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Gate Walker

CHRIS STEVENSON

Back Cover Copy

Don't drink and drive, especially when traveling the space-time continuum highway.

Avalon Labrador is convicted and sentenced to die for her husband's murder. In a twist of fate, before the sentence can be carried out, an odd priest informs her that she is being given a second chance to right the wrongs of the past. Avalon must die, but before she does, she must also give birth to a part of herself.

Avy Labrador doesn't know what to make of the odd twists life has thrown her way since she turned eighteen. All she knows is that something isn't right and it has to do with the death of her mother and her husband many years ago. As if an odd priest, powers she never knew she had, and a brand new magician boyfriend aren't enough to turn her life upside down, she finds her own life in danger as she tries to solve a crime that happened more than three decades ago and prevent a new one from occurring.

Will Avy accept her fate and learn to become a Gate-Walker in order to clear her mother's name and find the real killer?

Highlight

Something arose out of the weeds like a specter, a shadow in human form. It raised its arms in a crucifix pose, presenting a full frontal profile. He looked like a scarecrow staked to a pole, or maybe a filthy Jesus. But they all knew who this was.

“Squeeze one off, you’ll set me free,” taunted the voice from the weeds.

Sebastian turned his head with a slight movement. “Chubby, you seeing this?”

“Yeah, I got a bead on him.”

Something was on the man’s shoulder, an indistinct lump. The lump moved. Every so often two small points of light reflected back from the headlight beams. Animal eyes.

“Now I know where the opossum came from,” said Sebastian. “He’s wearing one like a piece of costume jewelry.”

The man made a few steps toward them, arms still extended. “Go ahead—shoot. Remove this pitiful piece of trash from society. I can hear the accolades now—do what has to be done.”

Chubby raised his weapon in full combat stance, but his arms were shaking.

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by

Chris Stevenson

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Dedication

To Mark and Mike, the best supporting roommates an author could ever have.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Poul Anderson, one of the greatest SF and Fantasy writers of all time, for his letters and mentorship in the old days.

Author's Note

Thank you for taking this journey with me. If you'd like to see Avy in any further explorations of the Gate World drop me a line.

Forward

An attempt was made to explain the physics of Gate Walking. Please excuse and make allowances for my interpretation of the space-time continuum. Albert Einstein, I am not.

Chapter 1

Through a mist of nausea, Avalon felt the bed roiling under her. Loud, harsh voices crashed in her mind, screaming out warnings. She tried to push up from the bed, but her arms refused to obey. Her legs were like lead. When she opened her eyes for a moment, she could see white beams flitting about. She heard the words, “Secure the scene.”

The hair on the back of her neck rose. Scene. What scene? What in the hell was going on? Who was that talking? She tried to speak, but her tongue seemed glued to her mouth.

“That’s her all right,” said a deep male voice.

“Avalon Labrador,” said a louder male voice. “Are you Avalon Labrador?”

She looked to the side of the bed, commanding her eyes to focus. A large shadow loomed, showing a man of massive girth.

“I’m—I’m Avalon,” she said, unsure of herself. Her head ached with fierce intensity. More words.

“Don’t touch the knife—leave it for homicide. Somebody catch the light switch. Keep the hallway open for the crime scene people.”

The bedroom light flicked on. It was like a welder’s torch going off in her face. For a moment, Avalon was blinded. She flung a hand up to shield her from the harsh glare. Someone grabbed her by the wrist, yanking her off the bed. A heavy knee came down on her back, pinning her onto the hard floor. Something metallic and foreign snapped her hands together.

“Wha—” She tried to enunciate, but her tongue felt numb.

“You have the right to remain silent,” someone droned. “Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

Someone thrust a hand under her breasts. The sound of her underwear band snapping rent the air like a firecracker on the Fourth of July. “Stop it!” she cried. “What are you doing to me?”

“She’s clean.”

Someone lifted her up, suspending her above the carpet. When she came down, her ankles buckled and she collapsed on the floor. Strong arms propped her up again. She fought to keep her balance on spongy legs. The room spun like an out-of-control carousel. The rush of voices garbled like bad calliope music. When she opened her eyes, a frightening Neanderthal-like face filled her vision.

“Where are the keys, Mrs. Labrador?” asked the cop with a horrible face.

“What keys?” The room spun in dizzying circles. She was amazed she’d not passed out. The vise-like grip on her arms brought such searing pain it was the one thing that kept her semi-conscious.

“The keys to the Chevy. The Suburban you used to transport the body.”

"I'm sick," she said. "I can't think." Her nightgown stuck to her, bunched up, wet, giving off a foul odor. Blood splatter freckled the upper arch of her breasts.

"I found the keys in the bed fold, Sergeant," said one of the male cops.

"Okay, leave them there. Tell Childs we'll need the front taped off to keep the media away from the premises."

Avalon staggered. A flash bulb popped in her face. Police, badges, guns. They were in her bedroom! Bile churned in her stomach and made its way up to her throat. What the hell was going on? Avalon had no idea. Confusion snarled her thoughts. Where was her husband? He would protect her from all of this!

Large hands shoved her around the bed. She spied swaths of purple stains on the carpet while she was frog marched across the floor. Something terrible had happened, but what? Coherency strained to come back in pieces. Her heart hammered in her chest. "Where's my husband? I don't see Tom."

"It's too late for him," said the big cop, escorting her down the hallway. They passed through the living room. It swarmed with khaki uniformed officers and white lab coat technicians who carried aluminum cases. Her nightgown snagged on a piece of wood jutting from the broken doorframe, tearing it. Her feet squished across the dewy lawn. The frigid night air did not compare to the ice in the pit of her stomach. A chill raced up her spine. Someone had to tell her what was going on! Tom! Her mind screamed for her husband.

They passed the driveway gate out onto the street. A large van sat at the curb, a generator hummed from within. Spotlights glared from the sidewalk. Her escort cop brought her up even with a police cruiser. He swung the rear door open. A large hand gave her a stark shove. The top of her head struck the door rim with a numbing thud just before she landed on the cold vinyl seat. The door slammed with a sad finality, leaving her to witness the spectacle in front of her house. Why were they treating her like a common criminal?

Uniformed officers carried brown bags from the front door and delivered them to the van while others strung yellow barrier tape from her elm trees blocking off the front gate access. A rainbow of emergency flashers sliced up the night, leaving ghost-like images on the building facades.

She yelled several times, but no one responded. She knew something terrible had happened that involved her husband. She fought to understand the words the big cop had used to describe Tom's condition. He'd said that her husband was past the point of something. She had no memory of anything violent or disturbing happening. She just remembered becoming ill after dinner. Then what? Where was Tom?

She beat her head against the window, sending shock waves through her spine. The big cop waddled across the street and rapped his baton on the roof. He flung the driver's door open and slid inside. He spoke through the wire grate, his face glistening wet from the humidity. "Settle down. You're not going anywhere. Maybe you'd like to tell me why this happened, not that it's going to make any difference."

"I don't even know what you're talking about," she said, sucking the breath between her teeth. "What are you telling me I did? Why have I been arrested?"

The cop pressed a driver's license up against the divider. "This is Tom Labrador's driver's license. He is, or was, your current husband. We know this because we ran a check on all of his ID. His body was discovered early this morning. You're being arrested for his murder. Another victim was found in the vicinity. He was a city official. We don't know if you had anything to do with that, but we aim to find out. Now do you understand what's happening to you?"

"I, uh," Avalon tried, a gag fought its way up her throat. "My head hurts!"

"I'd say it's a good bet you're looking at capital murder. Now do you get it?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so."

Avalon couldn't catch her breath. A buzz throbbed behind her eyes that intensified with such pressure she thought her head would burst open at any minute. A shriek started low in her guts. It flew out of her mouth like a steam whistle. She began to kick at the front seat, jerking her head with spastic movements until she was thrashing. It was impossible! She'd had dinner and then gone to bed. Tom had been with her. She hadn't heard or seen a thing. She'd never killed anything in her life but time. Now the police were accusing her of murdering the only man she'd ever loved.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried. "Dear God, what's happened?" Her shoulders racked with sobs. None of it made any sense. Nothing could have prepared her for this. With a gasp, she slumped in the seat.

"It's not going to do you any good to faint. The detectives are just going to wake you up when we get downtown."

That night hell was an uninvited guest. It didn't look like it was going to be leaving anytime soon.

Chapter 2

Fourteen Years Later

The prison dayroom echoed with a muffled babble punctuated by the harried shouts of restless inmates. A mean feat considering the cell doors were three inches thick.

Avalon Labrador tried to shove aside the morbid thoughts of what the next hour would bring. She had acquired a collection of manic delusions which were escalating into a full nervous breakdown. She didn't want to go out like a whimpering dog sprawled on its back, pissing in the air. How did one face execution like a lady?

She looked at Chubby, the deathwatch guard. She noticed that he was turning pages too fast again, too fast for a normal reader. He kept shifting on his stool as though he had hemorrhoids. At one point, he swatted at an imaginary fly. There were no flies in this unit of the North Carolina Central Prison. The facility was sealed—disinfected from top to bottom. An insect would have stood a better chance of entering a submarine.

She'd known Raymond "Chubby" Hammersmith for eons it seemed. Fate had seen him transferred to Central a week prior to her arrival. He'd spent fourteen years with her at the Women's Correctional Facility at Raleigh. Happenstance struck for a second time when he had been assigned as her permanent deathwatch guard. He wasn't the brightest guard in Central Prison. Amongst an intellectual sea of strong swimmers, Chubby dog paddled. Yet he had pounds of heart and a benevolent soul. He'd risked his job leaving her cell door open to the dayroom. Just one of his many acts of kindness. He had refused to shut her off from the basic human need for camaraderie.

The point of recriminations had reached the eleventh hour. What was it now, she mused, about fifty minutes left to draw breath?

"You doing okay over there, Chubs?" asked Avalon. "You don't look so good."

He shifted his eyes from the book, offering her a slight smile. "I guess I'm managing. It's a rotten book anyway. I can't even find the plot. Is there anything I can get you? Something to snack on?"

Her husband used to ask her that whenever she was bedridden with the flu or a headache. Thinking about Tom, made a chill creep up from her legs to settle in her stomach. "I'm still full of Arby's," she said. Although her last meal had been six hours ago, at least she had shared it in the company of Chubby, who'd enjoyed the food with her. Last meal. Arby's. What difference did it make? She was about to welcome in the New Year compliments of Doctor Death.

"I was wondering what it's like outside, Chubs. You think the sun will come out tomorrow?" What was she thinking? She wouldn't be around to see it.

Chubby frowned. "Got a cold front coming in. It's still cloudy. Hovering around forty-two degrees."

"Maybe it's gearing up for a thunderstorm," she said. He was afraid to look her in the eye. It was obvious he was more terrified than she.

His face brightening, he added, "The sun is sure to break through. Tomorrow's the day." He caught himself clumsily before going on. "To answer your question, I don't think I'm handling this very well. The regulations say I'm not supposed to have any emotional conversations with you, but I don't mind saying that I think your second lawyer fell flat on his face."

Avalon took a sighing breath. It was nice to hear somebody else get the blame for her conviction.

Chubby added, "All the evidence was too pat. I've always known you were innocent. There, I said it. For what it's worth, most of the staff agrees with me. Everybody's waiting for the attorney general or the governor to come through on the direct line."

"That means something, Chubby. It's comforting to know someone believes me. I want to thank you for the support—for your gentle treatment through the years. You've always been a standup guy. There, I said it, too."

Chubby's cheeks were puffy. His eyes looked moist. "I guess that's what they mean by closure," he added, then gazed back down at the pages, but not before glancing at his watch again.

It was a capital murder case yet the jury had been out for less than two hours. They had rejected a second degree or manslaughter conviction. The evidence was rolled up tighter than a Cuban cigar. She, with malice and forethought, had brutally knifed her husband to death. Seventeen stab wounds, her prints on the knife, and his blood all over her had sealed her fate. They said she'd dumped his body off interstate twenty-nine, four miles south of Danville, Virginia, in a drainage culvert. The rear compartment of her Suburban had contained blood and fiber evidence, proof that she had transported the corpse. They claimed her motivation had been to acquire her husband's electronics empire, of which she already owned forty-nine percent.

It got better. They found a Judge Ronald Gillian deceased off the shoulder of the interstate, three miles from her husband's location. From the looks of it, the judge was jogging in the early morning hours when he ended up the victim of a hit and run driver. Avalon's Suburban had been seen in the vicinity of the fatal accident. Hair, blood, and tissue remnants were found wedged in the undercarriage of her vehicle.

A ten-man, two-woman jury had abandoned Avalon Labrador to the mercies of the green gurney, the catheter couch. Slam-dunk.

