinted in the direction of the sound.

"I see her! Second floor, north end!" said Todd.

John pounded up the stairs with Evan half a dozen steps behind him. As John ran across the empty space of the second floor, he could see Todd trying to restrain Brie. She violently thrashed against him, the entire front of her white, long-sleeved T-shirt dark with blood. John

fell to his knees beside Todd, shoving him aside. She was still kicking, arching her back and holding her head. John clamped his hands over hers, holding her head somewhat still. He raked his mind across hers, seeking a reason for her furious struggle.

Agony. She was being sucked into a contact with something he couldn't get a fix on. He yanked her up and kissed her, brutally hard. Her thrashing ceased and she sagged bonelessly. John eased her to the floor, still gasping from his sprint, combined with blind panic. He grabbed the front of her shirt and ripped it open. While he ran his hand down her blood smeared chest and abdomen, searching for wounds, Evan laid a hand on John's arm.

"I don't think the blood is hers. I think she fell on top of the body," Evan said.

John nodded, just barely registering the information.

He was on his hand and knees, one hand lying above her heart, feeling her pounding pulse below his fingers. He sat back on the floor and slid his hands under her limp body, pulling her up into his arms. His face was buried against the side of her neck. She had the raw coppery smell of fresh blood. Very slowly, he pulled off the rest of her shredded and bloody shirt. Her head was slumped on his shoulder. She roused slightly then jerked. Her eyes popped open and she tried to push at John with one hand. A whimpering gasp escaped from her.

"Shh, you're safe," he whispered, trying to will himself to calm down, too. He stroked the side of her face. Her hand reached for his face. It was a vague, uncoordinated

motion. He caught her hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing the center of the palm of her hand. Her body relaxed somewhat.

"Tell me what happened," he said, still holding her hand against his face.

"It... he... Like acid." Her words came out in pieces.

He used the connection of her hand on his skin to try to probe her mind for details. Shields were there, sort of, but also a mass of disjointed pain and images, and he understood why she was having such extreme difficulty piecing her thoughts together. Fiona and Richard arrived, mere seconds having elapsed.

John drew a long shaky breath. "Gather evidence, collect the body, and be on your guard. I'm taking her back to the vehicles."

Slowly, he helped Brie to her feet. She appeared thoroughly shaken, standing there in her bra, smears of blood still on her skin. She shivered. John pulled off his button down shirt and helped her put it on. He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her toward the stairs.

By the time they reached where the vehicles were parked, she seemed a bit more coherent. Cecelia immediately demanded to have a look at Brie, but Brie shrank away.

"No... no... I can't handle having anyone else touch me!" Brie whimpered.

"Please. Just let me deal with this. The blood isn't hers," John said. "Go see if you can lend a hand with the body." He swung the tailgate and set Gabrielle on the edge of the back compartment, her feet dangling. She lifted her hand to run it through her hair and then stopped, seeing all the blood smeared across it. John leaned over and dug a box of wipes out of a side pocket of the truck. He pulled a couple out and took her hand, starting to wipe it clean. She looked at him with a searching expression.

"Are you together enough to tell me what happened?" he asked.

She stared down at her hand in his. "I found the body and started a cursory exam. It was fresh, probably less than an hour old. Then I saw something. Todd and I had crossed paths, then separated again. I assumed he was coming back toward me, but I felt a bit creeped out so I 'opened' up to check and make sure it was Todd. Oh God... It was like disgusting and burning. All I could see was eyes. It was inside my head, still hurts."

John put a hand behind her back and tipped her forward to rest her head on his shoulder. His hand massaged the back of her neck.

"Do you think it was the vampire?"

"I guess. I can only assume so." Her voice was muffled against his T-shirt. Under his fingers, he could feel her shutting down, pulling inward on her pain.

"Don't..." he whispered. "I think it'll make it worse." He pulled his T-shirt loose at the waist and slid her hands

under the fabric, around his body. His hands pulled her closer to the edge of the tailgate. He stood in the V of her legs, her thighs rubbing along his. His hand wove through her hair again, holding her head against his chest.

Open. Use me to block it out. Come on, ground, he said. He could feel her fingers tighten on his back as she choked down the razor thin edge of hysteria. A familiar hand touched between his shoulder blades and John looked back to see Evan standing behind him. John could feel the concern emanating from his partner.

"Do you need help?" Evan asked. John had relied on Evan's ability to help him ground so many times in the past, he suddenly felt abysmally stupid for not immediately thinking to ask for Evan's help now.

"Yeah, I do. We both do." Evan put an arm around John's shoulders and John immediately noticed the comfortable warmth of his presence. They were all immobile for a couple of minutes.

"Better?" Evan asked, looking between John and Gabrielle.

"Yes," John answered. He glanced around and saw that none of the rest of the team had returned yet. He brushed a quick kiss across Evan's mouth and then glanced at Gabrielle. She gave them both a bit of a smile.

Back at the SIS building, Cecelia suggested that Brie go shower and clean off all the dried blood. Cecelia herself

focused on the fresh body. The rest of the team watched her, drifting in and out of the lab while she did the autopsy. Fiona was sent to start a search on the victim's background, using his driver's license as a starting point.

Cecelia noted when Brie reappeared, she was wearing more of John's clothes and she still seemed a bit scattered. Gabrielle sat on the floor against the wall, elbows on her knees, rubbing her temples.

Todd told Cecelia that he and Rich were heading to the armory room to brainstorm ideas on how to stop the thing.

"So, tell me what you've got," Brie said to Cecelia.

"Not as much destruction as the previous bodies. I'd hazard a guess that we interrupted his lunch. "

"Eeeww. Can we not go there for a minute? Saliva?" Brie asked.

"I found the same stuff; it gives a positive UV test. I'm trying to estimate the blood pool at the scene verses what's left in the body. I think we're missing at least two liters or so. That's a bit less than the last victim found, but considering the amount of decomp on that one, I don't know if I totally trust the M.E.'s autopsy estimate. I still think we interrupted him. So, why didn't he attack you? Okay that didn't come out right," apologized Cecelia.

"S'okay, I know what you meant. I sort of wondered about that, too... I think I might be able to track him."

John had been hovering in the far corner of the lab examining the clothing and pocket contents of the victim. He stripped off his gloves and flexed the fingers of his injured hand, adjusting the edges of the elastic bandage. Grabbing Brie in the warehouse had set up a dull throb along the side of his hand where the break was only partially healed. He walked over to squat in front of Gabrielle, tipping her face up toward his, with a fingertip.

"No way," he said to her offer.

Brie pressed two fingers to his lips. "Just shut up and listen. It's a real long shot, but something that utterly nasty might leave enough of a signature that I could find him. Psychic slime trail or whatever. Oh God, it was just vile. Back to why he didn't attack me? I don't know. God knows I was thrown by the contact."

"Wait a minute," said John. He sat on the floor in front of her. "You said you were 'seeking' Todd. You were open when you saw him/it/thing. Did he see you? I don't mean visually."

"Um, I think so. Shit, I think he was actually... startled is not exactly the right word," she said.

"So not only is this thing running around munching on people, he might be psychic as well?" John was stunned.

"You know the whole 'hypnotizes people so they can chomp them' mythos. If this is the same thing it's not really hypnosis, it's more like paralysis. And... Even though I'm not really for shit on the whole inanimate

objects thing. I think we should go back to the scene, and see if I get pick up something."

"No, No, NO! Or don't you remember that three hours ago you were screaming in agony from an accidental contact with this thing!" He grabbed her fingers and laced his own between them.

"Accidental is the operative word. If I know what I'm looking for, my control will be better."

"This is a very bad idea." He could feel her rigid, almost brittle control. She was back to barely holding it together.

Fiona came into the lab carrying a sheet of paper. "It'll be daylight in about three hours. Going on the possibly totally bogus assumption that a vampire is not active when the sun is up, we could go hunt for it then and..."

"Then we should be safe?" asked Cecelia as she stared at Fiona.

"Should! Assume! Maybe! This crap is going to get somebody killed!" shouted John. He stood up and began to pace.

"It already has," said Fiona, gesturing at the body on the table. "And it turns out that guy is a driver for Gelsey & Company."

"Okay, get one of *us* killed!" John replied.

"If we don't do anything, he just keeps on killing," said Evan from the doorway.

They were all silent as his words were taken to heart.

"Shit... Okay, pass the word to everyone. Get something to eat, take a nap, or try to unwind 'til dawn. We'll head out as soon as it's *full* daylight," John ordered. He held out his hand to Brie to help her up.

"Come. You could use a handful of Excedrin and some rest," he said.

John and Gabrielle took the elevator up to his fourth floor quarters, and he grabbed a bottle of Excedrin from the kitchen cabinet.

As Gabrielle gulped down the offered meds, John stood watching her, arms crossed.

"You are running on sheer willpower," he said. She didn't reply. He wasn't really wrong. "Stretch out, on your stomach," he suggested.

She gave him a one-raised-eyebrow look, but complied. He sat next to her hips and pulled her shirt tail up, his hands sliding under the fabric rubbing her back.

"I see you've been raiding my wardrobe again," he said.

"Considering I'm not exactly sure what happened to my shirt," she began.

"My bad. I ripped it down the front. I thought... you were soaked in blood."

She felt his fingers tremble. She squirmed and rolled over, face up. Her hand closed around his, and she grazed her mind across his, sensing just how scared he'd been by the blood.

"I'm okay. A bit shaken, but okay," she tried to reassure him.

"No, you're not. I can tell you're crunched down around the pain, doing that thing you do, where you wall it off and just don't deal with it."

"And just what am I supposed to do? Shit happens, the job goes on!" she snapped.

He cupped her face in his hands and gazed into her eyes. "Let me help. Let me help when you're actually coherent enough to make use of it. And it's not just me doing a seriously half-assed job of trying to patch you up enough to get by! Trust me. "

She was silent for a while. "Trust is a hard thing. Look what it got me the last time," she made a motion with the wrist that had been broken.

"I know. But I am not him. I may have lots of other issues, that isn't one of them."

She got up off the sofa and paced the length of the room, then turned to face him. "One problem at a time, okay?" she said. He nodded. "I have no idea if it's even possible to... fix what he/it did to me in one go. Healing is not my thing, not that this is damage in the conventional sense."

"Nothing ventured..." he said.

"Sit back into the corner of the sofa, so I can lean back against you."

He did so and she slowly sat down. She leaned back on him and pulled one of his arms around her body, the other one she placed on her forehead. Gabrielle lowered her shielding, slowly and deliberately, this was probably just about as safe as she was going to get at the moment.

"Did you eat?" Evan asked softly coming into John's quarters. "Oh fuck, sorry," he apologized, obviously believing he was intruding since Gabrielle was practically in John's lap.

"No, not yet. Stick around for a minute," John replied. Evan's presence had been helpful out at the warehouse, maybe here where they had a little time to sort things out, Evan could lend his gift for grounding to the mix.

"Are you up to help from both of us?" John asked Gabrielle. "It might work better."