Sitting on the edge of the bunk with her fists balled up between her knees, she cocked her head, listening to the occasional flip of Chubby's pages. No other sound reached her ears. The adjoining cells of the dayroom had gone graveyard still. Just a few minutes ago, the death row inmates had screamed to her in support. Now she heard only the hollow clap of hard-soled shoes on concrete. She couldn't see the main entrance of the dayroom, but she presumed the steps came from

another watch guard. Her heart staggered for a beat while she watched Chubby for any reaction. It could be the warden, she thought. A prison warden could gag a tank and send inmates running for cover.

Chubby glanced over his shoulder, and did a quick double-take. He set his book down on the floor, then picked up his clipboard.

The heel strikes stopped out of Avalon's field of view. She heard a, "good evening, officer" in a mellow baritone voice that ran like warm molasses.

"Yes, good evening, Father," Chubby said in a hesitant voice. "You're not Father Mathews." Chubby flipped a page back on his clipboard roster, frowned and looked up again. "I don't believe I've ever seen you before. Father Mathews is our prison chaplain. I wasn't notified of a replacement."

"Father Mathews was called away on an unexpected emergency," said the man. "A family member has been involved in a car accident. The warden thought it best to permit him an immediate leave of absence. I'm afraid I'm a last-minute stand-in."

The mystery chaplain stepped within Avalon's sight. The first thing that caught her eye was the spill of long hair over broad shoulders—it looked like spun gold, catching the reflection of the overhead lights. He wore a charcoal black suit. A peek of white stood out from his throat against a high black collar. His shoes looked wet, waxed to bedazzlement. The creases in his pants were knife-edged. He had a wisp of bangs framing a high forehead. The jaw was square, prominent. The one thing that broke up the beauty of the man was a slight ski jump nose. He carried a thick Bible, crucifix, and rosary. Just the edge of his mouth was visible, which was turned up into an affable smile. On second thought, it could have been a grimace.

Chubby took a tentative step backward, glancing at his clipboard again. "Oh, gosh. I don't know," he said, his voice faltered. "I should have gotten a radio call announcing the switch. If you'll hang tight for just a minute, I'll get this cleared up. Name, sir?"

He stepped up to Chubby and offered his hand in greeting. "I'm Father Geminus, first name Janus." When Chubby gripped the hand for a shake, the chaplain pulled him to his shoulder, then whispered in his ear.

Avalon took small, nervous steps across the cell. She lingered at the threshold of the door. Enthralled, she watched Chubby's expression transform from apprehension to calm. A sudden fatigue came over his face. The guard relaxed for a moment, his arms hanging limp at his sides. When the chaplain pulled back from him, he gripped Chubby's shoulder and turned him around to face the other direction. Dazed, Chubby walked off toward the dayroom entrance and disappeared around the corner. The last thing Avalon heard was the chirp of rubber soles on the floor followed by the resounding clang of the vault-like door.

The chaplain turned to face Avalon's cell. His narrowed eyes reminded her of a dog she had once owned—grayish-blue, deep-set. Pretty, but haunting. He took slow, deliberate strides toward her cell. She backed up at the last moment, allowing him entry. He sat on her bunk with

his arms in his lap and gazed at her in silence. The cold slab of the wall against her back shocked her. She hadn't realized until that moment that she had thrust herself up against it. She felt trapped, mesmerized by this man who looked so out of place in this dungeon of the condemned. He was a Baryshnikov in a house of slam dancers, a Fabio look-alike who, in a different persuasion, might have been a high-profile hair stylist from Beverly Hills. She guessed him to be in his late thirties, but it was hard to tell. The light played tricks on his face. The large gold book at his side was face up but sans an embossed title like she would expect to see on a Bible.

"Are you uncomfortable?" He paused, staring at her. He patted the seat next to him. "I'm not here to make you feel uncomfortable. You can call me Janus."

"No, I'm just a bit surprised," she said, taking a seat on the bunk an arm's length away. "It's not every day we see new faces. It's always the same visitors or staff. The appointment times are always fixed. That's a strange first name. How do you spell it?"

"J-a-n-u-s," he said. "Do you know why I'm here?"

She swallowed, studying the handsome chaplain. "You're here to administer last rights. Forgive me for staring, but are you sure you are in the right vocation? I mean you don't look the part at all."

"I get that a lot," he said, cracking his lips for the first time, which showed a perfect row of teeth. It figured that he had neon pearly whites.

"I've worn more than one face on occasion," he continued, tiny crow's feet appearing at his eyes. "So there is diversity in my life that has to be weighed. Change and transition are the normal progression of past to future, of one condition to another, of one vision to another, the growing up of young people from one universe to another. Or you might be apt to put it, a chop, cut, and rebuilding of all things world-based. I have to represent the middle ground between barbarity and civilization."

She blinked. "Well, I've never heard it put quite that way before. It sounds like you're all over the place."

"Just backward and forward, the sun, the moon, and the key in between."

She cocked her head at the odd words, wondering if something was getting lost in translation. Was it possible this guy was mental?"

His eyes glimmered for a moment. "But forget about all that. I'm not the pertinent subject of this hour. This chapter draws to an end necessitating the turn of another page. Do you have anything to confess?"

"Should I kneel, Father?"

"It won't make your words any more significant. Divine justice reads the heart. Not the posture."

Her shoulders slumped. "I guess I'm guilty of being accused, convicted, and sentenced. I'm just plain dumb for trusting the wrong counsel. I'm ashamed that I've put what little family I have through the worst heartache imaginable."

“I’m not referring to this conviction in which the War Gate is soon to open. After all, you cannot confess to a crime that you are innocent of, can you?”

She looked at him with an aching curiosity. Her heart lifted for a moment. Then reality set in. “How do you know I’m innocent? I’ve never met you before.” It shocked her that a priest had followed her case with such conviction. “Unless you’re really a reporter whose been watching the trial coverage.”

He adjusted his body to face her more squarely. “Let’s just say my investigative sources prove that a sacrifice is not needed here. You could call it a restoration of balance. I was referring to the infractions in your life before this case.”

Strange. This man was convinced of her innocence. She had no idea how he had arrived at that conclusion. She struggled between embarrassment and relief when she began to tell him of her life’s transgressions, the times when she didn’t pay parking tickets, when she had kicked her dog out of frustration, the incidences of pettiness, jealousy, and wantonness. She even admitted to cheating on a history exam in high school for fear of being held back a grade.

When she exhausted her confession inventory, she looked at the chaplain, wondering if he was going to forgive her or recite a standard blessing. She watched him close his eyes. Next, she heard words that were just a whisper. Nevertheless, she found herself bowing out of reverence.

“So it was found. So it was confessed. So it is forgiven. From the past, into the new beginning, beyond into the days that have not yet been seen. I take thee from the Old Gate into another of the same for the deserved chance to correct the great wrong. Abide in the final peace that has been earned.” He opened his eyes. “Are you prepared to enter the new Gate, Avalon?”

She couldn’t hold back the floodgate of emotions any longer. His words intoned some kind of indescribable beauty, albeit tempered with tragedy. She had never heard such an interpretation that spoke of passing from one life into another in such a manner. It was too much.

The tears spilled from her eyes, and her shoulders quaked. She reached out a trembling hand. He took it to pat it in comfort. His hand was so warm, so secure. For a fleeting moment, she felt she was in the presence of a guardian angel. She tried to contain herself, resisting the urge to throw herself into his arms, knowing he would be one of the last persons to see her alive.

With an endearing tenderness, he pulled her to her feet. She bit her lip, commanding the tears to stop. At all costs, she would try to recapture some countenance of dignity.

The priest embraced her with strong arms. She wanted it to last, but knew it was prolonging the inevitable. When she pulled a half step back, she swiped one last wet spot from her cheek with a forearm.

“Forgive me,” she said. “This isn’t the way I wanted to be remembered. I just don’t want to suffer when the time comes. Will you help me deal with it, Father?”

He put a hand over her abdomen. A light shone in his face. His eyes seemed to pass right through her. “I won’t let them take you from this Gate. This is the time of rebirth.”

It was impossible to understand a lot of what he was saying, nor the implications. Death had always been a complicated issue amongst humanity. Faith was the assurance of things hoped for—the conviction of things not seen. She had the faith, but was uncertain if she had enough conviction. The passing from one plane to another was symbolic—it always had been. Maybe the priest knew the mysterious “other plane” better than anyone. He was conveying that it was not something to be feared, she reasoned. That to face renewal one should rejoice.

His hand brought a fire to her stomach. She could feel a throb that radiated from her navel down into her bowels, an uncomfortable sensation that almost felt like a bladder infection. The discomfort increased, causing her to waver. The air filled with a brusque mesquite odor that forced her to take choppy breaths until she was panting. A heavy buzz filled her head with a nauseating thrum. She felt herself collapsing from within, the strength leaving her legs. The world went black, like a curtain had been thrown over her.

She awoke lying on her back. When her eyes focused, she found herself staring up at the cell roof, watching the bluish-white flicker of the fluorescent lights behind the translucent covers. She sat up, and nausea from the worst cramps she had ever experienced rolled through her. From the corner of her eye she noticed the departing figure of the chaplain who strode through the dayroom on his way to the exit. He had left his thick book behind. She staggered to the door with it. Avalon called out twice. He stopped, turned around.

“I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I must have fainted. You’ve left your book here.” She wondered why he’d decided to leave. Wasn’t he supposed to accompany her into the death chamber?

Janus called across the room, “You’ll be all right now. Rest, child. The book is yours. It’s your new story. We’ll meet again.” He walked past her vision. The tap of his shoes echoed across the floor.

She waited for the sound of the slamming vault door but it never came. Knowing that she was defying prison rules, she took woozy steps out of her cell and across the floor to chance a look. She could see nothing. The chaplain had vanished. She returned to her cell, perplexed. She had no idea what time it was or where Chubby had gone.

The sound of a dozen inmate voices rose again, bleeding into each other in the dayroom.

“You hang in there, girl,” yelled a female voice from the next cell over, barely audible through the wall.

“Don’t give those bitches the satisfaction,” said another woman.

The familiar clank of the entrance door sounded like a gunshot. It was followed by the shuffling of shoes. Chubby appeared, cuffing sweat from his forehead. He drug his chair across the floor, placing it closer to Avalon’s cell. He sat down with a heavy thud. A patch of his shirttail hung out, and he had a streamer of toilet paper stuck to a shoe.

“Sorry I had to leave,” he said under labored breaths. “That was the worst case of diarrhea I’ve ever had. Jumped me like a strong-armed robber.” He began writing on his clipboard with furious strokes.

Her own guts churned before she could question him about the mysterious priest. It came to her in a fit of annoyance that her last meal might have been the source of their illness. She felt bloated, feeling an explosion of gas bubbling up from her guts like seltzer. She didn’t need to be sick right now. A nauseous belch escaped her. There went any vestige of dignity she had left. Now she faced the possibility of messing herself during the long walk or while strapped in the crucifixion pose on the gurney. The pain eased after a few moments.

She placed the large book on her lap, flipping it open to the first page. Her name was spelled out in bold letters across the top. She turned the page and found it blank. She fanned the pages. They were all blank except for the page numbers that appeared centered at the bottom. What kind of twisted joke was this? A new story? It was a blank slate, which was even more demeaning if it was meant to be a diary of her life.

She lurched to her feet and hurled the book. It hit the wall, bouncing back to slide under her bunk. Chubby jumped up from the chair and hurried into the room.

“You okay, Avalon? What was that bang?”

She sat down in a slump. “That was cruel—just damned cruel. The pages are empty. What a crock! Do me a favor. Don’t let anyone else in here until it’s over with.”

“Who did I let in here?” Chubby shrugged, looking dismayed.

Avalon slapped the bunk pad hard. “Now don’t you start in on me! Why does this have to turn into a torture fest? You’d think I’d had enough of this after fourteen years with God knows how many appeals!”

“Avalon, you want me to get the doctor?” He checked his watch. “We still have ten minutes or so.” He froze, whipping his head around at the clacking sound of the entrance latch in the dayroom.

Chubby received a call on his radio. He answered, “Okay, Sarg. I copy that. Yes, sir. We’re ready to walk, I think.” Then to Avalon, “Sorry. The detail is on its way.” He strode off to meet with the other staff members.

She rose to her feet, prepared to face the small escort crowd that had just entered the cell block. She picked up the thick book from under the bunk and secured it in her duffle bag. The bag contained her personal inventory—court documents, letters, hygiene kit, slippers, a photo album, and a few pieces of plastic jewelry. She hadn’t been in this cell long enough to call it home. She visualized her cell at the Correctional Institute in Raleigh. She said a silent goodbye to that one. All those inmates who had befriended her over the years passed through her thoughts. Considering the circumstances, some of those memories were happy ones.

She stepped up to the cell threshold. Two more guards, the prison physician, and a chaplain appeared. The prison physician, Doctor King, a silver-haired man, had been appointed to guard against botched execution procedures. One person of note who had not shown up was the warden. But why had the regular chaplain appeared now? Hadn't he been called away for an emergency?

The detail assumed a half ring around her in a casual parade. Father Mathews stepped forward to offer his hand for the purpose of escort. She took it with a fierce grip. "I thought you were off the schedule tonight," she said. "How's the family member?"

Father Mathews gave her a curious glance. "Family member?"

"Yeah, the one who got in an accident. I hope everything is okay. By the way, you shouldn't have sent a quack for a replacement. I could have done without the prank."

"There's been no accident, Avalon. I can assure you, I have not been replaced. In fact, I've been in the chapel praying for you."

She tossed the hand away like a gum wrapper. "What in the hell has gotten into everyone around here? Are you all in on this? The priest that was here fifteen minutes ago, jibber jabbering about new beginnings, gates, and correcting things." She backpedaled a few steps, raising an accusing finger. "Now don't tell me that Gemini character just walked right in here without a pass, fed me some horrendous pile, then put his hands on me without anyone knowing about it." She glared at her friend. "Chubs, you checked your roster. That priest wasn't even cleared to enter!"

The staff exchanged glances. The doctor gave a breathy sigh. Chubby froze like a stone pillar. The other two guards bowed their legs, postured for trouble. One of the guard's hands stole to the butt of a taser gun.

Father Mathews took a cautious step forward. "It's no good to get worked up over this, Avalon. I'll be with you every step of the way. We can do this together."

Chubby clenched a fist. "Can't you see she's frightened? She's sick and needs treatment. This is inhumane!"

The sergeant turned on him. "I'll remind you of your detail, Officer Hammersmith. Would you like to be relieved of duty?"

Chubby shook his head. "No. Right now she needs someone she can trust. I'm staying."

Avalon remained fortified. "If you don't believe me, check my bag. That fake priest gave me a big gold book with my name on it. At least check your surveillance tapes. Nobody can get in or out of here without the video system picking them up."

The sergeant blew out an exasperated breath. He spoke urgent words into his hand-held radio. "Surveillance, back up your tapes thirty minutes, then fast-forward. See if you can pick up any unauthorized entry into death row dayroom for D block. Report back ASAP." The sergeant looked at his watch. "Let's head out. We're falling behind."

Chubby extended a hand, offering a soft, sympathetic look. On the verge of panic once again, she collared her emotions. She reached out to take her friend's gentle grasp. She tried to imagine a logical scenario for what had just happened. Her mind had conjured up sights and sounds that

no one believed. There seemed a single explanation for it. The devil had come in the last hour to rattle her cage. Break her faith. Well, she wouldn't have any part of his dealings. She shook a fist at the ceiling. "Be gone!" she commanded the air. "Get behind me." Then to her escorts, "I'm ready now. Let's get this over with."

She walked hand in hand with Chubby across the dayroom floor. Her thong slippers made little clacks. She heard the sound of fists hitting the cell walls, knowing that her fellow inmates were in the throes of protest. Her legs felt heavy. There was a persistent ache in her lower back that hadn't been there before.

Father Mathews began reciting scripture when she passed through the dayroom vault into the long corridor. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, carefully distributing her weight lest she stumble and fall to the floor in an undignified belly flop. She gave a halfhearted salute to one of the surveillance cameras above. A door at the end of the hall opened when they approached. She filed through with her escorts into the octagonal room.

The huge observation windows of the execution chamber were cranked wide open for optimum view. Several reporters, along with a few city officials, sat in a long row of frontline chairs. A number of friends and past employees of her husband, who also happened to be her friends, were in attendance. Most of them did not make eye contact with her.

How awkward, how morose it all seemed. Her face flushed hot from embarrassment.

The sergeant spoke for the benefit of the staff after having listened to his radio. "Surveillance reports from all stations that there was no intruder on the prison property at any time tonight. All cellblocks are clear."

Avalon ignored the report. It was the devil. Case closed. Her bucket of give a damn was empty.

Refusing assistance, she mounted the gurney to splay herself out. Father Mathews droned on, reciting passages until he settled on Psalm twenty-three. He raised his voice, accentuating every word for all ears to hear. Two guards began buckling the straps while another readied two intravenous drip lines that were routed from behind a curtained station. The doctor applied a heart pickup, then adjusted the controls on a nearby monitor.

A face appeared over Avalon that she had seen just twice before. It was Warden Remy, a man with too much hair gel, a ruddy complexion, and too little time. He held a small microphone at her chin while addressing her in a calm, measured tone. "Do you have any final words you'd like to express, Avalon?"

She nodded, turning her head toward Chubby who stood to her right. He looked off balance, but his eyes remained fixed on her, soulful and unblinking.

"I would like Raymond Hammersmith to know, in answer to a question he asked me eleven years ago, that, yes, I would have been very proud to have accompanied him on a real date. He should always remember that beauty is in the heart. It always resides in the eye of the beholder. That's all. Oh yeah, I'm innocent. But I suppose that doesn't matter anymore."

Chubby blinked several times. A fat tear rolled off his cheek to plop on floor. Avalon winked at him. He tried to return the gesture but both his eyelids fluttered, his eyes beginning to fill with a wash of emotion.

When the abdominal strap was cinched over her, there came with it an indescribable pain that radiated all the way to her heels. Her breath caught in her throat. She clamped her teeth with all the strength in her jaw, determined that she would not cry out. But after holding her breath, a loud exclamatory bark escaped her throat. The contents of her stomach threatened to blow like a fountain.

“Hold off,” said the doctor, nudging the catheter-wielding guard to the side. He placed a stethoscope over her chest. “Where is the pain, dear?”

Avalon spoke through clenched teeth. “Oh, God. Down low in my stomach.”

The doctor put his hand to her abdomen while he slid the scope down. He gasped, looked at the monitor across the room, then whipped his hand down hard in chopping motions, the signal to drop the blinds. A guard released a cord, letting them fall with a clatter.

“What’s the problem, Doc?” The warden stepped over his own feet, trying to get closer.

“Quiet, please,” the doctor ordered. He moved the stethoscope pad across Avalon’s lower abdomen again. He collared the stethoscope, then glared at the warden. “You better get the attorney general and the governor on the line. Tell them we’ll need a stay of execution.”

“What’s going on, Doc?” asked the warden, now more agitated than ever.

Doctor King’s jaw tensed. “We can’t execute two people. I have a strong fetal heartbeat. She also has a nasty case of morning sickness. This woman is now a patient until further notice.”

“She’s pregnant? How is that even possible?” The warden ran a hand through his oily hair. He turned on Chubby, pegging him with a hardened stare. The other staff members joined in, leveling accusing eyes at the portly guard.

Chubby froze, wide-eyed. Avalon assumed by the look on his face that any words he might have were jammed in his throat.

The doctor threw his hands up in the air. “None of this makes sense. I examined her two days ago. There was no evidence of a pregnancy.” He closed his eyes. “In all my years of practice I have never had anything like this happen.” He turned on the others, making eye contact with each. “This information will not leave these prison walls. Is that understood? I don’t have to tell you that the media would thrash us into ground-round if this ever got out.”

The warden stepped up close to the gurney, massaging his temples. He looked on the verge of passing out at any moment. How ironic it all seemed.

Chubby stepped forward, his mouth cracked into a wide smile. “That’s one for the record books, Avalon. Happy New Year, honey. Way to go, babe! Yeah, way to go!”

The digital wall clock cycled. It read a minute after midnight. The New Year had arrived.

The sun dawned bright and beautiful the following day, chasing the storm clouds across the horizon.

Chapter 3

She was now full term, expecting delivery. The amniocentesis had been performed immediately upon discovery. The result had come back in seven days. Avalon had to sign a release form in triplicate, clearing the prison hospital staff of all culpability prior to the test. Although the procedure held some risk to the fetus, it was still forced. Avalon suspected that her rights had been violated, but had agreed under duress, rather than face persecution and the removal of her most basic privileges.

The North Carolina prison system had capped such a heavy lid on the incident that for a while, both the news and Avalon had been kept in solitary confinement. After the postponement of the execution, the male staff of the Women's Correctional Facility were sequestered for DNA tests, accompanied by lengthy interrogations. The staff scrutinized her visitor roster for any potential "donors," even though such contact would have been impossible in the first place. The warden felt convinced that one of their oversexed male staff members had slipped through the cracks to perform the deed. Yet, with the conclusion of the blood type analysis, no one, including the general workforce staff, matched the profile. Raymond Hammersmith had been eliminated firsthand from the donor list.

The news had leaked within the walls of the prison in spite of the security blanket. The inmates found out through a slip-of-the-tongue. Wild rumors of a "ghost lover" were awash in the Women's Correctional Facility. At least a dozen females claimed contact with a strange night visitor who came in their dreams to perform unspeakable acts of passionate fantasy rape. The prison psychologists worked double shifts recording mysterious claims that led to wild accusations. It was all a ruse by most of the inmates, one designed to throw the staff into complete turmoil. Others were convinced that a real ghost walked the cellblocks. From the day the first rumors appeared, all personal mail had been censored for any references dealing with the mysterious inmate pregnancy.

Doctor King had taken the full brunt of blame at the Central Prison. The staff physician at the Women's facility had also been interrogated. Neither had suspected or recorded evidence of a pregnancy. Both had given Avalon full exams more than once just prior to the execution date. King blamed his incompetence on a faulty stethoscope. The other physician claimed that had she been looking for a pregnancy she would have found one. Both accused the other of gross negligence. King avoided swinging in the breeze by the act of his discovery in the last hour. He had saved the prison system from executing a pregnant woman, which would have rained hellfire's damnation upon them from all compass directions, notwithstanding, the governor's office.

Avalon hadn't been spared the investigation. She was the investigation. She'd written out a fifty-page affidavit that included her schedule, visitations, contacts, and other general lifestyle activities for the past year. She passed three polygraph tests. Her story never changed. She denied

physical contact with any male staff member at the Women's Branch or Central Prison. Except for one. But now she couldn't even be sure that such a thing had happened. Warden Remy did not believe that a longhaired priest had infiltrated the Central Prison under the surveillance net to impregnate a female death row inmate. He was convinced that Avalon was covering for the real guilty party, and it was just a matter of time before that name surfaced.

Warden Remy ordered the end of the investigation a week before the expected delivery date. Not a word more would ever be said about the mysterious pregnancy or the upcoming delivery. Any inmate found guilty of spreading the tale would face solitary confinement. Any staff member belonging to either institution who was heard spreading the rumors, faced dismissal or prosecution. Careers were on the line. Worse, it had all derived from some insane mystery that had made laughing stocks out of some of the most brilliant correctional professionals in the state of North Carolina.

The adoption proceedings ended up a hideous travesty. Avalon broke down in tears after being notified that her mother, Emily Chambers, had refused to adopt her child. Since the prison authorities could not name the father, the result was a bastard child that she wanted no part in raising. Emily was also convinced of her daughter's guilt connected with her husband's murder.

Tom's parents did not attend the proceedings, wanting nothing to do with the adoption. The next in line was Drake Labrador, the victim's brother. He'd testified to Avalon's character during the trial, stating that she might have been innocent of the crime, although he had no concrete proof. He also claimed that she'd exhibited stellar behavior, with above average morals while in his company. Drake had been written into his brother's will as the major recipient of the family business, given seventy percent of the company while the rest of the stock had been divided between both sets of parents. There had also been a rumor that Drake had formed a new software division that had become an instant drain on the company assets.

Drake would be the new father of Avalon's little girl. He promised to name the girl Avy, a short version of her mother's first name. Avalon, having little to say in the matter, had to agree to the terms. She drafted a letter to her soon-to-be daughter, explaining the unfortunate circumstances of how her life had ended, hoping her daughter would understand at least some of the heart-wrenching circumstances. The letter waxed apologetic, but ended on a bright note, wishing her daughter happiness and success throughout her life. The letter would be opened on her daughter's eighteenth birthday.

They had moved Avalon to the prison infirmary two days ago. If she did not give birth soon, they would induce labor. They had told her that a cesarean was not out of the question, but she knew it was a bluff to force her to comply. The contractions had come abruptly, with the exam that showed she was fully dilated. Yet, if they were serious about the operation, she would not permit the last insult to be that of her child being forced to enter the world by being cut from her like some dangerous growth. Her bond with her daughter was holy, a sweet connection that Avalon cherished. She would not permit that link to be sullied.