She glanced from John to Evan and nodded. Evan sat beside them on the sofa, and placed one hand on John's arm and the other on Gabrielle's.

Brie shivered a little as John probed the surface of her mind. He brushed his mouth along her cheek to soothe her and felt her begin to peel away the control on her pain. It was raw, somewhere between claw rips and brush burn from concrete. She flinched in his arms and he noticed Evan offering a stable background beneath

them.

It did this? John asked.

Yeah, sort of, but it was also a product of trying to rip loose, she replied.

His skill was less than hers but not insignificant. He let his mind glide over the damage, as close to a caress as he could get without pushing against the area. John could feel the underlying simmer of Evan's energy beneath his own. It was intimate and intense, the sort of thing John associated with having sex, but he could feel both of them and that was just a little strange.

Gabrielle felt John's breath on her skin, his mouth was a gentle brush on her neck. A millimeter at a time, he let his own energy seep across the injuries and was mixed with Evan's presence. There was a hand touching her face and it took her time to sort out that the hand belonged to Evan.

The way you touch me... Brie wasn't sure if she meant John or Evan.

I'm a tactile person. I'm also not good enough to do this without a physical component. It'd be easier if we were naked, John responded. She felt a hint of his wicked little grin, but it was laced with concern, and he wasn't entirely joking, lots of skin contact made certain things easier.

A hint of interest and curiosity fluttered by and she

realized it was from Evan.

Am I putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound? John said.

No, it's helping. The fact that I'm not sure what it did is a piece of the problem, Gabrielle replied. Evan's hand stroked her cheek, and she found herself leaning into the different touch. She was amazed and disconcerted by textural comparisons between the two men.

John was all intensity and fury and careless control. Evan was like a candle flame, steady warmth and care. The combination began to ease the majority of the damage back toward something approaching normality.

Bodies cramping from lack of movement, the three of them surfaced to awareness.

"God, what time is it?" muttered John. Both his arms were still around Gabrielle's body and she was slouched against him.

"It's six-thirty," said Evan. "Nearly dawn." The look he gave John was a mixture of fatigue and happiness. Gabrielle realized belatedly that the events of her life were complicating an already existing relationship more than she had been aware, and it stirred a swirl of guilt within her.

"Coffee and food are in order," Evan said.

Chapter 14

Solutions

Thursday, June 28, 2007

When John walked into the main workspace, tucking a light blue shirt into his pants, Fiona handed him a couple of glossy sheets of paper. It took him a moment to realize what they were -- photos from the surveillance tape.

"That's what my digital enhancing programs came up with off the ATM shots. One is the full body pic and the other is a head shot," explained Fiona.

John considered the head picture. The face was sort of humanoid. The jaw line elongated downward giving a face that was less oval and more teardrop shaped. The eyes seemed to be deeply socketed and the nose slightly flattened. The mouth gaped open just a little and fangs that reminded him more of a snake were somewhat visible. The whole photo was a touch blurry and out of focus.

"A bit on the fuzzy side, but wow..." John said.

"I stopped the rendering part of the program before it started making guesses at what it might look like totally cleaned up. It seemed like the software was trying to go too clean and slick. My guess is, although it's a bit blurry, this is more accurate."

He gazed at the second photo. There were two arms, two legs, a head, and it was wearing what he tended to think of as street thug type clothing -- baggy pants, hoodie

with the hood pulled up, and boots. Except for the face, it was the type of look that would barely draw a second glance in inner city D.C.

He flipped back to the head shot. Something about the snakiness of the mouth was unnerving.

"Do you think he can unhinge his jaw? There's this video of a snake choking down a frog... never mind. I'm losin' it." he said.

Fiona grinned at him. "We're all losing it. Looking for a vampire in the twenty-first century United States."

Traffic was a bitch. There had been some patchy fog on the beltway, and a multi-car pileup was making an even larger mess than usual out of morning rush hour. The two Hummers wound their way back to the warehouse. Brie was in the back seat with John, leaning against him, eyes closed. He could tell she was attempting to still her thoughts, put her mind in neutral, just rest. Rich was driving.

"So, are we just going back over the scene, hunting for whatever we missed in the dark?" Rich asked.

"In part. It's fresh. You've been through it once, but we were all a bit unfocused after Gabrielle's near miss, so we're going to go through it again. Maybe we missed something," replied John.

"Should she have stayed back at the office?" asked Rich.

"*She* is not unconscious," snapped Brie. "And there's a chance I can feel this thing. Track it. Maybe."

Both H2s pulled up in front of the warehouse with one fewer team members this time. Fiona had remained at the office to do further research on the vampire mythos. She said she intended to pull as much information as possible off the web and try to supplement with some of the books they had.

Evan, Todd and Cecelia were in the second vehicle. Everyone piled out, checked weapons and gathered forensic gear. They all went back to the second floor of the warehouse where the body had been found as a starting place.

Brie stood with her arms crossed, chewing her lip. John laid his hands on her shoulders.

"You don't have to do this. We'll find another way," he said.

"And since we interrupted its dinner, will it kill again tonight?"

John was silent. He shoved his hands in his pockets and waited, glancing at the walls of the partially empty warehouse. He had no intention of letting her out of his sight. The rest of the team was slowly spreading out, looking for anything that had been missed before. Evan and Rich headed back down the stairs to hunt through the lower floor.

Gabrielle stood with her eyes closed for a good minute, and then she started walking. She touched the edge of

the now mostly dried blood stain, then stood up. She shuffled around in a vague circle, finally heading toward an open window. She stopped.

"It jumped, I think," she said, and she headed for the stairs. Outside she stood below the window, touched the building, the pavement, and then stood staring for a while.

John was worried. If she ended up "in contact" with that thing... He didn't know if he and Evan could patch her up again so soon.

She gave a heavy sigh of frustration and ran. Again, she touched the building, the ground, a light post, then she sat down on the asphalt, head leaning on her knees. John squatted beside her and laid a hand on her back.

"Shit, shit, shit! I am just so useless on inanimate things. All I'm getting is vague impressions that I'm not even sure aren't just my imagination!" she muttered.

"It's okay. I'd rather have you get nothing than get a repeat of last night," he said.

The radio headset crackled in his ear and Rich's voice could be heard. "Hey guys, you're not gonna believe this. I think I found a witness."

"Where? Who?" was John's response.

"A janitorial lady, she came by the storage place across the street to drop off stuff after the night shift. I'm out by the vehicles."

"Hang on to her. I'll be there in five." John held out his hand to pull Brie to her feet. "Come on I want you there, too."

The janitorial service employee was a small Hispanic lady who didn't speak particularly great English, but she quite cooperatively displayed her driver's license, declaring she was very definitely NOT an illegal immigrant. She said she had seen a man in a Halloween mask the night before, walking along the side of the warehouse. He appeared to be sharing a bottle in the obligatory brown paper sack with a buddy. She hadn't paid them an awful lot of attention, but had thought it very weird about the mask. It was a very ugly mask.

The janitorial company she worked for kept extra cleaning supplies in a self storage unit because their own office was very small. She had needed a steam cleaner to clean up after an office party and had come by this morning to return it to the storage unit.

Rich and John asked the cleaning lady more questions about the man in the mask, while Brie leaned against one of the trucks with a pad of paper and a pencil. Gabrielle was actively skimming visuals off the surface of the woman's mind and sketching them on the pad. She wasn't a particularly great artist but drew well enough for things to be recognizable. She jotted phrases along the margins.

John profusely thanked the woman and told her they might be in touch for her to look at a photo, because the man in the mask was suspected of a murder. The woman

headed off back to her car.

"Too bad we didn't bring the photo Fiona scraped together," commented Rich.

John held up a finger, "Hold that idea." He waited patiently while Gabrielle finished with her sketching. She handed him the clipboard. "Brie hasn't seen the photo." He glanced at the clipboard and then handed it to Rich. Rich's eyes widened.

"Well, damn..." Rich said. The sketch was a bit crude but bore a very distinct resemblance to the photo John had seen a few hours before.

"I'm going to go see if anything else epic has turned up back inside." John glanced back at Brie. She was suddenly looking exhausted and he suspected the extra effort of focusing on the witness's thoughts had about done her in. John took hold of her hand. "Stay here with the vehicles. Lie down in the back seat if you like. *You*," he pointed at Rich, "stay with her. This means stay here. Don't bring her back into the warehouse or take her anywhere else. Got it?!"

"Yeah, I got it." Rich looked suitably chastised.

Back inside the warehouse, Cecelia and Todd were at the far end of the upper floor, photographing a few blood drops they had missed the night before and taking samples when John returned.

"I think we're about done," said Todd. "So, what was that about a witness?"

"She was a cleaning company employee. I'll tell you more about it later," replied John. He glanced around. "Where's Evan?"

"Downstairs, I think," said Cecelia.

John tapped his headset. "Hey, Evan where are you?" There was only silence from the radio. "Evan, come in! What's your Twenty?" There was no response.

"He could have a dead battery," suggested Todd hopefully. John exchanged a worried glance with his team-mates.

"Spread out. Find him," John ordered.

Evan had been walking between the rows of crates on the ground floor of the warehouse. Boxes stacked some ten to twelve feet high, some were shrink wrapped, some not, they were labeled "THIS END UP." On the corner of one row, the plastic bore a smear. The lighting was kind of dim and Evan shone his flash light on the smear. It definitely gave the appearance of blood. He presumed from last night as it looked dried. Had the vampire come this way after killing its victim? Maybe. He walked slower, searching for other smears, checking the floor. There was another smear about ten feet farther on. Dropping to one knee, he analyzed the direction the smear seemed to indicate and followed the line of sight.

There was a narrow metal stairwell leading down to a basement level. Evan hesitated for a moment, debating on the wisdom of going below. It was daylight. They were all operating on the assumption that the vampire was inactive during the day. Evan touched the gun at his hip. He drew a deep breath and decided a quick check should be reasonably safe.

Approaching the stairwell and aiming his flashlight down it, he could see that half the steps hung broken at weird angles. Okay, he guessed he wouldn't be going down there, not without a good ladder. There was a whisper of air motion behind him. He glanced back and a blur of darkness smacked into his body, knocking him forward. Evan flailed, grabbing for the edge, and missed. His body impacted a couple of the heavily damaged steps as he fell before crashing onto the concrete floor with bone-jarring force. His vision went black.

Chapter 15

Pressure

Thursday, June 28, 2007

Cecelia walked between packing crates stacked higher than her head calling Evan's name. The warehouse flung back muffled echoes at her. John was searching about a half dozen aisles farther on. Cecelia had covered about two aisles and was nearing the wall, when she noticed an opening in the floor. Edging toward it, she peered down. There was a hint of light from below. She knelt at the opening and tried to see more clearly. The light was dim and seemed to be emanating out in a straight line from a single source. It took her brain a second to process the visual. Flashlight. She followed the beam along its trail with her eyes and saw sneakers. It had to be Evan.

She smacked her headset. "John! Todd! I think I found him! Head toward the west wall." There was the sound of running feet. In a moment, John and Todd were heading toward her.