Though her feet were in the stirrups, she vowed to smack the first individual who approached her with a scalpel or needle. She had insisted on a natural birth, and so far had found the experience almost spiritual in spite of the pain. She had one last legacy to fulfill. Little Avy would be her last, but greatest accomplishment.

"I don't even think you're pushing," the nurse declared. "We haven't got all day. We'll have to provide assistance if you are not willing to cooperate."

"Don't come near me," warned Avalon. "You might be the first one to lay your hands on my daughter to take her away, but you won't dictate to me how she comes into this world."

Doctor King and Warden Remy stood by looking like two bobbleheads. The delivery room door had been locked to any staff who might have been tempted to enter with the purpose of satiating their curiosity. In spite of the threats of reprisal for speaking about the subject, news of the arrival of a "bastard death row kid" had consumed the prison like a firestorm, which meant the warden would be in full damage control mode for weeks.

Doctor King held a syringe up to the light, depressing the plunger to remove the air. "We're just saying that if you need a little help, we're equipped to assist," he said. "Please concentrate. Let's see if we can make this an easy delivery."

Avalon had held off long enough. She had enjoyed the moment—the kicking life of a baby beneath her heart as well as the frustration she had caused these three. Their single priority concerned getting the child off the premises, then carrying out her sentence. That way their slate would be wiped clean, their reputations restored.

She leaned forward, bearing down. She fisted the sides of the bed until her knuckles blanched white. She felt the head crown. She gave a slight laugh, watching the nurse stare at her with a grave face. Doctor King set his syringe down, then picked up a pair of scissors.

Warden Remy turned his back on the delivery. The man may have never witnessed a birth before, or maybe he found the entire act distasteful.

Avalon relaxed, took several breaths, then kinked forward again. She felt a sudden movement coinciding with the collapse of her stomach. At that very moment, she saw an image flash before her face. The strange vision took on a human form. It was a masculine face shrouded in a misty aspen glow. He had haunting, strange eyes that seemed to glow with their own inner light. The sudden vision stirred something in her that came in revelation. Now she could plainly see that this was Father Geminus and what part he had played in the scheme of her life. It was nothing like she had thought at all. He hadn't come to cause problems, but to solve them. Everything was crystal clear now.

She heard the familiar voice, rich and smooth like a river of molasses. He spoke to her—words she had heard before.

“So it was found. So it was confessed. So it is forgiven. From the past, into the new beginning, and beyond into the days that have not yet been seen. I take thee from the old Gate into another of the same for the deserved chance to correct the great wrong. Abide in the final peace that has been earned. Are you prepared to enter the new Gate, Avalon Labrador?”

She found herself answering, “Yes, I am.”

“The baby’s not breathing,” said the nurse.

Doctor King used the bulb suction to clear the mucus from the nose. He flipped the baby upside down, grasped the ankles, and delivered a buttock smack.

“The Gate is open now,” said the voice. “You’re welcome to cross. There is nothing more that needs to be done here. Don’t be afraid.”

“I am not afraid anymore,” Avalon answered in her mind. Toasty warmth enveloped her body. She took one step forward into the dream world. She could see it now—rolling knolls of daffodils amongst clumps of spongy heather wet with dew. Tall, rose-colored clouds swooned in a windy sky. A spine of mountains rolled away in a blaze of purple, gray, and white snowcaps. She recognized this place, she’d seen this panorama before. She knew this is where she had to stay.

Avalon sucked in the sweet air, holding her breath. It felt like she’d just swallowed paradise. The taste of this life was beyond grand.

The doctor shock-slapped the baby again. “We’re losing her.”

Avalon let out the breath she had been holding with a huge whoosh. Her eyelids fluttered for a moment, and then she collapsed backward onto the gurney with a last wheeze.

* * * *

The baby drew its first lungful of air, then pushed out a loud squawk.

Doctor King looked at the monitor. “Wait a minute. Now we’re losing the mother. She’s flat-lined!”

The nurse scurried to unsnap the defibrillator kit and yank out the paddles.

But it was too late. After working on her for twenty minutes, they could not bring her back. The last vestige left of Avalon Labrador was an eerie smile frozen across her face. One could have almost said it looked like paradise.

Chapter 4

Eighteen Years Later

One group of girls approached from the head of the dining room table while a smaller contingent came around from the other end. Realizing she had been outflanked, Avy backed up against the wall, clapping her hands over her eyes. She gave a frightful squeal just to make it look good.

The party poppers exploded with the sound of crackling corn, sending out a tornado of confetti. Silly String arched through the air, landing on her in sticky webs. One of the girls even threw a handful of rice, but Avy ducked just in time to let it spray against the wall.

“That’s not fair,” said Avy, stomping her foot. “You guys have all the ammo!”

“Happy Birthday!” they chorused, pressing forward.

Avy could see mischief in their eyes. “Okay, what gives? The presents were opened an hour ago. You already sneak attacked me.”

In the next instant, the girls cocked their arms back, fists loaded. Avy reared back, catching a glimpse of sock-like objects hurtling through the air. The objects pelted off her harmlessly, except for a few that hung up in her hair. When she chanced a look down, her eyes widened in surprise. A blush came to her cheeks.

A dozen jockstraps lay strewn on the floor.

Avy pulled one off the top her head, noting that it was an extra large. “Are you guys trying to tell me something?”

“Yeah,” said Lindsey, her best friend. “All that bling shit doesn’t count. You need the real gift—the one that keeps on giving—we can’t help you out with that one.”

“Yeah,” said another. “You need a side order of beefcake.”

“Major way,” agreed a third. “Who do you think you are, Princess Bride? Dude, you gotta get gigged, stuck like a frog in an Alabama creek. The last guy we saw you with was a cardboard cutout of Johnny Depp at the theater.”

“Okay, okay.” Avy could see her mother, Lizzy, standing at the kitchen door, shaking her head, eyeing the mess on the floor. Yet her mother had a crooked smile on her face. Avy spoke loud enough for her mother to hear. “I’m just looking for something a little more stable than a good ‘gigging.’ But I promise if I find a good looking cabana boy, I’ll go right for his ‘on’ switch.”

The girls burst out in shrieking laughter. Avy took a seat at the dining room table and began to appraise the gifts once again. Lindsey stood behind her, picking some of the stringy goop from her hair. One of the girls flipped a switch on a CD boom blaster. It began to emit a thumping techno tune. Avy looked up when she saw her uncle emerge from the foyer hallway into the dining room. His face had the expression of someone sitting on a toilet trying to pass a rock-hard turd.

He made a beeline for the blaster, pushing buttons, flipping switches. After killing the music, he waved his arms for attention, a useless gesture since he had all eyes on him the moment he'd stomped into the room.

"All right now, girls," he announced. "We have to chop-chop this for now. Sorry, but everybody has to go. If you'll just pick up, we'll see you out. Can't thank you enough for showing up for the party."

Avy looked at her watch. "It's four-forty in the afternoon, Uncle Drake. We haven't finished our cake yet. I thought we could listen to some music for a bit."

"No can do. I'm expecting a very important business call any minute. Your mother can fix up some doggie bags to give to your guests."

Avy's mouth dropped. "Can't you take your call upstairs? We're not going to bother you there."

Drake set his jaw. The tone of his next words came out restrained. "I need absolute concentration for this call, which means peace and quiet. I'm asking that you respect my wishes."

"They're not hurting anything," Lizzy tried.

He glared at his wife, making a swishing motion with his hand. Lizzy rolled her eyes, then stepped back into the kitchen.

Avy stood up, a thread of Silly String hanging from her ear. She tried to mask the embarrassment on her face when she said, "I'm sorry, guys. We can make it another time and pick up where we left off. You've all been awesome."

There were no more words. She escorted her friends to the front door, hugging each one before they left. There was no way to describe the awkwardness of the moment. When the last one had gone, Avy shut the door and walked back into the dining room to sit down in her decorated chair. It had been just an hour ago that she had blown out the eighteen candles. A thick carpet of wrapping paper and confetti on the floor was the only indication that a party had been held.

Her mother began to run a portable sweeper, managing to shove small piles into larger clumps. It seemed a shovel would have done a better job than the little sweeper. There was no housekeeper to take care of the mess, since she had the day off. Besides, it was her mother's feeble attempt to show her domestic side, which she didn't do often.

Avy watched Drake standing at the end of the hallway, rubbing his temples with nervous agitation. He'd used the old conference-in-the-afternoon excuse to get the partygoers out early, but a real appointment was doubtful. A moment passed. His cellphone rang. It was disgusting the way he jumped on it so fast. Probably dialed himself, thought Avy.

She picked at a square of angel food cake, watching her stepfather cup his mouth. Drake turned to her every so often, flashing a forced smile, the good-old-uncle smile that had an edge of Wile E. Coyote crossed with the Grinch. His face would grow grave while he addressed his caller, until his eyes landed on her again, and then he'd plaster on an instant grin. He wasn't fooling her.

Avy knew Drake felt uncomfortable around her. This wasn't the first time he'd pulled such a stunt. The man played Halloween all year round. He had three masks—*sorry, I have to go, I'm late, and we'll talk again later*. Avy and Lizzy came second to Cyberflow in the Labrador household. Where Lizzy pushed small piles around the floor, Drake shoved larger ones around at Cyberflow Electronics, Security and Software.

Avy knew her mother well, having experienced eighteen years of observation from the sidelines. She remembered the time when Drake told his wife, "You're the shiniest bulb on my tree." At least the woman had been the shiniest bulb on his tree in the beginning. In those days, the limelight of fame had shined down upon her. The press never tired of Miss Fitness USA, the runner up in the Miss Universe contest. Strong, athletic, with perfect muscle tone, she'd been coveted by every eligible bachelor on the east coast. Her mother had spent endless hours showing Avy all the clippings from her past, itemizing her accomplishments in great detail. But a sorry transformation evolved. The years had faded her like junkyard paint.

Today her mother wore the Armani suits, attended all the right parties, allowing her to hang out with the other Botox queens who were on every miracle supplement, energy herb, stress formula, prescription drug, and vitamin known to man. Her mother played racquetball once a week. For this, she needed a trainer. She also had a full-time motivational counselor and a psychologist on call to help her make critical decisions. The woman could think her way through a day or two of shopping at the expensive boutiques, provided she'd taken her L-tryptophan. But Avy noticed that she would often come back with the wrong items, or fashionable clothes that were two sizes too small. On more than one occasion, she had gotten lost on her way to the hair or nail salon, but it was because she had given the limousine driver the wrong directions.

If she wasn't on the run, her mother spent her days staked out by the pool, plastered with tanning oil, trying to catch some color in her face. The result of the tanning sessions required more Botox injections to erase the crow's feet.

Avy didn't blame her mother for her behavior, she harbored more than just general anxiety attacks. There were bouts of confusion and deep depression. Drake took extended business trips out of state sometimes, failing to return for weeks. He'd fired numerous secretaries for various reasons. All the excuses were bogus. Avy knew he'd been screwing the help. Lizzy carried more than the burden of trying to keep up appearances or hide her loneliness. Elizabeth Labrador *knew* that her husband had been unfaithful. The woman suffered from a broken heart.

"Mom," said Avy in a soft voice. "I can do that later. Why don't you relax?"

Trying to get out of earshot, Drake had left the kitchen.

"It's no trouble at all," her mom said, pushing the sweeper with awkward strokes across the floor, looking a decade older than her forty-six years. "Greta will be here tomorrow to get anything I miss." Then, trying to change the subject, she added, "You did so well in school, honey. I bet you'll have your choice of any university you have your heart set on. And they'll be darn lucky to get you."

"I wasn't thinking about enrolling right away. I haven't decided on a major anyway. I loved my drama classes." Avy looked up, wistful thoughts running through her head. "There's nothing cooler than stepping on a stage in front of a live audience or acting in the round."

Lizzy leaned on the sweeper handle. "An actress! Now there is something you have the bones for. It shows in your profile."

"Great looks isn't all of it," said Avy. "There has to be talent, too."

"You could make Sharon Stone look like a third-grader in a school play," her mom declared. She started pushing the sweeper again, shoving a smaller pile into another.

Drake stepped back into the room, snapping his cellphone shut. He looked pissed off, but calmed when he glanced at Avy. Then a smile widened across his face, showing expensive capped teeth. He reached into his suit jacket, retrieving an envelope.

"I saved this for last," said Drake, handing the envelope to Avy. "There's a little something in there from me, but what's most important is the letter that your birth mother asked me to give you on your eighteenth birthday."

Avy opened the envelope and pulled out a thousand dollar check. Simple, but impersonal. She'd expected such a gift from him. Drake was lacking in the sensitivity department.

"You shouldn't have." Avy's hand strayed to the heavy gold chain around her wrist that her mother had just given her. The older woman wore a duplicate on her wrist. At least the bracelet had been purchased with Avy in mind, it had even been inscribed. A check was easy to write.

The letter inside the envelope intrigued her. It began with the words *My Darling Daughter*. The letter was over eighteen years old. Her hand shook while she gazed at it. She had the urge to continue reading. But not in front of her parents. It could wait until later.

"This is special occasion," Drake said, smoothing a gray lock of hair into place. "You've reached that magical age. It reminds me of how young I was when I went out on my own. Of course, that was a long time ago. Take the corporate ladder, for example. I remember when I was on the first rung, eager for the climb. I knew there was one direction to go—up! Those first steps were uncertain, sometimes the height became frightening. But wouldn't you know it, it got easier because I became more sure-footed. In the end, I grew to meet the task."

This was going somewhere, thought Avy, but the trip was a long way around the mountain. She wished he would just spill his guts.

Her mother stopped pushing the sweeper and cocked her head.

"The point being," Drake went on, "that it's never too early to set your goals so you can forge ahead. I'm convinced you have the talent. Who am I to stand in your way? It's your venture."

"I understand," said Avy. "I appreciate your concern. But I haven't decided on college yet. I thought I would take a little time off to think about my portfolio."

"Nonsense," he said, checking his watch. "There's no time like the present to get your feet wet, which will give you a glimpse of what the world has in store for you. You've got to take charge out there."

Her mother tried, "But I thought she could—"

"Absurd," he said. "She's much better off taking advantage of the job opportunities while she's fresh out of school. We're talking about the proper work ethic. Having a vocation is a major character builder. Avy's got enough savvy to choose whatever starter career she has her heart set on. There's no better time than now to move out and start the process."

Avy rose off the chair. "You mean now? This minute?"

Her mother fumbled, dropping the sweeper. "But, Drake, I don't think it's such a—"

He whirled on his wife. "You don't need to think about this, Elizabeth. This is her decision, *her* future." Then to Avy, "Sure, why not? There's nothing stopping you. You have *my* blessing. Your little Suzuki Kamikaze car, or whatever it is, is in perfect running order. You already have a thousand dollars, which will help to get you into a place. *The Raleigh News and Observer* is full of listings for prime candidate jobs. I even think we have some spare luggage we can add to your birthday hit list. That's the least we can do. Look, Avy, I don't want to force this on you, but I thought this is what you wanted all along."

It was what he wanted all along, she thought. The candles were not even cool on her cake. Here she sat, not at her birthday party, but at her bon voyage party. All that seemed to be missing was the swift kick in the ass and the slam of the door. He had finally gotten rid of her.

Avy rose to her feet. "It's okay, Mom. I'll get my things."

Drake gave her peck on the head. "That's my girl. Everything will work out just fine. You'll see. Mother, help our daughter gather her things, then see her off, would you? I have to get to the plant. We've got a late shipment. Heads are starting to roll. Now you take care, you hear, girl?"

Avy did not watch him leave the room. She heard the front door slam a moment later. Lizzy gave out a groan when she picked up the sweeper. Avy didn't care if she ever saw him again. All the years of his hatred had boiled over to end in this moment. Avy knew why, too. She looked too much like her mother. Avalon Labrador had been Drake's demon for almost two decades for reasons that Avy never understood.

It didn't take long. She packed in twenty minutes, using one large wheeled carrier. She found herself driving south on the main highway toward Raleigh. Leaving the city proper, she gave Durham a mock salute while she watched it disappear in the rearview mirror. She had no way to describe how she felt. It reminded her of that fantasy tale where Bilbo Baggins left the Shire on his way to his first adventure. He'd been reluctant at first, even afraid, but he'd left with his blood

boiling for the glorious quest. But this...she felt cast out of her house like a piece of trash, not the eager adventurer. Part of her lusted for new faces and places while another part of her cried foul. This was abandonment.

She hit the speed dial for Lindsey on her cellphone. Then she stopped the call. How could she tell her best friend that she'd just got the boot from her uncle? On her birthday. How could she explain something like that?

Thanks a lot, Drake, you merciless scumbag.

She decided that something on Raleigh's Westside might be a safer neighborhood, considering that she was a single female with no friends or contacts in the area. At least one of the local police officers had told her that.

After forty minutes of driving, she pulled into a small motel called the Flat On Your Back, on Blue Ridge Road. It consisted of two-dozen units fashioned in a half-moon shape around a courtyard, equipped with a kidney-shaped swimming pool. Giant oaks, their branches gaunt from age, sat about the property. Tree roots had come up through the pavement in small pretzel shapes. The units looked ancient save the fresh coat of white paint with lavender trim. It had a cozy ambience, almost storybook in appearance. But that's not what attracted her to it. The deciding factor was the fourteen ninety-five per night sign. She had a thousand dollar check and at least twice as much in her savings account. It would give her a little financial mileage to stay here. At least she would have enough time to scope out the job market in Raleigh.

She paid for a week, taking possession of key number twenty-three, a room on the outside wing. She checked the room before unloading her luggage, making sure it was at least livable. It had a queen-size bed, dresser drawers, walnut table with two spindle-back chairs. It even had a mini-kitchen, a small hot plate, and half-sized refrigerator. It would do. Resigned to the fact that this would be her new home, she parked her car in front of her door.

She wrestled with the heavy suitcase, trying to lift it out of the small trunk. The strap tore loose, which sent her stumbling.

"Here, let me help you with that," a mellow voice offered from behind her.

Without looking she said, "That's okay" but she turned out of curiosity, to see a man standing behind her. She sucked in a sharp breath. His face looked like something Michelangelo had carved out. Even in the glare of the sun, it shone clean with a flawless complexion. His hair tumbled over his shoulders, blond with golden highlights. It was almost as long as hers. His eyes were so gray they almost looked white. Yet it was the high-necked collar that caught her off guard. She wondered what a Catholic priest was doing at a small motel on the Westside.

She wagged the strap at him. "I guess I yanked when I should have pulled."

"Happens all the time." He hefted the bag out to place it on the ground. His hand remained on the pull bar.

She gawked, standing there like a dithering fool. “Oh, how stupid of me! I’m right here in twenty-three. I don’t mean to put you to any trouble.” Although, she had to confess that she wouldn’t mind bothering him just a little.

“No problem at all,” he said. He pulled the bag through the open door and placed it at the foot of the bed. She followed him in, taking delicate steps.

“It’s a nice little motel,” she tried to make conversation. “You can’t beat the rates. I just love this little kitchen, too. Is there anything I can get you?” Now that was raw. Did she think she was hosting a cocktail party at the Governor’s mansion? Sure, offer the honey-roasted duck, cream sauce and a bucket of champagne. Coming right up. But he saved her.

“A glass of water would be fine.”

Once in the kitchenette, she wrestled a plastic cup from its packaging. She presented the cup to him a moment later.

“They are quaint little arrangements,” he said. He took a quick sip of water while he looked around the room. “Are you staying for long or just visiting the area? Forgive me, I’ve skipped the preliminaries. I’m Father Geminus, first name Janus. Janus is fine.”

Janus was not only fine, he was supernova combustible, she decided.

“Avy Labrador.” She extended her hand. “Well, you might say that I’m on my first adventure, striking out on my own. I’m from Durham. I’ve always been curious about our capital city, so I thought it was about time I got to know the area.”

“Ah, Raleigh.” He chuckled. “Known as the City of Oaks, named in honor of Sir Walter Raleigh, sponsor of the Colony of Roanoke, otherwise remembered as the lost colony. Chartered in seventeen ninety-two. Home of Rufus Harley, Andrew Johnson, and Kaye Gibbons. That’s just scratching the surface. There is a lot of history here. You could have done worse.”

“Were you born and raised here?”

“Not a native. I just make it a point to know a little bit about where I’ve been or where I’m going. It’s a confusing process. My natural curiosity is the culprit.”

“Are you staying at the hotel?” She didn’t want to sound too forward, but the words were out before she could stop them.

“Just making an inquiry. We have a convention in town. I’m on the hunt for a small lodging. Are you employed in the area?”

“Not exactly.” Her smile slipped. If she couldn’t confess the truth to this man, then she had more problems than she was aware of. “To tell you the truth, I haven’t even checked the want ads for a job yet.”

He leaned toward her. “Are you looking for anything specific, or does it matter at this point?”

“I’m interested in the dramatic arts, but I doubt there are any openings in that area. I might try a waitress job or bartending. There’s always factory work. IBM, Cisco, Carquest, and Nortel are down the road.” She thought of Cyberflow for an instant. Drake hadn’t even mentioned a position for her there. Bastard.

He flexed his hands, showing a perfect manicure. “Perhaps I could be of some help. It just so happens that one of my dearest friends, a past member of my parish, is in need of an assistant. His name is Sebastian Norman, also called the Amazing Sebastian, which is a celebrity moniker. Now, I don’t believe he has a stage the size that you’re used to performing on, but it’s quite adequate. He fills the house Friday through Sunday over at the old converted Stadium Theater on Hillsborough. Two acts a night, three nights running, would get you a nice little paycheck. You would have time to enroll in school full time during the weekdays while handling the job.”

“Sounds neat. What kind of business is it? I’m not clear on the description.”

“It’s drama, if you could call a magic act such. I’ve heard a rumor that his assistant is leaving due to pregnancy. He’ll need someone this weekend. I wouldn’t recommend him if I hadn’t seen the act, which I’ve taken in twice. You might catch him working on some stage props this evening. I’m afraid the single drawback is the costume. I’d liken it to one part bathing suit, one part sequins, another part ostrich feathers.” He handed her a business card that had the magician’s contact information embossed on it.

“I’m not worried about the costume,” she said, staring at the card. She looked at him again, unable to believe her luck. “I appreciate the contact. I’ll be sure to check it out. Well, thank you very much!” She stood up to shake his hand. She liked his hand. He had an easy smile that gave him a relaxed, uninhibited manner.

“I’m glad I could be of help. It’s been a pleasant chat. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to be off. A higher authority calls.”

“Oh, of course. Goodbye, thanks again.” Her gaze followed him until he disappeared through the door. She could hear the taps of his wingtips retreating. She resisted the urge to run to the doorframe to peek around it. Instead, she knelt at her bag to remove a large gold diary, and wrote:

Met Father Geminus today. I can’t describe how I feel about the visit. What can I say? He was charming. A real hottie. He gave me a lead on a job. I think I’ll look it up.

Avy made sure to include his name, which she didn’t want to forget. It was a peculiar name, *Geminus*. But what a slice of heaven to have made the connection with him. She recorded the date in the diary, noting that it was her birthday. She also wrote:

Kicked out of the house. It was Uncle Drake’s idea. Am I surprised? Not. I moved into a motel in Raleigh. How do you like that? From a colonial in Durham to a motel room on the Westside. Who’d have thunk it? To be continued.

She unfolded the letter addressed to her from her mother and began to read.

My Darling Daughter,

Happy Birthday, sweetheart. I’m sorry I can’t be there with you right now. By now many years have passed, but I’ll bet that you are a bright, beautiful young woman, everything that I hoped you would be.

I'm sure you've got questions about me. You've probably heard your fair share about me in the way of gossip or rumor. Maybe you've read about me. I'm very sorry about all that. I hope you've had a joyful and rewarding life despite everything. If you have, it was because of your own doing, something I could never take credit for. But don't think for one minute that I wouldn't have enjoyed that time with you. That I wouldn't have loved holding you in my arms.

I guess I owe you an explanation. I was convicted of murdering my husband, Tom. They said the evidence that convicted me was overwhelming. I can't tell you what happened that night. I have no memory of the dinner party or anything afterward. It's all a terrible blank. I won't bother you with the gruesome details. Believe me when I say that I don't remember doing any of the things they said I did. I want you to understand when I tell you that I would have never committed such a horrible act against the man I loved so much. Before God, I'm proclaiming my innocence.

I don't know who your father is, which is a tragedy. This has probably torn you apart. Something mysterious happened to me that I had no control over. I don't really know how to explain it. I'm convinced some spirit came over me, something that came from another world, a miracle. They said I was crazy for making such claims about angels and visitors. I now think that it was somehow linked to my pregnancy. I know that's hard to believe. Maybe it came from the one who promised me a new beginning. He talked about such things. I didn't believe him at first, but he said the reasons would become clear one day. He said that this wasn't an end to my story. He promised that my pages would be filled again. I know, I know, Mom's got delusions—she's cracked. But maybe it will make sense one day. Or maybe the meaning of it will be hidden away forever.

I wish you all my heartfelt love, Avy. I've carried you and loved you from the moment you were conceived. You might think that your birth was a mistake. But I want you to know that you were never a mistake. Great things await you, my love. I feel these things because a mother's bond is forever. We'll be together again. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me for not being there for you, especially in the times that you needed someone when you suffered or felt pain. Trust me when I say that I'm with you now and will never leave.