"Got a flashlight? I can barely see down there," she said. Todd handed her his. John pulled his gun and started to take a step down onto the stairs. Cecelia grabbed him by the back of the shirt and hauled him back.

"Stop! Look! You dumb ass!" She gestured at the numerous stair treads dangling. "You're liable to break your neck." John grabbed the flashlight from her and lay down on the side of the opening on his stomach.

"Hey, grab my feet so I don't slide," John said to Todd. Todd complied and John inched forward so that a good

half of his torso was hanging down into the hole. He aimed the flashlight in his hand in the direction of the dim streak of light below.

"I see him! We have to get down there," said John, wiggling backward until he was no longer hanging in the stairwell. He rested his forehead on the dusty floor, willing himself to be calm when all he wanted to do was leap down into the basement and see if his lover was injured or dead. The last conversation they had had was a thirty second exchange about needing to get another body bag. He felt like he couldn't breathe. *Oh, God. Please don't let that be the last thing I ever get to say to him.*

Cecelia touched his shoulder, and he realized she was actually talking to him and he had no idea what she had said. He lifted his head and glanced at her. He must've looked confused.

"I said, Todd went to get climbing gear out of the truck. Okay? He'll be back in a couple of minutes," she said. John nodded.

Todd came jogging back up the aisle, coil of rope over his shoulder and a harness in his hand. Rich and Brie were a few steps behind him.

"What the hell happened?" demanded Rich as he helped Todd secure the rope around a steel support pole at the end of the aisle.

"We don't know," said Cecelia.

"I'm going down," said John, holding out his hand for the harness.

"No, you're not. You have one hand that's still injured." She gestured at the metal splint and elastic bandage wrapped around his hand. "I'm the doctor. If he's hurt, the sooner I figure out how bad, the better. And if he's..." She didn't finish the sentence.

John merely nodded, his jaw clenched.

Cecelia stepped into the harness and cinched the buckles tight around her thighs and waist. She checked the D-clamp and let Todd hook it to the loop on the rope. He lifted her a couple of inches off her feet to check the connection, then he nodded and gave a thumbs up.

She stepped to the far edge of the stairwell opening and eased into it, one hand on the rope, the other holding a flashlight. Todd and Rich counterweighted her and lowered her carefully.

"I'm down, give me some slack," she called. John lay down on the floor again staring down into the hole, heart pounding. He could see movement, but not a lot else. Behind him, Gabrielle leaned against the packing crates, watching. The fear of what Cecelia might find churned John's stomach.

"He's alive!" Cecelia shouted.

In the light from the flashlight tucked under her arm, Cecelia examined Evan as best she could. Her hands ran along his arms and legs. No apparent breaks. He was lying mostly on his back. She felt along the back of his neck. There were no obvious depressions or irregularities, but the side of his head was sticky with blood. He moaned faintly.

"Evan?" she said. He moaned again. She aimed the flashlight at his chest, so as not to blind him. "Evan, hon, it's Cecelia. Can you talk to me?"

His hand lifted to his head. "Los' my gun," he muttered.

"I'm sure it's around here somewhere. Wiggle your fingers for me." She gently took hold of his hands and waited for him to do so. "How 'bout your legs?" He bent his knees, and rested his feet flat on the floor. "Tell me what hurts."

"Everything... mostly my head."

"There's some blood. I think you bashed your head either on the stairs or on the floor. It looks like the stairs broke." Evan struggled to sit up. Cecelia was leery of such a move, but he didn't seem to have indications of spinal injuries. She wasn't sure if the blood was from just a scalp wound or something more serious. He'd definitely been unconscious for a while. Evan tipped sideways, clinging to her shoulder, obviously dizzy. He had a concussion, she suspected. Getting him out of here was the priority.

"We need to get you up out of here so I can have a better look at your head." She stood up and stepped back a

couple of paces 'til she was directly below the opening.

"He's mobile, more or less, and there's nothing obviously broken. Got another harness?" she asked.

"Not with us. You're damn lucky we had any climbing gear at all. I think we're gonna have to haul you up one at time," said Todd. "Can he get into the harness?"

"I'll put it on him. He's kind of shaky." She returned to where he was sitting and started unbuckling her harness.

"Celi, you can't stay down here by yourself," he said, squinting at her. "Something hit me."

"You can't get into the harness by yourself. There are four people up there. I'll be fine. Tell you what, I actually think I see your gun." She picked up his flashlight which she noticed lying half under the bottom stair tread. Hers lay on the floor beside his leg. She strode toward the wall a dozen feet behind him and picked up his gun, checked the safety, and jammed it in the back of the waistband of her pants. "Better?"

"I guess so." She helped him into the harness and did her best to make sure it was secure. He leaned unsteadily against her, and she wondered if he was going to pass out.

"Both hands on the rope," she said.

Evan was hauled up out of the basement and hung dangling, feet approximately even with the floor. John

reached out and grabbed his wrist, pulling him toward solid ground.

"Give me a few more inches, so I can unhook him," said John. He grabbed a fist of Evan's shirt, maneuvering Evan back, farther away from the stairwell, as Evan sought to get his footing. John jammed his fingers under the webbing of the harness while he unhitched the D-clamp with the other hand. Evan lurched sideways a little. John grabbed Evan's hand and laid it on his shoulder to steady his partner while he worked on the harness buckles.

"Hey, don't keel over, okay?" said John, fighting with the buckle at Evan's hips. What he really wanted to do was wrap both arms around Evan and kiss him passionately with relief that he was still alive, and apologize and tell Evan how much John loved him. None of this was going to happen in a warehouse where they were stalking a vampire, with four other people watching, and the anguish just tore at John's insides. "I'm going to slide it down your legs," he said, tugging the harness downward. Evan braced one hand on the packing crates as John pulled it over Evan's shoes. John stood back up, tossing the harness back down into the basement.

"Celi, catch," he said. He turned back to face Evan who was leaning on the boxes, looking at the blood on his fingers, from where he had run his hand through his hair. John put his hand on the side of Evan's neck, desperate to touch him.

"You going to be all right? What the hell happened?" he asked, still fighting the desire to hold his lover. Evan's

eyes met his and he felt Evan's shielding weaken a little, letting out a hint of reassurance, but it was mixed with pain. Evan drew a deep breath and let it out, and John could sense the pain more clearly.

"I saw some blood on the crates. I thought maybe the vamp had left it, so I started to peek down into the stairwell. And I think something hit me. I'm a little fuzzy on that part," Evan attempted to explain.

Behind them Gabrielle had just finished helping Cecelia unhitch the harness from the rope. Rich and Todd were untying and rewinding the rope. Cecelia crossed to John and Evan.

"Let me check your pupils," she said to Evan. John kept his hand on Evan, unwilling to stop touching Evan even though he thought it was drawing some odd looks from his team.

Cecelia checked Evan's eyes. "Both pupils seemed equal and responsive. That's a good sign. Come on, let's go get you cleaned up," she said and shepherded him in the direction of the vehicles.

Gear and people were loaded into vehicles and they headed back toward the office. Rich drove. John sat in the front seat as Rich tossed out ideas about evidence. Gabrielle sat in the back seat, listening to John's mostly one word responses. He had drawn his shielding up as tightly as she had ever seen, but she noticed flickers of emotion still seeping through, mostly guilt. Seeing Evan hurt was just gnawing at him. She knew that Evan had

nearly died in John's arms some months ago, and there was something uncomfortable going on between them that was tied to her relationship with John. Emotions were viciously complicated things. A little bit of whatever the conflict between them had eased when they'd both helped her fix the damage inflicted by the vampire. She suspected it was only a partial resolution though. A part of her wanted to touch John, comfort him, tell him it was okay and that Evan was safe, but now was the wrong time.

As soon as they got back to headquarters, John went into his office and shut his door. Fiona quickly realized things had not gone much better on the second foray to the warehouse, and she began grilling Todd for information. Cecelia took one good look at Gabrielle and ordered her to eat something and go to bed. Evan got another once-over from her as well as an X-ray and she gave him painkillers for the headache. Everyone was dragging after the events of the night before. After a brief discussion, it was decided that Fiona, Todd, and Rich would go home.

Cecelia proclaimed Evan was not allowed to drive, so if he wanted some sleep it had better be in the building, and she intended to wake him up in a couple of hours.

"So when're *you* planning on sleeping?" Todd asked Cecelia as he headed in the direction of the stairs.

"In about ten minutes. Upstairs in the bunk room, right after I kick my boss' butt."

Todd gave her a wry smile. "Good luck."

Cecelia opened the door to John's office. He was sitting cross-legged in his desk chair, shoes kicked off, elbows on his desk, head resting on his folded fingers. His glance noted her presence.

"Christ, John. Go to bed. We've all been up for something like thirty hours. Thirty, very shitty hours. So help me, I swear I need to get a tranq gun and just shoot you when you pull this shit! Guess what, you're a human being. You need food, sleep, maybe a shower, not necessarily in that order." She ended her tirade, just glaring at him.

He smirked just a little. "You know perfectly well you're the only one I let get away with chewing me out."

"Good! That's part of what you hired me for! Now move it!"

John unfolded himself from the chair and walked toward the kitchen. Cecelia had vanished in the direction of the stairs, so in the spirit of needing food John started throwing things into the blender: milk, yogurt, a banana, and powdered protein. He flipped the switch and watched the contents whirl for a minute, debating the merits of bothering to get a glass.

"If Celi catches you, she's gonna tell you real food would be better," said Evan. John turned around slowly. Evan was leaning against the opposite counter, hands braced behind him.

"Yeah, you're probably right," he replied, turning the blender off. He gazed at Evan, who looked sort of haggard. "Fuck this." John whispered. He crossed the space between them in two steps and pressed Evan back hard against the counter, both arms around Evan's body, sealing his mouth over his lover's in a hard, passionate kiss. It was an all out assault of lips and tongue and teeth. He bent Evan back until Evan lay half across the counter. It wasn't enough. John leaned down and hooked an arm behind Evan's knees and lifted the rest of his body up onto the counter, then crawled up onto the counter and lay on top of him, arms crossed under Evan's head, kissing him again, devouring him. The softness of his mouth, the abrasion of razor stubble, the warmth of Evan's body under John's was heady and reassuring. John dropped his shielding and sank his mind against Evan's, feeling it open to his. Evan's mind felt softly fogged to John, probably from the pain killers Evan had been given.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't bear to lose you, John whispered. Evan's hands were on either side of his head, forcing him to lift his face away. Evan's eyes searched his.

We don't usually... do this, replied Evan.

I know. And we should. The two of us putting Brie back together made me think about what I'm not giving you. You accused me of not giving you my emotions... I'm stupid. It took me a while to figure out why. I have spent so much of my life shutting out the world. Trying to keep my sanity. After piecing her back together... it's intimate, it's addictive, I realized I missed it, so bad. I let you

ground me, but I don't let you in. Oh God, Evan. Please forgive me.