I won't say goodbye. I will say hello, Avy. God bless and keep you.

Love,

Mom

Bitter tears plopped onto the aged paper. Avy let them run, feeling no shame with the display. She folded the letter to place it between the diary pages. She did not cry because she had sympathy for her mother. She never knew her. She cried because she didn't understand her, felt sorry for her. Her mother spoke of confusion and memory loss, when she might have confessed to her crime, facing the issue like a noble, honest person. It also became obvious that her mother might have suffered from mental problems. To have even contemplated executing her in such a condition was the real crime. She knew that her mother had died giving birth to her. Avy, in an indirect sort of way, had been responsible for her mother's passing. Had it been a mercy killing, she wondered. Her mother's life had been sad. A pathetic series of delusions. Still, she couldn't blame her. Avy hoped her mother had attained peace when the end came.

"Now you've smeared your mascara," she said to herself. She went to the small bathroom to shampoo her hair and freshen up. After pinning her hair back, she chose a white cotton jumper. Except for a little red in the eyes, her appearance in the mirror looked passable.

She didn't have an appointment, but she hoped to catch Sebastian Norman at the Stadium Theater so she could snag that position before it was filled. The Amazing Sebastian. She had to smile.

Minutes later, she found herself cruising Hillsborough Street, craning her neck to locate the theater. She found a three-story brick building with a giant wedge-shaped marquis. No mistaking the 1940's structure for an old movie house, or the name plastered across the front of it. She parked in front, tried the double glass doors, but they were locked. She followed an alley that led to the rear parking lot. She pressed a service buzzer next to a thick metal door. Looking around, she could see two cars sat in the rear lot. She hoped one of them belonged to Sebastian.

She hadn't any real expectations about what a magician looked like, but the man who answered the door turned out to be very handsome and sporting a muscular frame. He was rather short, his black hair cropped in a high crew cut. His eyes were light brown, in his left ear he wore a diamond stud. His voice resounded an octave lower than she would have expected.

"I'm afraid there's no show tonight," he said. "Friday, six to eight, eight-thirty to ten-thirty."

"I'm not here about the show," said Avy faltering. "Actually, I am here about the show, but not in a customer sense. Father Geminus gave me this." She extended the business card. "He said you might be looking for an assistant. I hope the position is still open. My name is Avy. Oh, I've had some drama experience, ballet, some fencing, along with a side order of yoga." A little humor couldn't hurt.

"How did he know I needed an assistant? Are you sure it was Janus Geminus?"

"Yes, he was a priest named Janus."

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "Well, that explains it."

Explained what, she wondered.

He gave her a quick head to toe once-over, but his gaze came to rest on her hips. She felt a bit uneasy under the lingering stare.

He met her eyes again. "You're about the right size. You sure look healthy. The costume should fit. Glad to meet you. I'm Sebastian Norman." He shook her hand with energetic pumps. "There's nothing amazing about me so feel free to disregard the sign out front." He gave her a pert bow, then with the wave of his hand produced a purple rose. She took the flower as she stepped inside.

The back of the theater was a storehouse packed with colorful props, engines, and mechanical devices. A large workbench took up the left wall. On it sat an array of various hand tools, paint cans, and spools of wire. A cot sat in the middle of the floor with a wool blanket folded in half over it. At the end of the long bunker-like room were larger boxes, coffin-like structures, painted cutouts, all manner of plastic toys and contraptions. Six manikins hung from the ceiling via wires, their glass eyes staring in mute repose. Half circus, half menagerie, the place looked fun in a festive sort of way, but cluttered enough to make walking hazardous.

Sebastian snapped a folding chair open, setting it before her. He jumped backward to land butt first on a counter top. His agility did not go without her notice.

He waved his arm, indicating the interior floor space. "Don't hold it against me. My mind is more organized than the digs. But I call it home, until the building inspectors come knockin' with a code violation." He sneezed, throwing his hands up to cover his face. In the next moment, he let a fountain of dimes fall from his palms onto the floor. "I hate it when that happens," he said.

It was the perfect icebreaker.

"That was wonderful," said Avy, giving him an energetic clap and a wide smile. "So spontaneous. How long have you studied the magic arts?"

"I started pulling disappearing acts when I was two. Now you see him, now you don't kind of things. I got pretty good at removing my dad's wallet from his pants while he was still in them. I had a habit of making my vegetables vanish, too. In reality, they were going to the dog under the table. By the time I was in sixth grade, I was bending cafeteria spoons or willing young girls skirts to rise, which landed me in the principal's office. I also had a habit of disappearing while in the bathtub, which drove Mom nuts, but I was under the soap bubbles holding my breath.

"Things got a little more intense in my senior year of high school. I removed about a dozen trouser belts during a sock hop dance once, which resulted in a few pairs of pants hitting the gymnasium floor. But I think it was the time I turned a lab frog into a white dove that got me suspended for two days. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that none of the students wanted to pitch dimes or play cards with me. That was because I cheated. The time came when Dad asked me to perform one last disappearing act. Long story short, I ended up here."

"Whoa, heavy." Avy was impressed. "Sort of the James Dean of magical fantasy."

"You flatter the hell out of me. You're hired, what can I say." He tossed her something. She put her reflexes into play, catching it. It was her watch.

“Sorry,” he said. “Couldn’t help myself. Mind if we make it Wednesday? That’ll give us another day before rehearsal.”

“Today is Thursday.”

“No, it’s Wednesday. Look at your watch.”

She checked the date on the timepiece. It had been rolled back twenty-four hours. “How in the name of wizardry did you do that?”

“Me no speaky. I win. Is that okay with you? Nice catch, by the way. You have good hand-eye coordination. You’ll need every bit of it.”

“You’re the boss, Sebastian. I’m not going to argue with you. I might lose something else in the deal.”

“Don’t give me any ideas. But you better check your buttons and snaps. Nooo, I’m just kidding.” He laughed heartily.

They spoke about their pasts for over an hour. She told him about her studies, mentioning that she hadn’t decided on a major course of study yet. He admitted to leaving school before the tenth grade, but she found that he had an innate talent at reading people, like her, since he kept finishing her sentences. He showed a sincere interest in her words with little or no pandering. She confessed to keeping an up-to-date diary, recording life’s incidents, goals, and heartaches within it. He identified with her about how difficult it was to be tossed out of the house, showing surprise when she told him that today was her first day on her own. He gave her a sad puppy dog look followed by a sweet smile. He joked about being much older than he looked. He admitted to being twenty-seven. She roared with laughter, then asked him if he needed a walker or a cane. He answered, “Sure, if it could be used as a prop.”

She liked Sebastian. He threw up a smoke screen to make her feel less conscious about herself, using himself as the brunt of his humor. She found him laid back, easy to talk to. Meeting someone who could read her wavelength was like lifting a mountain from her shoulders. His empathy with the major disconnect from her household notwithstanding, she found herself warming to the male part of Sebastian, and she wondered if these feelings she was having had any profound meaning beyond friendship. Part of her found an instant acceptance with this man on a human level. Another part of her reeled with the realization that she might be dipping her toe into a pool of water that had a very deep end. She didn’t want to let the horse out of the gate just yet. There could be a lot more to his nature than just props. This ride was best left in cruise control.

“I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about the job?” she asked. “Are there any special skills required?”

“Besides dealing with me? That’s the easy part to get over. You know on game shows how the women move around the stage to demonstrate the products?”

She nodded. “Kind of like display modeling.”

“Okay, there’s a whole lot of that, plus the prop handling, with a little morphing in the mix. You’ll need some steady nerves if a thrown knife happens to fly in your direction. Nothing dangerous, it’s all rehearsed and choreographed. You’ll have to watch me when I hit my marks. My eyes will tell you what to do a lot of the time. You’ll learn the routine by rote. It’ll be easy. It’s a three-act structure per show. Six shows, three days running. A hundred bucks per show. Agreeable?”

“That’s fine.” Although she felt like letting out a squeal, proclaiming it was stupendous. But this was a time for easy-does-it. She stood up. But when she glanced down to locate the rose he had given her, it was gone. When she looked back up, Sebastian was crossing the floor with the rose poked in a small flask of water. She took it, offering him a sly smile.

He gave her another mock bow. “See you tomorrow then,” he said. “Avy, be careful on the ride home. Always remember to lock your doors at night.”

He must have known something about the neighborhood she didn’t. Well, of course. He lived here!

“Tomorrow it is then. Thanks for the tip—I always lock up.” She walked to the door to let herself out. It occurred to her when Sebastian had bowed, a Star of David emblem swung from his neck on a thin chain. It struck her as peculiar. Hadn’t the priest mentioned that Sebastian had once been a member of his parish? He could have converted to Judaism, she thought, but shook off the discrepancy. She was getting way too paranoid.

Chapter 5

“Yes, Lizzy,” said Drake into the receiver, scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad. “Are you sure that’s what you want? Do you think that’s wise, dear? Okay, there’s no need to sound off about it. I’ll let you know if I’ve made a decision when I get home. Please go to the sauna or parlor to get some relaxation. Spend some money.” Drake hung up the phone, then pinched the bridge of his nose. He had another migraine barreling in his direction. He looked down at his desk, opened a manila folder, and began to read.

At her desk across the room, Linda Wu tossed her hair, then shuffled some papers. “When am I going to get my own office? Whatever happened to that corner suite with a view that you promised me?”

The muscles in Drake’s jaw twitched. “You’re annoying me right now. Can’t you see I’m reading this report? Anyway, you know I like you near my desk.”

“I spend too much of my time under it. Besides that, a girl can’t get any privacy when she’s in the same room with somebody else. Secretaries are supposed to be stationed out in a lobby somewhere. This is not the way it’s supposed to happen. It really blows.”

He looked at her in disgust, noticing that she had her hair frothed up again in that ridiculous cotton candy clump. She’d used a trowel to apply her makeup. Was there any wonder he kept her hidden away?

“What would you do if I weren’t here?” he asked. “What do you mean by privacy? Honest to God, go to the bathroom if you have hygiene problems or need to fix yourself up. If you don’t like the arrangements, maybe you would prefer another company that pays you less than I do. Maybe somebody who hasn’t heard of medical plans or has no solid career advancement opportunities.”

“Sometimes I think the real reason you keep me around is to toot your flute.”

“That ought to be enough for you. You didn’t even graduate high school. That means you’re under-qualified for the position.” He blew out a sigh. “You’re standing very close to the edge right now.” He turned a page. “It’s a long fall without a parachute.”

“Maybe I can fly, you never know.”

“Shaddap! Show a little initiative for a change. Give me some news, any news. Look at your inbox. I mean the one on your desk, not the other one.”

She snapped her gum, then brought a few pieces of mail to her face. “Well, our lawyer didn’t make the court appearance with Sony. They’re expecting us to respond with a reschedule date. IBM is threatening to sue us over a patent issue regarding that new hard drive we exhibited at the expo. What else? Oh, yeah, both partners are expecting their quarter profit shares. They’re wondering

why we haven't cut them a check yet. They sent us certified letters. I ducked their phone calls like you told me." She sighed. "I'm surprised they haven't shown up on your front steps. Especially your mother. Jesus, Drake, you should cut your parents some slack."

"You don't have the math skills to know how much interest accumulates for that amount of capital over a quarter. I can always apologize, but I can't always expect a bag of nickels like that. Hey, we pull it off once a year. After a couple of years it adds up. Nobody is getting hurt—It's all part of our creative disbursement strategy."

"Yeah, but you could end up pissing them off. They have high profile lawyers."

"I'll make it up to them. That reminds me. Buzz Auggie, tell him I want to see him. When he shows up, take lunch."

Drake watched her, making sure that she rang Auggie. He did have something very important to discuss with his security chief because Linda had just reminded him that a certain topic couldn't wait.

It didn't take long for Auggie to appear, stumbling through the door. He was rotund and nearly bald. He was out of breath, but not from walking fast or running. The man had emphysema due to a three-pack-a-day smoking habit. When he spoke, his voice sounded like his throat was full of pine cones.

Drake waited for Linda to leave before he motioned for Auggie to sit. Augustus Hollywood had been with Drake for sixteen years. Auggie's security force wore matching black double-breasted suits over Forzieri dress oxfords. Each carried a two-inch thirty-eight in a shoulder holster. The Cyberflow workforce, who always got a kick out of them marching down the plant aisles while looking like penguins, had dubbed them the Hollywood mafia. High-tech wise guys in an unwise age. But Drake knew he could count on any one of them to see a job to completion, where sometimes strong-arm tactics were needed. The only thing that had changed over the years about his head of security was his declining health. His devotion had remained steadfast.

Drake began with the basic pleasantries—the wife, kids, doctor visits, annoying in-laws, the current political arena. It was a ritual they went through every time they met—a warm-up, a prelude to the matter at hand. Drake stopped speaking to clear his throat. That was the signal for Auggie to check the door by cracking it open, assurance that no one stood within earshot of the room. Auggie did so, returned to his seat and gave a curt nod.

Drake laced his hands. Then the delivery came. It could have been written by a presidential speechwriter and spoken by an announcer. His voice took on a low pitch. Auggie pulled his chair closer to the desk.

"It's been brought to my attention, Auggie, that my parents, along with my daughter's grandmother, have been inconvenienced again. Miss. Wu reminded me that I've been lax in my duty to get the checks out. This has happened in the past, I'm sure you know that. So, I was thinking it was about time I made up for these oversights with a presentation or gift. Something that might salve the wounds, ease the friction."

“If I’m reading you right, you mean some type of goodwill gesture to make up for all these goofs.”

“You’re right on target, Auggie. I can’t think of anything more appropriate than a goodwill getaway vacation. You know, something the older folks are certain to enjoy or talk about until they’re renting real estate six feet under. Something worthy of postcards so they can bore their relatives. It should be something exotic. White sandy beaches, azure seas, gulls skiing in the clouds overhead—something like that. I’m thinking Bermuda.”

“I can hear the grass skirts swishing now. I can even taste those rum runners with the little umbrellas.”

“I think you’re talking about Hawaii, but you get the idea.”

“They’re all tropical, boss.”

“Fine, fine. Hold that thought. It also occurred to me that the commercial airlines can be a cluster-fuck affair, even if it’s first class. I mean, what makes such a flight special or exclusive, especially when it’s crowded? Shit, you have to pray for a window seat, wait in line for the head, then there’s the screaming kids. That could drive anybody to drink. You know how inflated the liquor cost is onboard a seven forty seven.”

“Haven’t flown on one for fifteen years. It was expensive then.”

“That’s my point. The cost, the inconvenience. It’s dehumanizing. I think seniors in the twilight of their years deserve much finer things. Something that will cater to finicky sensibilities. I couldn’t think of a better way to reach a paradise destination than with one of our corporate jets. No sense in using the Lear five-five. How’s that old Citation holding up?”

Auggie shrugged. “She’s airworthy, I guess. I don’t think the maintenance logs are up to date. The tires are bald. She’s more than behind on a scheduled inspection.”

“We’ve still got insurance on her?”

“Yeah, I think we’re paid up. You might have to ask Linda to make sure. But if you’re thinking about a flight to Bermuda, I wouldn’t advise it. That’s a lot of ocean out there.”

“That’s my point. Bear with me on this. She’s got a questionable airframe, an engine that’s on its last wheezing breath. Given her age, she’s not in the best of shape. However, she could make it. The decision to use her might appear a harmless oversight.”

“We’d have to get the engineer and pilot to sign her off.”

“The engineer doesn’t have to know where she’s going. Just that she’s worthy enough to take to the air, which would require him to sign her off with a couple of pen strokes. If the pilot sees a glowing inspection report, he won’t have any qualms about making the trip.”

“Possible.”

“Suppose the Citation had an in-air emergency over the Atlantic. The pilot would send a call out on the emergency frequency. If the situation were dire, a panicked pilot might decide to abandon the aircraft. He might parachute out once he had reached below ten thousand feet. The pilot wouldn’t stand much of a chance for rescue once he hit the water. Unless there was a

watercraft waiting below that had those GPS coordinates, the exact location of the incident. If the pilot knew he had a chance for rescue, such a thing could come off without a hitch. If it had a faulty locator device, the craft would disappear into the ocean without a trace.” Drake snapped his fingers. “Poof!”

“That would be a terrible accident,” said Auggie, slathering his tongue over his lips.

“Yes, an unfortunate accident, Augustus. After a five or six-day search by the coast guard, it would be called off with the presumption that the craft, along with everyone aboard, were lost. I think the grieving process alone would go on for weeks. I could imagine how the relatives would take the news. Days off work, counseling, therapy, all of that would be involved.” Drake feigned a sad look, leaning forward. “Buck Reynolds is still our pilot, isn’t he?”

“Yep, Buck’s still with us.”

“I believe Buck is the type who has self-preservation in mind. It wouldn’t surprise me if he followed such a course of action. Auggie, I’m wondering if you can grasp all of the colors I’m using on this canvas.”

“Looks like a Rembrandt to me. But I can make sure it looks like a Picasso to others.”

“That’s what I needed to hear. Any questions?”

“Hmm, passengers on their way to a vacation destination. In-flight trouble. Accident. Check. I was wondering if your parents were frequent flyers.”

“Of course. They deserve a much-needed rest. We all know that flying over an endless expanse of water is enough to put anyone to sleep. Older folks can conk out anywhere. They’d be snoring away, dreaming about sunsets, beaches, hotel reservations. No stress, panic, or pain.”

Auggie stood up, his knees cracked. “The thing I’m wondering about is the departure time, boss.”

“There’s no hurry. Take some time to set it up. Maybe next week. Pick a mild, sunny day. The kind of day that’s perfect for a flight to Bermuda.”

“Can do.”

“That’s what I like about you, Auggie. You can expect a nice bonus in about a month for the overtime. Oh, keep your telephone traffic to me in normal range. No flags, no tags. I won’t have to be appraised of any ‘mission accomplished’ type message. Just normal business transmissions.”

“Will that be all, Mr. Labrador?”

“I think that’s enough for now,” said Drake. He couldn’t contain a muffled laugh while he watched Auggie cross the carpet headed for the door. “Oh, Auggie.”

“Sir?”

“You can assure Buck that things are going to turn out all right—make it sound harmless and routine. But I don’t think you have to send that pickup watercraft hundreds of miles out there. It would just be an unneeded expense. We’ve got to tighten up a little bit around here.”

“Sure thing.” Auggie left, shutting the door with a soft click.

Drake grabbed a telephone book and thumbed through the pages. He found funeral services in the alphabetical listings. He looked at some of the prices in the advertisements. "Jesus Christ," he muttered. "That much nowadays?" There was always a chance they wouldn't find the bodies, negating the purchase of caskets.

A rap at the door drew his attention. He shut the book. "Enter."

A man peered around the door edge, smiling with an almost apologetic look. Not any man, Drake noted with disdain. A Catholic priest. He looked like a male model, his blond hair hanging like a wet towel.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," said the priest. "I'm Father Geminus from the local parish. I was just wondering if you were available."

"How did you get past security?" Drake asked. "My chief just left two minutes ago. You're in a restricted area."

"Please forgive me." The priest cornered the door, then clasped his hands prayer-like. "I must have walked right through him. Hah! On a serious note, I was told that I could find you here. One of your staff gave me directions."

"What staff? Look, I don't have time for—please shut the door behind you. My visitor roster is very full right now."

"Not to worry." The man held up his hand like a stop sign. "I'm so glad I found you. I've seen your picture in *Fortune Five-Hundred*, *People*, *Computer Age*. I'm Father Janus Geminus. You're Drake Labrador, aren't you?"

"I suppose."

"It's a pleasure, an honor to make your acquaintance!"

Before he could stop him, the priest rounded the desk with his hand extended. Drake eyed him, knowing he was about to have the bite put on him. Why else would a man of the cloth be wandering around Cyberflow hallways without an escort or visitor's badge? Drake refused the handshake.

Janus raised his arms at the open window expanse. "A breathtaking view. Even if it is a parking lot. Nice garden planters though."

"Yeah, thanks."

"You know," said Janus, spinning around and laying a palm on the phonebook. "You strike me as the type of man who wouldn't think twice about putting something back into the community. You have the potential to reach thousands, even millions of people less fortunate than yourself. Some of our greatest philanthropists have discovered this outlet. Their contributions have left an indelible mark on society, not to mention brought their names back up into the spotlight of notoriety. You could reserve a first class seat in the social register."

Drake winced. "Who do I write this check out to?"

Janus began fanning the pages of the phonebook with his thumb while thumping a finger on the cover. "You won't regret this. I can't begin to tell you how this will help our organization. You can make it out to the Boy Scouts of America. Regarding the amount? I'll leave that up to you. I'm sure you'll do the right thing. I just hope you're feeling generous today."

Drake ripped a check out of his company binder and began filling it out, but he couldn't take his eyes from the phonebook, or the priest, who kept blathering away, smiling like an idiot. The man grinned like a dopey Samoyed dog, thought Drake, handing the check over. He thought that ended the visit. He was wrong.

Janus eyed him, the grin vanished. "This will never quite make up for it. It never goes away, you know. Sometimes the severity of the repercussions can fall from the sky and land on us like a mountain. There's nowhere to hide."

Drake shifted in his seat. "I'm not sure I'm following you."

Janus's smile returned in all of its idiocy. He waved the check in the air. "I was talking about the financial trouble in the BSA. There! I think the ink is dry." He looked at the check. "A whole ten dollars! Fabulous. What an impact that will make. You have no idea what you've done. But you will. I can't thank you enough!"

Drake didn't want thanks. If the priest didn't want the donation, he'd take it back. All he wanted was for the guy to get the hell out of there. Drake started to say as much, but Janus turned away. In doing so, the priest knocked the phone book to the floor. Drake bent to retrieve it, noticing that the pages were splayed out. It was opened to the funeral section, the exact page he had been looking at earlier. He slapped the book back on his desk, but when he opened his mouth to say goodbye, he found the office empty. The priest had vanished.

"I hope you choke on it," Drake said to the door.

Chapter 6

After showering, Avy decided on her lavender jogging suit. She tugged her hair into a ponytail, then shoved her feet into her best running shoes. Now she was dressed to twist into a pretzel if Sebastian asked her to. But there was one thing she wanted to do before going to the theater—stop by the library.

She drove down Hillsborough Street and parked in the Harvey Sibbitt Library parking lot. Once inside the library, she went to the administration desk with her driver's license in hand. An aged woman had her back to her, stacking books on a shelving unit. When she turned around, she caught sight of Avy, slapped a hand to her mouth, and dropped an armload to the floor.

Avy stepped back, fearful she'd done something wrong.

"It's your face," said the woman, emphasizing the noun.

"What's wrong with it?" Avy dug in her purse for a mirror.

"Nothing's wrong with it. You look like someone who used to come in here."

Avy blinked. "Was it Avalon Labrador? She was my mother, and she used to live here."

The clerk fanned herself. "It's just so striking. You could be twins. I knew your mother. She was a peach. I am very sorry about the way things turned out. The trial made the headlines here for months. Dear God, it was a regular media circus!"

"There's no need to apologize."

The woman handed her a form. "I'm Abigail Folger. Let's get you started on a card."

Avy filled out the form, which got her a temporary. "Do you have an archives room? I might need tapes that go back to the nineteen seventies."

"Forgive me for asking, but would this have to do with your mother?"

"Well, yes."

"You'd be swimming in the microfiche for days to search out all of the articles. You could get that information face to face from the man who knew her better than anyone. Raymond Hammersmith. He's worked at the women's correctional facility for thirty-five years. He gathered everything in a scrapbook, spending months following the trial like a bloodhound. It would save you the hassle." She brought out a phone book from under the counter. She wrote down the address and pushed the paper slip across the counter.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate this," said Avy.

"I hope you find what you're looking for."

* * * *

Hammersmith's residence was on the South Side, on a street called Flag. It was a dusty, silver trailer on an unkempt lot. A large oak tree with a rotted tire swing sat off center in front of the entrance. Flagstones led up to the door, which looked like a submarine hatch. Six pots held rhododendrons under an aluminum eave. A small sedan cowered under a flimsy awning. The place screamed poverty, given its condition.

After she parked, Avy strolled up the walk, then rapped on the door. The trailer suspension creaked under heavy footsteps. The door opened with a squeal. A large man, fifty something, stepped forward holding a coffee cup. He squinted.

"Hello," said Avy, throwing on her best smile. "My name's Avy Labrador. I've come here because I think you can help me."

The coffee cup slipped from his hand, swung on a pudgy index finger, its contents splashing on the wooden steps over Avy's shoes. The man gawked, taking a step backward.

Avy licked her lips. She would try this again. "Like I was saying, a certain person gave me your address. I'm sorry to bother you, but you knew my mom, right? I was wondering if you could answer some questions." There, she got it out in one breath.

"Man, I'm so fucked up," said the man. "I mean, I'm super shocked. For a minute, I thought Avalon had dropped out of a cloud to come haunt my ass. But you're not her!"

She narrowed her eyes. "I sure hope you're Raymond Hammersmith."