Yes. Evan's hands were yanking John's shirt loose from his belt, fumbling with buttons. Evan gave up and ripped it, buttons went flying in a spatter across the tiled floor. John was shoving Evan's T-shirt up over his head, mouth trailing down the center of his chest.

A slight click-creak noise off in the distance broke the near silence. They both looked at the door to the stairwell. It drifted the last couple of inches shut and clicked again.

"Cecelia," said John, giggling.

"You know I can't figure out if she has world's worst timing or if it's us."

"That makes what... four times. You know, at some point she's actually gonna interrupt the part where we're both naked," John said with a snicker.

"You gotta admit the kitchen counter in the work room was not exactly a brilliant idea."

This set John giggling again. He slid off the counter and held out a hand to Evan.

"So, were you actually planning on drinking that?" asked Evan, gesturing at the blender.

"Yeah, yeah." He pulled a glass out of the cupboard, then on second thought pulled out a second. He split the contents of the blender between the glasses and handed

one to Evan.

"God, I'm tired," said John. "I'd suggest we go crawl into bed together, but I think that's where Cecelia sent Brie."

Evan brushed his fingers along John's jaw. "Just how stupid do you think Gabrielle is?"

"Huh?"

"She's asleep in the bunk room. She knew you were busy tearing yourself apart because I got hurt."

"Oh..."

"We're both exhausted. Bed is a good idea." Evan took his hand and led him toward the stairs.

Clothing flung on the floor, John dragged Evan under the blankets with him. They were both naked and that was exactly how he wanted it. Despite the fact he was probably falling in love with Gabrielle, John suddenly realized how deeply he had been missing intimacy with Evan. John wound his arms and legs around Evan, kissing him deeply, savoring the taste of his mouth and feel of his body.

He also knew that Evan was aching from the fall, and John was uncertain just how far to push in terms of sex. Evan seemed blissfully content to grope and kiss for a while, but John eventually noticed the hard press of Evan's cock grinding against his. Evan guided John's hand to wrap around both of their erections together.

"Is this okay? I'm not going to hurt you, am I?" John whispered.

"Huh-uh, need this," moaned Evan.

John stroked them both slowly, as he plunged his tongue into every recess in Evan's mouth. He could feel the build from both of them. Evan let out a shuddered groan as he climaxed, come spurting up between them. John followed him a moment later. Together they lay spent, folded in each other's arms.

Love you, said John.

"Love you, too," mumbled Evan.

A tinny little version of an obnoxious pop tune jolted John out of sleep. He groaned. He really needed to change his ring tone. He was tangled halfway wound around Evan, the sheets twisted and mangled. He managed to free himself enough to grope on the floor for his pants, pulling out his cell phone.

"Benchley," he groaned.

"I'm guessing you were asleep. Good, but I need you to wake Evan up and make sure he's lucid. He had a pretty good knock on his hard head," said Cecelia.

"Um, okay..."

"If he doesn't seem all right, come down to the lab to get

me. Otherwise go back to sleep. 'Bye.'

John was left staring at the phone.

"Who 'as that?" mumbled Evan.

"Cecelia."

"What'd she want?"

"For me to wake you up," John said.

"So why'd she call *you*? Oh, never mind."

John grinned at him. Evan rolled over on his back and rubbed his hands down across his face. John propped his head on his hand and looked down at Evan.

"Blink, slowly," he said, and he watched Evan's pupils contract as he opened his eyes. "Is your vision okay?"

"Yeah, my head is still killing me though. It's kind of like a railroad spike in the side of my head. I guess it's a little like your migraines," he said.

John pulled him closer and tipped his head forward, digging fingers carefully into the back of Evan's neck. *Try to relax*, John said. Evan took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

Chapter 16

Methods of Analysis

Thursday, June 28, 2007 -- evening

When Gabrielle pried herself out of the lower half of the bunk bed, the sun shone a gold sliver on the floor beneath the heavily curtained windows. The bunk room was silent. She picked her purse up off the floor, dug out her cell phone, and started listening to her voice mail. There were two from Chris; geez it always seemed he never remembered to tell her everything in one go. Chris, her boss at the FBI, had spent thirty-five minutes on the phone with her yesterday, trying to deal with data from a couple of ongoing cases. He was already thoroughly unhappy with her. Time spent at SIS, plus time spent at Division P all added up to time NOT spent on her FBI tasks. There was little he could do about either, other than hope it would all be settled soon. There was also a voice mail from a girlfriend named Danielle saying she hadn't heard from Brie in awhile and they should do lunch. Then, Tom.

"Gabrielle, you bitch! They served papers on me at work! This is shit. I will fight this! And you're going to regret every second!"

She closed her eyes, fighting a tremor of fear. She absolutely did not need this, and then a flicker of sorrow went through her mind. She hadn't meant for it to affect his job. That wasn't supposed to be part of this. No, wait, that was stupid. What he did affected *her* job! Old habits, bad habits died hard. She took a deep breath and focused on slowing her pounding pulse. There was work to be done, and a vampire to find. She had to be the one

in control, not him. She had to be the one making the choices, not him.

Brie walked slowly down the stairs to Cecelia's lab and found the doctor asleep on the hospital bed, journal article open on her chest. The title read "Recovery Prognosis on Identification of Necrotizing Fasciitis." Brie smiled a little and turned to go.

"What time is it?" Cecelia asked, struggling into an upright position.

Brie turned back around. "Pushing six. Is that a good place to sleep?"

"Good enough. Doctor's prerogative."

"A little light reading before bed?" teased Gabrielle.

"Sort of, the details keep bugging me."

"Such as?"

"It's hard to put my finger on it, but I keep trying to connect the tissue death with the whole UV sensitivity thing."

"We know the saliva generates an intense heat reaction with UV or sunlight. We assume it's the saliva that caused the necrosis. That was semi-confirmed by the samples I retrieved from the pathophys lab that came from Lauren Mitchell's body. How far into the body does the saliva progress? After death does it basically stay on the surface portions of the wounds? Or does it continue to react with the tissue?" asked Gabrielle.

"Good questions. Questions I don't know the answer to. And guess what, we have a fresh body. I have a UV light box and there's also the germicidal one in the hood."

"Oh, don't want to expose *us* to that one if we don't have to. It's too strong and too dangerous. Let's go for the light box; there's enough sunburn risk with that one."

Gabrielle and Cecelia spent about an hour extensively documenting the wounds on the body with digital photos and swab samples, then they set up the UV box on a set of ring stands, so it hung over the body.

"What kind of distance do you think we should use?" asked Cecelia.

"In my UV/VIS in the lab, there's about a 10 centimeter path length, but we want to take video while we're doing this. I think more like 40 centimeter to give us enough room."

"Okay, got it." They measured, set up the video camera, and stared at each other with a bit of anxiety.

"Here goes," said Brie and flicked on the light, and Cecelia clicked the stopwatch.

"You know this reminds me of fake and bake," mused Gabrielle, taking pictures.

"Say what?"

"Fake and bake," laughed Brie. "Couple of my

colleagues from work are into the whole tanning bed thing, on how it's *so* much better than lying out in the sun, yeah right. Like I really want knots in my DNA on purpose." Cecelia gave her a look with one raised eyebrow. "Sorry, guess you're... the wrong color to go for the whole tanning thing." She glanced at Cecelia's deep mocha skin.

"Gee, ya think?"

Fiona leaned into the lab. "Are you guys burning something?" she asked. Cecelia looked up from the pad where she was scribbling notes.

"Sort of. We're trying to calculate the amount of UV exposure it takes to completely and fully react with vampire saliva. It burns the flesh, hence the smell, and since we had a nice fresh obliging body..." said Cecelia.

"Eeeeww! Eeeeww! Stop! I don't wanna know any more!" squealed Fiona and dashed for the stairs.

"You enjoyed that," said Brie.

"Yep." Cecelia grinned.

Fiona shoved two large aluminum pans of frozen chicken pot pies into the oven on the main level. It was her turn to cook. She dragged a large bag of frozen broccoli out and left it on the counter to thaw a little. Garlic bread seemed like an appropriate accompaniment,

given the circumstances.

Returning to her desk, she devoted some time to trying to calculate the speed of the vampire from the ATM security video. Estimating the field of view in the far distance, and the timing between the only two frames that showed the vampire, she came up with about thirteen meters per second. That sounded fast. She Googled human sprinting speeds and found a reference to ten point two meters per second. Yippee! That thing was moving faster than an Olympic sprinter *while* carrying a body. How fast could he move on his own? Cheetah speed, something like thirty-two meters per second?

She glanced at the clock. The pot pie package had said the cook time was one hour. She still had close to forty minutes 'til they were done. While she was waiting, Fiona wondered why he/it had hidden the body in the bucket of the cherry picker. Why not just heave it in a dumpster and let it go at that? Todd came into the work room, and set a pair of boxes of ammunition on his desk, along with some empty clips.

"Have we got any idea if normal bullets will kill this thing?" he asked. "Or are we going to be waving a crucifix and running at it with a pointy stake?"

"I have no idea, but tell you what, this thing moves at the speed of a sprinter or faster and I don't. So I'm really hoping guns can kill it or at least immobilize it," she replied.

Todd opened one of the boxes and began loading rounds into a clip. "I figured maybe we'd load all the 9mm's

with hydrashoks. They've got pretty fair terminal performance. And maybe I'll drill out some hollow points and put a little something extra in them."

"Like what?"

"Maybe garlic? It might be more effective to shoot 'em with it rather than eat it." He pointed a finger at the half prepped garlic bread lying on the counter. Fiona stuck her tongue out at him.

"I don't know. I kind of got the impression that was a slow kill sort of thing," Fiona said.

"Oh, well maybe I'll need to rethink that."

Fiona started dragging out a steamer for the broccoli. Her foot struck something small on the floor and it made a light clattering noise. She glanced down and saw a button. When she bent to pick it up and realized there were four more scattered across the floor. Curious, she gathered them up. Small, pale, blue, they looked like buttons off a guy's shirt. Why five? Whose shirt? Her thought made a little mental leap. Hadn't John been wearing a blue shirt sometime yesterday? Or was that this morning? She wasn't exactly sure. Had John and Brie gone at it in the kitchen? She thought back to the kiss she'd seen after Gabrielle had returned from her trip to southern Virginia. Oh yeah, she could just about picture them ripping each other's clothes off. She left the buttons in a pile on the counter. Rich came in and began talking to Todd about body armor.

Everyone gathered in the work space to eat and trade ideas.

"In my opinion, the whole past day and half has been an outright clusterfuck," said John. "We thought we'd track it down via the information from the precog and get a jump on it and maybe luck out and execute the thing. Instead, we get one dead body and a near miss with Brie. And what we think might be a second one with Evan. This is unacceptable! Somebody please come up with a better idea!"

"This thing is fast! Superhuman fast. We can't outrun, so we're gonna have to out think it," said Fiona.

"How fast?" asked Cecelia.

"Faster than an Olympic sprinter."

"Ouch."

"And we think it jumped out a window about thirty feet up without going splat on the pavement. Which brings me back to the question I asked Fiona; do we have any idea if bullets will stop this thing?" said Todd, snagging a plate off the pile. Fiona had set all the food on the counter that fronted the kitchen, and everyone was gathered there, loading up their plates.

"No one seems to know. But here's some more info. Gabrielle and I conducted a little experiment. We tested the body downstairs to see if we could make a definite connection between the whole saliva issue and its UV sensitivity and the victim who died sort of belatedly," Cecelia explained. "Saliva was in the bites, but only in

roughly the top inch of the wound, blood flowing outward and all that. It does retain its UV sensitivity. So we determined it takes a minimum of five minutes of UV exposure to fully deactivate whatever is in the stuff. Without a couple of rats to test the saliva on for the necrosis factor, we're a little stuck at this point."

Fiona made a face at the information and Todd laughed at her.

"So does this mean it would take at least five minutes of zapping this sucker with ultraviolet light before he goes poof, up in smoke?" asked Evan.

"Presumably. That's just a best guess scenario."

"I think maybe we're back to making assumptions that most parts of the mythos are true, at least in some fashion," said John, and he made a gesture with a hunk of the garlic bread.

"I'll forward everyone the list I compiled of possible weaknesses and the like," said Fiona.

"So that leaves us with what? Stab him in the heart with a stake, behead him and or fry him in the sunlight?" suggested Rich.

"Beheading is my choice. Preferably with a little Semtex or a grenade," said Todd.

"I have to admit, that sounds like the safest choice for *us*, but I really doubt he's going to stand still long enough for us to pull something like that off," agreed John.

"Yo, gotta find him first!" replied Rich.

"I've been working on the map," said Fiona. "He might not be in the warehouse itself, but all the lines connecting known victims point to that area. I'm trying to get a map of sewer lines to interface with the rest of it, 'cause I'm guessing he's not likely to be snoozing on a rooftop somewhere."

"So what we need is a game plan. Something that minimizes our risks," said John.

"Here's my suggestions then," began Todd. "Starting with body armor. I'm going to suggest we ditch the idea of regular Kevlar and go with the Dragon Skin ones. Maximum protection and all. But... We all have them and Gabrielle doesn't."

"I can get a vest from work, but it's going to be a standard issue one," she replied. John glared at her and she knew perfectly well he didn't want her anywhere near the vampire.

"I may be six inches shorter, but her ribcage and mine are not that far off. She can take mine and I'll use hers. I'm less likely to be in the line of fire," said Cecelia.

"Maybe," said Todd. "Next items, ammo and weapons. I'll take an M16 with a Beowulf conversion. Any preferences from anyone else? Cause otherwise I'm going to suggest 50 cal Desert Eagles for everyone else, with some 9mm as backup loaded with hydrashok ammo."

"Nuh-uh, no way, I'll take the 9mm but there's no way I'm carrying a Desert Eagle!" protested Cecelia. "That thing kicks like a sonofabitch and I'd be liable to hit one of you."

"I have to agree with Cecelia. I'll take your hydrashoks but I've never fired an Eagle, and we don't really have a week for me to feel comfortable with it. I will, however, swap vests if you don't mind," said Brie.

"Back to ammo, I have some hollow points filled with white phosphorus, left over from the troll adventure. I think it might pay to haul them along. Isn't fire supposed to be lethal to a vampire?" asked Todd.

"In some tales, yes; in others, only maybe," replied Brie.

"What about the whole cross and religious objects thing?" asked Evan.

"That looks off target; the body from last night was wearing a crucifix," said Cecelia.

They spent another hour going round and round, trying to cover all possibilities before reaching a decision to start at the warehouse and then work outward. They would split into three pairs leaving Fiona on backup with the vehicles and tracking all their GPS signals. John and Rich, Cecelia and Todd, Evan and Brie. This produced arguing, so John presented his rationale. Next to Fiona, Cecelia had the least weapons and field experience, and Todd had the most. Together, the medic would stay reasonably safe, and Cecelia was smart enough to follow orders from Todd. Evan was with Brie, in part to keep Brie hopefully out of harm's way. Also

John put forth, since they were searching for a vampire that had a very nasty psychic signature, it needed to be someone who was not headblind, so there was a chance of helping Gabrielle break free of contact if needed. This, of course, led to more arguing.

"Much as I appreciate the idea of protecting me," said Gabrielle, "each pair needs someone psi or I don't think we're going to find this thing. Put me with Todd, since he has all the really big guns." That produced laughter. "And put Evan with Cecelia. It makes more sense, since me, John or Evan are going to be the ones hopefully noticing this thing."

"Are we doing this tonight?" asked Rich.

"No, no. Much as I hate the fact that this thing is potentially going to kill someone else tonight, we're not ready. We all got *some* sleep, and here we sit having a meal, but we need to be better rested, more alert, and have time to get all the weapons and stuff together. We're doing this tomorrow. If we shoot for reaching the warehouse around six p.m., that'll give us all a day to get our shit together. And we'll still have a little daylight left. Since we're not entirely sure how active this thing is during the day, if it wakes up at dusk per the legends, then hopefully one of us will pick up on it, and we can find it in a hurry." John finished.

With that, the team began to return plates to the kitchen, and disperse to begin preparations. Fiona watched the pile of buttons on the kitchen counter. Would anyone notice them? She was slightly astonished to see Cecelia

brush them off the counter into her hand. John was slouched against the frame of his office door, talking on the phone. Cecelia took hold of his wrist and poured the buttons into his hand. He rolled his eyes a little. Now, Fiona was mightily confused. Had Cecelia and John had a quickie in the kitchen?

Across the room, another pair of eyes watched John. Now that the business of the case was dealt with for the moment, Brie was meditating on how to tell him that Tom had left her a fairly threatening, if nonspecific, message.

"You look lost in thought," said Evan, leaning on the wall beside her. She glanced at him.

"Too many things going on," she replied.

"Spit that catches on fire, and dead bodies, and vampires. Yeah, that probably qualifies as too many things," he smiled. "But there's something else, I suspect."

"Tom left me some voice mail." Evan raised an eyebrow and gave her a concerned look. Gabrielle was mildly relieved that Evan's response was low key.

"Angry? Obscene? Threatening? All of the above?" he asked.

"All three, I guess."

"Did you delete it?"

"No," she said hesitantly, not that she hadn't been extremely tempted. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and handed it to him. He listened to the message.

"Your locks have all been changed. But, how likely is he to try and break in?"

"He's mad. I think it's all just words. Listen, I haven't been home for more than ten minutes since I got back from Suffolk. I'm going to head on out and go questing for clothes that actually belong to me. And I'll go swing by work and pick up a vest, too."

Gabrielle walked toward John who was still deep in his phone conversation. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and mouthed, "gotta go get clothes," while tugging on the collar of the shirt she wore. John frowned as she walked away.

The DCPD had received complaints from the owner of Gelsey & Company about why there was crime tape on parts of their warehouse. John spent another thirty minutes arguing jurisdiction and trying to convince the police, the owner, and a manager that the warehouse was a crime scene, especially the second floor. He finally got them to agree to a twenty-four hour window before anyone would be allowed back to work in the building.

John wandered over to where Evan sat at his desk, dealing with some e-mail.

"That was a serious pain in the ass. So, is Brie coming

back after she gets some clothes?" John asked.

"I don't know. I didn't think to ask. Tom left her some pretty nasty voice mail."

"What?! And you let her leave?! Shit, she promised me she would tell me if he contacted her again!"

Evan reached up from where he sat and grabbed the front of John's shirt. "Chill! This is why she didn't tell you. You blow a gasket every time you think about him. It's okay to worry! But you need to be a little more subtle about it. She needs to learn to trust herself again. However, I was considering going back to my place to check on some stuff. I could swing by her house. It's not too far out of the way."

John grimaced and fought his urge to go himself. Evan did have a point, much as he hated to admit it.

Brie unlocked the front door to her house. It was quiet inside. She tossed her keys on the hall table and trudged up the stairs. In the bedroom, she stripped out of the borrowed clothes and tossed them on the bed. She took a shower and dragged on a T-shirt and underwear to sleep in. She was gathering up the other clothes to take down to the wash when the phone rang. It was probably John.

"Hello," she answered.

"Fucking bitch. Why'd you drag the damn police into this? This is between you and me!" Tom was yelling at her.

Dropping the phone, she bolted back down the stairs, nearly falling, and yanked her gun from her purse. With her 9mm clutched in her hand, she sat on the steps and tried to force herself to calm down. After a few minutes, she remembered that she had left the phone lying on the bedroom floor. She wondered if he was still screaming through it. As she stood up to go back upstairs, there was a knock on the front door and her heart rate shot into the stratosphere again.

Practically hyperventilating, she gripped her gun tighter. She had shot at him once, she could do it again, she told herself. She unlocked the door and wrenched it open, then wrapped her second hand around the gun.

Evan stared at her in frozen wide-eyed shock. She stood immobile, chest heaving.

"Gabrielle?" said Evan, finally finding his voice.

"Oh God, I thought you were him," she gasped and slowly lowered her gun. She stepped back and went to sit on the steps again, 9 mm dangling loosely from her fingers. Evan shut the door behind him and sat on the steps beside her. She ran trembling fingers back through her damp hair. "Damn, Evan. I could've shot you. What're you doing here?"

"I was worried. Maybe rightly so?" he said.

She huffed out a long breath. "He called again. Shit, I didn't even hang up the phone. I left it lying on the bedroom floor."

"Did he say he was coming here?"

"No. It was just vague and furious." Evan put an arm around her shoulders and she leaned gratefully against him. She appreciated his relatively calm if concerned presence. She was tempted to kiss him just to let him know how much she valued his reasonably sane and caring response.

"I know you want some space and some control, but maybe now is not the best time... I think that you should either let me sleep on your sofa, or get your stuff and let me take you back to the office. A vampire and a psycho are too much to deal with at the same time."

She gave a bitter, mirthless laugh. "Only my life could apply to a sentence like that."

She decided SIS was probably a better choice for the night and threw a batch of clothes in her bag. More than one set; working with SIS was hard on the wardrobe.

John was sitting on the floor of his den. More than a dozen books lay on the floor around him, some open, some not. Fiona's list of potential vampire traits also lay flung on the floor. She was generally pretty thorough, but occasionally she ran a little light on non-electronic information sources. He was searching through some of his books, just in case there was some little edge she had missed.

"Hunting for a little bedtime reading?" asked Evan from the door.

John looked up. "Just double-checking some things, and considering going on a quest through some of the occult bookstores when this is all said and done. We need more resource books. So, did you actually go home?"

"No." The resigned tone of Evan's voice prompted John to immediately stand up.

"Where's Brie?" he demanded, lunging at Evan and grabbing him by the shoulders.

"Downstairs on my computer." He grabbed John's head with both hands. "Stand still and listen!" John glared at him but did so. "Tom called her at home. She's fine. A little bit stressed but fine."

John pulled away and stalked toward the window in fury. "I swear I wish she had actually shot him that night! It would have made things so much simpler! Hell! *I* should have shot him!"

"Okay, nice sentiment, but focus on the problem. The primary issue is keeping her safe from him." John made a snarling face at Evan and continued to pace in anger. "I get your whole rage thing. It makes me mad, too, but you have to let her feel like she has some sort of control. Remember she is only just beginning to come to terms with the fact that she has other options than just him for physical contact," Evan finished.

Okay, okay." John threw himself onto the sofa, arms crossed. He ran both hands back through his hair and tried to rein in his temper. Evan sat down beside him. John slouched sideways, and laid his head on Evan's

legs, his own feet propped on the arm of the sofa. He gazed upward and made another snarling face. Evan laughed a little.

"Can I still want to kill him?" John muttered.

"Yeah, if you like. We could feed him to the vampire."

"Truthfully, you think she's okay?"

"She's trying. She opened the door with her gun in her hand," Evan said.

"Oh. I'm gonna go down and talk to her. You still going home tonight?"

"I'm not in the mood to go get on 495 again, even if it is ten at night. I'll go crash downstairs."

John sat up slowly and hauled himself to his feet. He started in the direction of the door, then stopped.

"I suppose it would be way too weird to suggest my bed's big enough for three..." he said.

"If we didn't have really insane plans for tomorrow, maybe we could all discuss it. But, no, some other time," replied Evan.

John kissed Evan before he walked out the door.

Downstairs he found Gabrielle sitting at Evan's desk, staring at a photo taken earlier by Cecelia of their "experiment" in progress.

"Can I get you to tell me about the phone call? Actually, either of them?" he asked.

She spun the desk chair around slowly. "He's mad. He's venting. He hasn't done anything else," she said.

"But you thought you could stop him with your gun if he had been the one knocking on your door."

"Yes."

"I hope that would have been true. But that's pretty damn risky." What he wanted to do was grab her and hold her tightly and run his hands over every inch of her body to assure himself she was unharmed; instead he held out his hand to her.

She stood up and walked slowly toward him. He folded his arms around her and rested his cheek on her forehead. "My turn to... vent. Twenty-four hours ago, you got your brain run through a blender by a vampire. You're still just as tired as the rest of us. Garner is a psychopath. Even thinking you were capable of facing him down was just plain stupid. Every time you're at risk, it tears me up inside. And here I am planning on letting you help us hunt down the vampire. I must be out of my mind."

Brie slid her arms around his body and let her shielding fall open.

I love you, he said. She buried her face against his shoulder.

"John... I can't," she whispered. "Please don't ask..."

He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers. "It's all right, I told you before if this is not what you want, it's fine, but I do love you."

She drew a long, strained breath and tilted her face up toward his. He could feel the wave of angst washing through her.

"I want you. I need you, but the last person I said it to died, and I thought it would destroy me," she whispered.

"It does for a while and then you eventually have to start again. The scars never go away, but at some point you learn to live with them." He kissed her and led her in the direction of the stairs.

Faint, dawn light peeked through the gap in the curtains. Gabrielle opened her eyes. John had one arm wound around her body, holding her. His face was relaxed, lips parted slightly. His hair was tousled, his skin creased by sheet marks, and his razor stubble obvious. So why did she think he looked like some carnal angel? She thought about the very first time she'd seen him, the meeting at Quantico. Even through the agony of the migraine pain she had thought he was unbelievably gorgeous. Now here she was in his bed, and he loved her. It was that simple, except it wasn't.

She sometimes wished she could go back in time and just obliterate her past. A telepathic child raised by parents who insisted that emotions should never be trusted, that how you were perceived by society was all-

important. Don't make waves. Don't be noticeably different. Then there was her recruitment into Division P during grad school, a diametric opposite. Trust your gut, implicitly. Let your subconscious overrule standard logic. Be as overwhelmingly different as you need to be to be comfortable in your own skin. The real truth probably lay somewhere in between, and she felt she never seemed to find the right blend. Her heart wanted to abandon all logic and just love John. Her head screamed that that was as poor a choice as letting Tom take out his anger on her for the sake of a touch. Anything that left her that vulnerable was going to hurt.

John made a sleepy sigh and drew her closer to his body, his face nuzzling into her neck.

"Too early in 'e morning for that much stress," he mumbled.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you," she said.

"S'okay."

"It occurred to me, I have slept with you more times in the past two weeks than I slept with him in an entire year. Literally, not... the sex part."

"Mmm... Like sleepin' with you. The sex part, too."

"I think you're only pretending to be awake."

"Too many questions before coffee." He rolled halfway on top of her, to squint at the clock on the night stand.

"Ugh, six-twenty. What time do you have to be at work?"

"Eight-thirty. It's going to take at least thirty minutes on the metro plus the ten minute walk."

"Need coffee," he muttered and slowly got up and shuffled toward the kitchen.

Gabrielle was washing her hair when he came into the bathroom. Through the glass of the shower, she watched as he stood, unwinding the elastic bandage that bound his hand to the metal splint, and then he got in the shower with her.

"I am amazingly glad that Cecelia let me ditch the cast," he said. He pressed her slowly back against the wall, running his hands over her soap slick skin. He combed his fingers through her wet hair, cradling her head and began to kiss her. His knee nudged her legs apart and his fingers explored. Her breathing hitched as his tongue pressed between her teeth. Her foot skidded on the wet tile as she arched on the pressure from his fingers and she began to slide. John grabbed at her to keep her from falling and her back slammed his only partially healed hand into the water dial. He let out a cry of pain, but kept his hold on her as she scrambled to regain her footing. As she did so, he bent forward hugging his injured hand against his stomach.

"Sonofabitch," he groaned, dropping to his knees.

"Oh God, I'm sorry!" she apologized. It took him another minute to catch his breath. Gabrielle was sitting on the floor on the shower with her arms around him. He forced himself to flex his fingers.

"Did I rebreak them?" she asked hesitantly.

"I don't think so. It was my fault anyway. My penance for trying to distract you. I can just see me trying to explain to Cecelia why I screwed up my hand again." He gave her a lopsided grin, and she kissed him.

"Guess we better stick to the taking a shower part," she said.

Chapter 17

Reactivity

Friday, June 29, 2007 -- 6 pm

Back near the warehouse, the SIS team started unloading the vehicles. Headsets and throat mics were passed out, along with the vests. Brie was struggling with the Velcro closures on the vest she had borrowed from Cecelia. John turned to help her. He pulled one side back apart and then lined up the two edges before pressing them together.

"Are you going to be able to tell whether the vampire is even in the area?" he asked.

"I should be able to. You guys are going to have to give me a few minutes to scan for it. 'Cause there's no way I'm just dropping open," she said.

He sighed a little and pulled her against his body, hands cupped around her face. "I want you on your guard against this thing. Considering what it did to you the last time, I'm still wondering if this is a piss-poor idea," he said. Around them, the rest of the team was connecting headsets to power packs and putting on their own vests.

Gabrielle walked toward the wall of the building and leaned against it. She glanced around to make sure she was a good ten feet from anyone. It would make it slightly easier to sort out anything she might pick up from the vampire. The sun had dipped just below the horizon, but there was still enough daylight to clearly see the SIS personnel gearing up. Long, dim shadows were cast by the vehicles. This was not going to qualify

as fun. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then she closed her eyes.

A fraction at a time, she began to lower her defenses. Pretend it's a practice session, just like back at Division P headquarters, an exercise in how slowly you can open up to the psychic signatures around you. One by one she ID'd the minds. John's was a bright, intense spark behind the shuttered walls of his shielding. Evan was a steady glow, candle warm, what shields he had were carefully schooled, but with a touch of tension. Then Cecelia, just shy of completely headblind, focused on checking her medical supplies. Todd, his thoughts ordered, precise, running a mental checklist of weapons. Rich, thinking about a SWAT team assault on a similar location. Fiona was fretting over radio frequencies and GPS signals.

Now Brie needed to inch down her shielding a little more. Feeling, seeking, searching for... She flinched hard; it was like catching a whiff of warm nitric acid -- sharp. But this was sluggish, too. It wasn't completely active, energies damped. Not asleep, but not hunting. A lick your lips hint of hunger. She nudged her shielding back up a couple of notches, swallowing hard against the terror that threatened to overwhelm her. Would it have noticed her? She thought not. There was a certain self-centered, arrogant edge. It wouldn't think of itself as the hunted.

It was a thoroughly un-nerving sensation nonetheless, and she struggled to control her accelerating pulse. Be calm. Be in control. She felt a thread of concern from John. He was watching her. He had seen her flinch. She lowered her shielding again, but only some. It was there. She still didn't know where, but not too far. She wasn't

really very good at the whole tracking idea. It just wasn't her thing. She drew a shaky breath. This was probably as good as the information was going to get. She pulled all her defenses back in place, still fighting flickers of fear within herself, and walked back toward the vehicles.

"So?" John asked, coming toward her.

"It's here and awake but not hunting... Yet. It's somewhere close. I can't get a fix. Well, let's put it this way, I don't really want to drop open far enough to get a potential repeat of the other night," she said. John's hands rested on her shoulders, his thumb stroked along the side of her neck.

"It's fine. Don't sweat it. I don't want you getting a repeat either. So, take a few minutes to center and pull yourself back together." He took both her hands in his and laid them against the base of his throat, letting her into his head. She could feel his worry, at war with duty and necessity. They had to stop this thing, but it tore at him that he could be putting both her and Evan in mortal danger. She felt him huff out a long sigh and attempt to settle his own thoughts.

"Stick tight with Todd, okay? He's good at this sort of op," he said.

"I will," she whispered.

He let go of her hands with a great reluctance.

John walked around one of the Humvees to find Evan. Evan was shoving an extra clip in his pocket and checking the connection on his radio headset. John grabbed his jaw.

"Hey, no falling down a stairwell this time, got it?" John said.

"Yeah, I got it," Evan replied with a bit of smile.

Be careful, was a silent added comment by John before he released his grip. Evan nodded.

"Radio check!" Fiona called out and they all spent a couple of minutes testing. John gazed steadily for a moment at Brie.

"Listen up," John said. "Brie says it's here, somewhere close, and it's awake. We have no idea if it's planning on looking for lunch right away or what. So we're going with the game plan. Lock and load."

Three pairs. Todd and Gabrielle started inside the warehouse. Evan and Cecelia were on the street side of building. Rich and John started with the loading dock area.

In the long access alley leading to the loading dock there were a number of Connex boxes. They were eight feet wide and parked end to end for about two hundred feet. Rich checked the lock on the one on the end. It was locked tight. They spent a number of minutes checking the area leading into the dock. Nothing. Something flagged John's attention, a graze against his only partially active shielding, a presence. He made a halt

motion with his fist to Rich. He stopped for a moment, eyes closing trying to identify it, dropping his shields more. Could it be someone else from the team? Didn't seem like it. John could feel Rich, standing a couple of feet away, watching, waiting, a familiar presence. It seemed to be farther away, up ahead.

"I think I might be picking up something. You go down the left side of the Connex boxes and I'll go down the right. Yell, if you see something. Shoot it first, ask questions later," ordered John, and they eased along opposite sides of the line of big metal boxes, guns drawn.

John crept along the alleyway. It was pretty close to full dark now. Street lights had come on and the hum of traffic on the highway at the far end of the street had dropped off a little. His sneakers didn't make much sound against the asphalt.

"Hey, Rich, see anything yet?" he said softly, counting on the throat mike to pick up his voice.

"Nothing yet," was the measured reply.

John dropped his shielding as low as he dared. Again, there was *something* there. Something... wrong about it.

John's peripheral vision caught the barest of shadows, motion, and then he was slammed against the wall with brutal force, head impacting brickwork. Stunned, his gun slid from his fingers. Eyes. Just like Brie described it. A vicious, insane hunger breathing in his face. Breath like rotting meat. Paralyzing his body, clawing at the inside of his brain. He struggled against it. Teeth.

John fought weakly against the vampire as its teeth were ripping apart his shoulder. His cry of pain sounded pathetic to his own ears and he thought he heard Rich's voice shouting his name. Stupidly, he decided Brie's comment was right, the grip of the vampire's will on his brain was somewhere between raw sewage and nitric acid. He managed to slam his head forward hard enough to loosen its grip and caught a glimpse of the leathery skin on the side of its head, and the pair of elongated teeth in the center of the upper jaw. It seemed both surprised and enraged. Its fingers dug into his skin again as he struggled to pull free. Teeth were tearing into the side of his neck and the pain ripped through him.

Inside the warehouse, Todd and Gabrielle were working their way along the corridors of boxes. They had covered maybe half the ground floor. Brie was partially focused inward, probably more than was actually safe, but she was counting on Todd to cover her back. Half her attention on what her eyes told her, half her attention on what her telepathy might pick up. There was a flicker, similar to what she had felt earlier, but it was distant, outside the building, then she was hit by a surge of pain and terror. John. It was mixed with the nauseating and caustic feel of the vampire's perceptions. She sprinted up the aisle and toward the loading dock before she even realized she was moving. John was caught in the same horrifying, paralyzing, mindlock that she had been, but it was mixed with debilitating pain. The vampire was tearing into his neck and shoulder, pulling at the shoulder of the vest.

She was stumbling, tightening her grip on her gun. The combination of John's pain and fear along with an ecstasy of hot blood on the creature's lips were a chaotically disorienting combination. Gabrielle fought to shut out at least part of the sensations. As she ran out on to the loading dock, she could dimly see the vampire with its hands clenched into John's body as it pinned him against the wall of the alley. Its hairless head was bent to John's neck. Aim for the body, her brain told her foggily. A head shot would be too close to John's. She focused and began squeezing off rounds as she ran.

Bang. Was that a gun shot? John heard the repeated bang of more shots, drawing closer and closer. The vampire's grip was loosening on his arms.

Gabrielle watched the vampire twitch as the bullets tore into its side, the impact jerking its body. It pulled away from John by several inches, lifting his face, showing his ugly, deep socketed eyes, and blood smearing its teeth filled mouth. It was changing its attention to her, amidst a blaze of pain. It was attempting to focus that paralyzing gaze on her. Aim higher, she thought, head shots. Bits of flesh went flying, then bits of skull, the hairless head rocking sideways. She felt the click of an empty chamber and she madly groped in her pocket for the spare clip.

Suddenly, John could turn his head enough to see Brie

running full tilt, arm out, and gun blazing. Her face was absolutely blank, hyper-focused. As the vampire finally let go, John fell to his knees. He saw her drop out the clip and slam another one in. She kept firing. He toppled forward and hit the ground, only dimly able to see Rich sprinting around the far end of the Connex boxes a couple yards behind Brie. More people were behind them.

The vampire's body teetered and flopped to the ground, the back half of its head mostly obliterated, dark fluid oozing from at least a half dozen body wounds. It made uncoordinated, twitching motions.

Gabrielle could feel it struggling to continue its attack, furious but also a hint of cornered animal fear. The presence was dimming, dying but raging against it. It was hard to keep its desperation out of her head and she fell to her hands and knees a few feet from it. She was dimly aware of Fiona's voice shouting over the radio.

"What's going on!? I hear gunfire! Talk to me! Status report!"

"John's down! Past the loading dock! Sonofabitch! I see it!" Rich shouted in response.

Evan came charging off the edge of the loading dock and saw John sprawled limply on the ground covered in blood. He ran toward his partner and dropped to his knees beside the man. Blood was pooling on the

pavement beneath John's shoulder, flowing from deep torn gashes where his neck and shoulder met. In seconds, Evan was yanking off his own vest and then his T-shirt. He balled up his shirt and pressed the fabric against the wounds, trying to apply enough pressure to slow the bleeding.

"God damn it, John! I didn't die on you and you are not going to die on me!" he choked out.

John lifted a hand and touched it to Evan's face. "Kill..." John whispered.

Off to the side, Evan heard an odd metallic thunk and glanced to see Rich standing over the body of the vampire, with a machete in his hand. A smaller almost football shape was a foot or so away. John was losing consciousness; Evan could feel his lover's awareness slipping away.

Gabrielle watched Rich's machete descend, lopping off the head of the bloody, twitching vampire, and the dying rage in her head abruptly stopped. She drew in a sharp breath of relief, but it only lasted an instant as her connection to John surged strong again. He was in deep, deep trouble. Pain, confusion, fighting to remain conscious. She felt at least halfway like her brain had been scoured with steel wool. Damn, the time for dealing with that had to be later, much later.

She scrambled toward John, seeing Evan desperately attempting to slow the flow of blood. Evan glanced up at her, unbearable anguish on his face, and she felt one step

closer to understanding the bond between the two men.

"Help him," Evan begged. "I can't force a connection."

Brie eased John's head and shoulders into her lap, holding Evan's hand in place on the balled up shirt. She dropped all her shielding, reaching for his thoughts. It took a moment and she found the flickering of John's presence as he was fading toward unconsciousness.

Stay awake, John! she ordered. She could feel his mind feebly hanging onto hers.

"Put as much pressure on it as you can!" snapped Cecelia as she knelt beside them. The doctor madly dug inside the backpack on her shoulder and yanked out a number of things. She stripped apart a pair of packages labeled HemCon and then pried Evan's finger away, glancing under the fabric of the blood-soaked shirt. She slapped both of the pads in her hands over the wounds and pressed down hard. Within seconds the blood flow slowed to a trickle.

"We need to get him back to the truck," said Cecelia. Todd was running down the alley toward them.

"What the fuck happened?! Brie just took off! Oh, hell!" yelled Todd as he practically skidded to a stop beside them. He smacked his headset. "Fiona! We've got a casualty. John's down!"

"Get her to bring one of the trucks. We need to move him and carrying him half a mile is not an option," said Cecelia as she got an IV started. "Come on, John, stay with us."

It took every ounce of control Gabrielle had to force John to stay focused on her. The pain he was experiencing was dulling slightly as shock began to take over. At some point she was aware of Evan's hand on top of hers, offering what support he could to her link.

Five agonizing minutes passed as Fiona brought the H2 through the narrow alleyways. The back seat was put down and John was carefully lifted in. His head lay in Brie's lap as she struggled to keep him conscious. Cecelia sat beside him keeping a careful eye on his vitals. She slipped an oxygen mask over his face. Richard and Todd stayed behind to do cleanup. Evan climbed in the front seat next to Fiona.

"Hospital or home?" asked Fiona. Cecelia and Brie suddenly looked at each other.

"Oh shit!" muttered Brie.

"We're going to have to fake and bake him. Go home. I need the equipment in the lab," said Cecelia.

"What are you talking about?" demanded Evan.

"The victim that survived for about twenty-four hours or so, eventually died of toxemia from tissue necrosis. Remember? The experiment that Cecelia and I were doing!" said Brie.

"The saliva from this thing causes the cells to die, this kind of creeping rot. It's in John's wounds. If we don't get rid of it, it will kill him just as surely as if he bled to death."

"Wait a minute! Didn't we determine that that stuff catches fire, exosomething?" said Evan.

"Yeah, it does. We need to expose him to probably at least five minutes of UV radiation. You know kind of like a tanning bed," Cecelia tried to explain.

"And set him on fire!?" yelled Evan.

"No, no, not on fire. I think it's the only way to be safe. The stuff's only on the wounds, not in his entire body," said Cecelia.

"Jus' do it," mumbled John from Brie's arms.

"I'll give him a couple hundred milligrams of Demerol. Cleaning out the bite should be a little like wound debridement for a burn patient. Hurts like bloody hell, but has to be done."

Fiona broke a few speed limits getting them back to SIS. She pulled the H2 into the garage, and Evan raced for the gurney usually reserved for dead bodies. He, Brie, and Fiona eased John out of the vehicle onto the gurney and whisked him toward the infirmary while Cecelia was madly grabbing the light box and other things.

"See if you can get him out of the vest and his shirt," said Cecelia, handing Evan a pair of trauma shears.

"Don't be delicate, just cut it off."

Evan took a deep breath and looked down at John. Brie's hand was holding John's. He was still fading in and out of coherence. Together they ripped apart the Velcro of

the vest, wrestling him out of it. John moaned in pain at the movement. Evan slit the sleeves on his shirt and down the front, pulling loose the blood-soaked fabric. John's breath was a harsh rasp under the oxygen mask.

Cecelia was jamming bottles of saline in ice and jury rigging the UV light box with help from Fiona. She loaded a couple of syringes with Demerol and a local anesthetic. Cecelia injected the local first in several places. John flinched.

"It should only take a couple of minutes to kick in," the doctor said, then she stabbed the Demerol syringe into John's IV. John lay motionless, eyes closed, his fingers clenched around Brie's hand. She was stroking his hair. Evan's hand lay on John's blood smeared chest.

Relax as much as you can, Gabrielle said.

"Best guess at how this is going to work. We turn on the lights, irrigate with cold saline. Five minutes of UV, then we're done. John, can you open your eyes?" asked Cecelia.

He had a distant, glazed expression when he did so.

"You ready for this?" Cecelia asked.

"No. Doesn't matter," he slurred.

"Safety glasses on," said Cecelia.

Evan slid a pair over John's face.

"Fiona, five minutes."

Fiona bit her lip and nodded, a digital timer in her hand. Cecelia flipped the switch, and the light popped on. About ten seconds passed in silence while she doused the wounds with saline. John whimpered. There was the smell of burning flesh. He started to thrash in agony. Brie held his head against her chest and tried to wrap an arm around his body. Evan practically lay on top of his legs and Cecelia had the other wrist. Somewhere past the three minute mark, John went limp.

"Oh God! Is he...?" whispered Evan.

"It's okay. He's still breathing. His pulse is like two hundred. I think he passed out," said Cecelia, pressing her stethoscope to his chest. Two more minutes dragged by.

"Five," said Fiona and practically lunged to turn off the lights.

"How bad did it burn the tissue?" Brie said. "Do you think we got it all?" Her voice was a strained near whisper.

"Bad enough. But the very fact that it reacted means we had no choice. It would have killed him." Cecelia spent several minutes actively cleaning the wounds before she started suturing and bandaging. Ten minutes crept by before John moaned in pain.

"Almost done," said the doctor.

"Can we please not do that again, like ever?" he choked out.

"Hope I never have to."

Brie's fingers squeezed John's. She could sense the intense pain in his shoulder, neck and chest. Her hand traced the planes of his face. His skin was deathly pale and damp to the touch. She was still worried. He shivered, body in shock.

"I'll get a blanket," said Evan.

"What happened to the vampire?" asked John.

"Brie practically blew its fucking head off, and then Rich took a machete to what was left. We left him and Todd to gather up the pieces. Head in one bag, body in another, preferably," replied Cecelia.

"Burn it."

"We will. I'm thinking about spreading the ashes in a bucket out in the sun for a couple of days, too."

"Good."

Evan returned with a blanket. He tucked it around John, staring down into his partner's face and John lifted a shaky hand to touch him. Evan took hold of John's hand and laid it over his heart. The feel of John's mind against his own was a sluggish mass of pain and drug-filled confusion.

"You scared the shit out of me," Evan said. "All that blood."

"Just like you," John breathed, sliding toward unconsciousness again.

"Celia, he's losing consciousness again," said Brie.

"That's okay. Let him. He's reasonably stable. Although I'm still not so sure he doesn't need a unit or two of blood," said Cecelia, checking his blood pressure. "He's still pretty damn shocky."

"Do we leave him on the gurney?" asked Evan.

"For a little while, then we'll get him into a bed," Cecelia made a vague gesture at the hospital bed next to the wall. Brie laid a hand on Evan's shoulder. He was still standing motionless, holding onto John's hand.

"I'll be back in a little while," Gabrielle said and left the room, almost staggering from pain and exhaustion.

The mental abrasion of Gabrielle's last encounter with the vampire's mind was combining with the sheer stress of forcibly maintaining her connection to John, while his body did its best to give up. She needed a few minutes alone. Brie fled down the hallway that led to the armory and leaned against the wall at the far end. The pain in her head pounded behind her eyes with sickening force. She slid down the wall to sit with her arms wrapped around her knees and spent the next couple of minutes just focusing on breathing, trying to force herself to find a still point in her mind. Oh God, she had nearly lost him. The feeling of his life trying to slip through her

fingers tore at her emotions. She pressed her forehead to her knees. She loved him. There was no denial left. She loved him and his death would have nearly destroyed her all over again. She sat rocking back and forth, crying for a long time. The pain in her skull was mounting toward incoherence level. She slowly scraped herself up off the floor and headed for the stairs.

Cecelia pushed a stool against the back of Evan's legs and he sat, while she and Fiona disassembled the light box gear and cleaned up. Evan pressed John's limp hand against his cheek, silent tears sliding down his face. Evan wanted to wrap his arms around his lover and hold him tightly. John roused a little, eyes blinking partway open.

"Hurts... so bad. Ev' please don' leef," he mumbled.

Evan pressed John's chilly fingers against his lips, stroking a gentle hand down John's cheek. "Shh, try to sleep. I'm right here," whispered Evan.

John turned his face slightly, toward the light caress. "Need you," John said, his words barely audible. "Love you."

Brie returned a while later, desperate to check on John and reassure herself that he was reasonably out of danger. He was sleeping in the hospital bed, neck and shoulder bandaged, face nearly as pale as the sheets. Evan sat beside him, holding his hand, watching. Evan

glanced up at Brie. She pulled up another stool to sit beside Evan. Gabrielle could tell that Evan was every bit as worried about John as she was.

"You look like you're in pain," said Evan. Even amidst his angst for John, Evan was worrying about her, too. She was deeply touched.

"The migraine is coming, the migraine is coming," she chanted, giving him a lopsided grin.

"Payback for keeping him conscious 'til he was reasonably out of danger?"

"Yeah. Something like that." She pressed a hand to her eye-socket. "All combined with too little sleep, messing with a vampire, and just way too much everything else."

"Go to bed. No, I have a better idea, get Celi to give you some good drugs, then go to bed," said Evan. He watched her draw a deep breath and look at John. "Celi and I'll watch him. She thinks he'll be fine. Just needs... recovery time."

"He cares about you," Brie said.

"I know. We do talk, sometimes."

"Stay with him. There'll be fall out from what I did, probably." Evan frowned a little at her half explanation. "To keep him conscious while he was trying to fade in and out, all the trauma to his body. I've seen some psi become very disoriented and panic stricken if they wake up alone. All the in and out of coherent thought thing tends to make the mind assume someone's presence will

be there every time. If it isn't, then the body can head into shock, sort of. Christ, words are just so inefficient sometimes." She rubbed her hands down across her face.

"It's okay, I understand. He needs someone familiar nearby 'til he kind of gets his feet beneath him mentally speaking. This isn't the first time I've kept a vigil for him."

"Close enough. And right now, I don't think I have the concentration left to do it. It needs to be you." She stood up and bent forward, kissing Evan lightly. Love for John was something they had in common, and she had every intention of making sure it stayed that way.

The remainder of the night passed quietly. Cecelia checked on John every hour. Evan sat at his bedside, laptop balanced on his knees, typing report stuff. John slept restlessly, periodic whimpers drifting from his lips. Evan rubbed his hand across John's chest, allowing John to settle again.

Toward dawn, Evan's own exhaustion was catching up to him. He set the laptop on the floor and sat rubbing his gritty eyes and watching John. He was moving uneasily again beneath the blankets. A thought occurred to Evan. Was there enough room to lie down beside John? Would he hurt John if he crawled onto the bed beside his partner? He thought about Gabrielle's halting explanation and his own past experiences with John. All the nights Evan held John while he fought against terrifying nightmares. Maybe holding John would actually allow him to sleep easier now. Evan kicked off

his shoes and stretched out very carefully beside John, laying an arm across the other man's chest and pulling John's head against his own shoulder. John let out what could only be taken as a sleepy sigh.

Cecelia found John and Evan both asleep together a little while later. Such an action would never have been allowed in a hospital, but then what hospital would have been prepared to deal with the victim of a vampire attack? Lord knows the other temporarily surviving victim had died miserably enough. She did a quick vitals check on John and peeked beneath the edge of the bandages. It didn't look too awful. There was scabbing and some seepage, mostly bright pink, which was good, no sign of the darkness of dying tissue.

Seeing Evan wound protectively around John, she wondered about Gabrielle. She had seen John similarly wrapped around her. Psi things. Psi things she just didn't really comprehend. She had given Brie some Vicodin for the migraine and shooed her off to sleep. Poor woman, Gabrielle looked dead exhausted on top of the migraine. At some point Cecelia was going to have to get some actual details on the mechanics of the psi mind. If she could. It unfortunately seemed a bit of a closed loop. John putting Gabrielle mentally back together, then Gabrielle holding him together while he was in danger of dying. Evan fitted into this mix somehow. They seemed to take care of their own. Maybe there wasn't anything Cecelia could learn, at least not the way she learned traditional medicine. Nope, take that back. Touch was overwhelmingly and incredibly important to the psi, more than any other set of patients she had dealt

with.

She looked back down at John's sleeping face. She had been wondering if she should consider another large dose of painkillers, judging from his restless sleep and the pinched, stressed aspect of his unconscious features. TLC, it would seem, was a better choice. That tight look of subconscious agony had eased a fair bit. She could probably get away with a light dose of the pain meds, which was safer.

Saturday, June 30, 2007

It was noon before the rest of team was up and about and wading through tasks. Todd and Fiona had loaded the bits of the vampire body into the incinerator and were keeping a careful eye on the burn. Richard was cleaning and reloading gear into the vehicles.

Brie wandered back down to the infirmary, still looking half-tired. Evan had vanished in search of a shower and clean clothes, Cecelia told her. Brie sat down on the stool beside John. He was conscious, if not terribly coherent as Cecelia changed the dressings on his wounds.

"So, where's the body? Ow," he moaned as bandages were peeled away from his damaged shoulder.

"Sorry. Being burned, thought we told you that last night. Not that I really expect you to remember much," said Cecelia.

"Is Evan okay?" he muttered.

"He's fine. He went to take a shower," said Brie, laying a hand on his arm. She carefully brushed her mind across his, feeling the mass of pain, drugs, and confusion. What little shielding he had up was in total disarray.

"Shh, relax," she whispered. Gabrielle pressed his palm against her lips, drawing him into rapport. His eyes strained to focus on her face. He smiled at her and his eyes slowly fell shut. She felt the muscles of his arm unclench as she wove her presence around his, a grounding, a connection.

Cecelia studied Brie. "You did something."

"Yes."

"Good. Having him tense up only makes it hurt worse."

"I'm assuming you did an autopsy of the vampire?" Brie asked.

"Oh, yeah. With Todd standing half a step behind me, with the UV light box and a gun, in case it so much as twitched. I took about four hundred digital photos and about a hundred samples, now all safely frozen at minus seventy in separate containers."

"I'd like to see the photos later."

"Absolutely."

"How do we know this is the only one?" asked Brie.

Cecelia gave her a long look. "We don't," Cecelia admitted.

Sunday June 31, 2007

When they buried him he wouldn't need a coffin, they could just use all his unfinished paperwork. John sat in the hospital bed in the SIS lab/clinic with a laptop parked on his legs. Gelsey & Co. still wanted to know when their warehouse would be available again. There was a body to send to the city morgue and the FBI needed to be notified that the case was provisionally closed. There was paperwork for each and every one of those actions and more.

An IV line was still pumping him full of antibiotics, painkillers, and whatever the hell else Cecelia deemed necessary. The drugs made him feel almost incoherent. Fuck, there were probably going to be a ton of errors on the forms he was attempting to type. Maybe he could get Evan and Fiona to help him proof them.

"Does Cecelia know you're doing that?" asked Evan as he came into the lab.

"Yes. Note the laptop as opposed to me up in the office where I'd probably be getting more done," John grumbled.

Evan sat on the edge of the bed. "This has been one hell of a month, between trying to keep Gabrielle safe from Garner, a slew of dead bodies, and a vampire at the center of the disaster." Evan's hand rested on John's leg.

It was a loving touch.

"It would have simplified things if Garner had been the vampire and then we could've solved two problems at once."

Evan snickered. There was laughter behind him, too. John noticed that Gabrielle had come to the lab.

She sat on a stool beside the bed, facing John and Evan. "You need to write soap opera plots. No, I take that back, our lives are a soap opera. You forgot to add in that you have two lovers that don't hate each other and might be willing to try to figure out a way to hang our lives all together without going totally crazy." She gazed at Evan with a questioning look. John swallowed hard. He wanted both of them in his life but wasn't certain how to pull it off.

"Where do we go from here?" John asked tentatively.

"Forward. We're all adults, we can make this work," said Evan.

End.

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