"They call me Chubby." He stared at her. "Yes, yes, come in. By all means!" He backpeddled, allowing her in. She entered, looking around for a moment. She chose to sit on the end of a stuffed chair, not wanting to get too comfortable. She watched him hurry around the corner, then heard a racket of clashing dishes. Something hit the floor with a ping. "I'll be with you in a minute!" he hollered.

"Thanks for inviting me!" she shot back.

She looked around again. Cluttered. A table held a stack of detective novels, sitting on top of an even larger stack of crime magazines. Several rifles sat in corner crooks, while numerous pistols lay scattered about on the top of cushions. A TV hung from wires, eye-hooked to the ceiling. Near the couch, something resembling a fuzzy slipper came to life. The tiny dog stretched once, then walked with an arthritic shiver into the kitchen. Then she heard, "Gretchen! Get out from underneath my feet!" In another minute, Chubby appeared with a cup, saucer, and napkin. "I know just how you like it," he said. "Guh! I mean, I hope you like it this way."

She accepted the cup, watching him study her. Avy sipped the brew. "Just right." What the heck else was she going to say?

He stood in front of her, wound up like a taut spring. She began to fidget under his popeyed gaze, wondering how she was going to bring up the subject. According to the librarian, this was the man who had followed her mother's trial and possibly had the information she was looking for.

He backed up to sit on the armrest of the couch. Now they were both perched on armrests.

“I hope I didn’t freak you out,” Avy tried. “There’s a huge resemblance. I promise I won’t be long. I just have a few questions.”

Chubby brightened. “Oh, sure. Fire away.” He lifted a thick, three-ring binder from an end table, opened it up, then flipped a few pages.

“I guess I’d like to know if the arrest was as bad as I’ve been told.”

He crossed the floor to give her a clipping. “This pretty much explains what happened.”

Avy read the ink-smudged newsprint, while she sipped the coffee.

Law enforcement officials were tipped off about two bodies found in the vicinity of Interstate twenty-nine. The deceased are Tom Labrador and Judge Ronald Gillian. The identification of one of the deceased men led police to an undisclosed residence, where an adult female was questioned. The woman was taken to headquarters for further interrogation. She remains a person of interest in this case. No one has been formally charged. The investigation is ongoing.

Avy handed the short clipping back. “It sounds like she was the main suspect from the beginning.”

“Yeah, two months later the district attorney was set to go. The prosecution hammered her the first day. They said things like ‘irrefutable evidence’ and ‘slam dunk’ because they were so sure that Avalon was guilty. The defense attorney was a friggin nitwit. All he did was bring in people to testify to her character. Seems like she had the whole neighborhood on her side. They had some nice things to say about your mom. Nobody believed that she could do anything like that. But all of that ended up being immaterial.”

“Do you believe she committed the murders?”

“Nah, not even from the start. I could read her pretty well. I was assigned to her cellblock for a long time, and I got to know her well. We talked about a lot of things. Strange thing was that she had no memory of any of it. Plus, she was just too broken up over her husband getting killed like that. They had to remove her a dozen times during the first two weeks of the trial, because she couldn’t look at the autopsy photos. Never have seen a woman cry so much after knocking off her mate. It just didn’t make any sense. There was no hate there.”

“It sounds like you followed the trial, then became good friends with her.”

He looked sad for a moment. “She was the best.” He pointed to his chest. “Inside here, you know.” Then he patted the binder. “I documented everything. Up until the end when the jury reached the final verdict, pronouncing her guilty of capital murder. Then the penalty phase came later—death by lethal injection. Man, the protests flew hot from everyone! There were letter campaigns to the attorney general, the mayor, governor, even the Supreme Court. Nothing worked. Even the appeals. A second lawyer was appointed, but he couldn’t pull any rabbits out of the hat. In fact, he was worse than the first one. She never got a retrial.”

“Then it all came down to the end fourteen years later.”

“Yeah, just over fourteen years. They found out she was pregnant while they were strapping her to the gurney. What a train wreck. They had to lay down a major cover up to keep it from the press. The two doctors assigned to her got canned for incompetence a year later. Nobody could figure out how Avalon got pregnant. They ran all kinds of tests, trying to find out who the father was. The prison reps didn’t have any comments for the media, who were all over the story because they thought it was a botched execution. They never did find a DNA match. All the gals in the prison said that it was the Ghost Lover that came in to do the deed.”

“Ghost Lover?”

“Yep.” He handed her a another clipping. “They did interviews with some of the inmates who spent time with Avalon. One of them wrote that poem. I can recite it by heart.”

Avy began to read the poem.

“Who goes there in the night?

When all is deathly dark

Cause time stands still for all of us

When all are filled with fright

Oh, take me, ghostly lover

Take me far away

Wrap your arms around me

Tell me that you’ll stay

A shadow stalks and whispers

It speaks a loveless ruse

He’s come to do his bidding

With all the little sisters.

Oh, take me, ghostly lover

Take me far away

Wrap your arms around me

Tell me that you’ll stay

Rake my body, make it shiver

Plunge your soul in mine

Give it to me nasty bad

You death-watch nightly giver

Oh, take me, ghostly lover

Take me far away

Wrap your arms around me

Tell me that you'll stay"

Chubby handed her the large binder after she finished reading the poem. He opened it to a certain page, pointing to an article. He was the subject of the interview this time.

Long time Raleigh prison guard, Raymond Hammersmith, has been championing the innocence of Avalon Labrador for more than fourteen years. His outspoken opinions about the trial have garnered media attention and public support, yet controversy from his superiors. He offered his closing thoughts on the aftermath of the trial, sentencing, and death of his longtime friend. Hammersmith said, "Avalon was never a cold-blooded killer or a black widow like some people have been saying. She was incapable of harming another person. I know that killer instinct. I'm telling you, she didn't have it."

Hammersmith went on to say that the trial was a "mockery, a rush to judgment" He also disagreed with the sentence that she received. He has taken great offense to the way things were handled. He challenged the authority that would execute a woman who had been distressed during the last days of her life. Hammersmith said, "In the first place, you don't even think about executing someone who's suffering a mental breakdown—that's the real crime." He added, "I believe that the stress in those last days caused a delivery that ended in her death." Asked what clinical proof he had of her unstable nature, he said, "Avalon said she had nightmares of divine visitations from angels. She saw a priest with long flowing hair."

Avy clenched her fists when she read over the “priest with long flowing hair” remark three more times. *Angels. Ghost lovers.* It seemed like the whole prison was in on it. Either her mother was a full-tilt whacko, or something very strange had happened in the women’s main prison. Whatever it was, it had resulted in a massive cover-up. The inmates were convinced of paranormal activity. The claims might have worked in an insanity defense, but why hadn’t her mother’s attorney used the tactic earlier in the trial? None of it made any sense.

She flipped through the book, reading several more clippings while Chubby looked on. She found more about the evidence against her mother. She read a few snippets from Drake’s testimony, including his reactions to the murder. It all seemed so surreal.

Chubby went to a display shelf to bring down a picture. He held the frame before her. “This was taken in the exercise yard by one of the other officers. We were holding hands that day. It was Avalon’s birthday. You can see right here where she signed it to me. It says, ‘To my best friend in whole world, Chubs.’” He placed it back on the shelf, giving it a loving pat.

Now, Avy stared at him. It was obvious that Raymond Hammersmith had been in love with her mother. He spoke of her with a divine reverence and loyalty, as if she were a fairy princess or queen. It was hard to tell what was manic obsession, or what might be innocent infatuation. Her instincts told her that Chubby had not been intimate with her. He just didn’t come off that way. It had to be a true friendship, she realized. She could see how her mother had become endeared to this simple, gentle man.

Chubby clasped his hands. “I tried to be there for the baby, for you, Avy. But they wouldn’t let me in the infirmary. I just wanted to see you, you know? I would have given an arm to hold you. But the warden said that I was too involved with my emotions. He said I couldn’t be trusted.” His eyes moistened.

She shuddered at the display of emotion. “That’s a wonderful story, Chubby. I wonder if you could tell me about some of the visions she had. I understand that my mom was hallucinating. At the end, I mean.”

“Now that you mention it.” Chubby screwed up his face, obviously thinking hard on the answer. “She did tell me several times that, well, a priest paid her a special visit. Not our regular chaplain. It was somebody else. She swore to it.” He looked down at the carpet. “Avy, you have to understand that your mom was under a lot of stress at that time.”

“Wait a minute. Did she describe this priest to you?”

“Just a catholic priest. Father, damn, I can’t remember his name!”

“Father Geminus? First name, Janus?”

“That’s it! Janet or something. Weird dude, had long flowing blond hair. She said for a priest, he was a looker.”

Avy dropped her cup on the floor. She picked it up, patted the stain with her napkin, but Chubby was there a moment later with a damp towel. “It’s nothing,” he said. “I do it all the time.”

He looked up from the floor, then rose to his feet. “Avy, your hands are shaking.”

She put them between her thighs, willing them to stop. Things were unraveling at light speed. For a moment, she thought she might be losing her mind. The room seemed like it was closing in around her, prompting her with the sudden need to leave. Not because of Chubby. He appeared harmless enough. But the information she'd learned made her skin crawl.

After a minute passed, she stood up. "This meeting has been a real eye-opener," she said, catching her breath. "My mother couldn't have had a better friend than you. Thanks for understanding her, protecting her, and allowing her some dignity. I feel like I've known you all my life." That was another thing that rattled her. She sidestepped toward the door. "I have another appointment that's very important. I've got to go."

He shadowed her steps, grasping her forearm before she made it to the door. "If you've been digging around for information about your mom, just remember to forget most of the bad things you read or hear. She wasn't anything like they said. She was a kind, loving person."

"Thanks for saying that, Raymond." She raised her hand to open the door.

"Avy?"

She turned to meet his gaze. His eyes looked like steel. "Yes?"

His body stiffened. "I won't ever let them hurt you again. Ever. Don't be afraid to call me if you're in danger. I won't let anything bad happen to you. I promise."

She left, almost stumbling on the stoop. Her vision blurred as the tears sprang. She sensed Chubby's gaze following her across the yard over the flagstones.

The ignition key fumbled in her hand before she got the engine started. She turned the stereo on full blast, then pressed down on the accelerator. The car took off with a lurch. Avy drove through the streets of Raleigh in a daze, trying to understand everything she'd just heard. Although the last years of her mother's life had been filled with misery, there had been one person who stood up to defend her, accepting her as a friend. Chubby, Raymond Hammersmith. He had believed in her—taken care of her up until the very end. It tore at Avy's guts, knowing she had not even shown half that trust or faith in the person who had given her the miracle of life. She had no idea if she could ever squash that guilt, but somehow she knew she had to try to make things right with her soul.

When she pulled in the rear parking lot behind the Stadium Theater, she took a quick moment to freshen her makeup in the rearview mirror. Composed, Avy exited her car and made her way to the door where she rang the service buzzer.

Sebastian opened the door, a triangle of pizza hanging from his mouth. She stepped in, setting her purse down. He retrieved a large cardboard box from the counter and presented it to her. He wiggled his eyebrows in invitation to open it. She peeled the top off and swiped the tissue paper aside. It was her costume.

"Had it dry-cleaned," he said around a pizza wedge. "Some of the stitches were reinforced. Hey, your eyes are pink. You okay?"

“It’s the pollen in the air.” She hoped he didn’t read anything else in her expression. Right now she felt like an emotional powder keg. It would be a miracle if she got through the rehearsal session.

Her eyes roamed over the lavender, nylon, one-piece suit. The costume was sheer, speckled with multicolored sequins. It was tiny. A feathered fantail that frothed from a wide elastic belt served as the waist decoration. She pulled the headpiece out, a beret with a small shock of feathers. It looked “show-girlie,” in a Las Vegas sort of way. She ran a finger through the suit fabric. It was tissue-thin, almost see-through.

“Very pretty,” she said. “But it looks like just about everything is going to pop out of this. I hope you keep the stage warm.”

“That’s the whole idea.” He dusted pizza crumbs from his shirt. “Have to keep the eyes of the audience on the beauty rather than the beast. We call it ‘misdirection’ in the trade. I have a feeling I’m going to get away with murder.”

Avy gave him a playful shove, then entered the bathroom. Inching the suit up was the only way to get it up past her hips, requiring her to exhale. Oh, it was tight. She stood five-nine. The suit had been tailored for someone at least three inches shorter. She had to slump to corral her breasts into it. When she stood erect to draw her shoulders back, the top rode down while at the same time the crotch rode up. *Whew, yeah.* It was a dinger, all right. She wondered if her buttocks looked like a couple of spring hams ready to punch each other out. *The hell with it.*

“Here I come,” she said in warning. She stepped out, gave a twirl.

Sebastian spit pizza crumbs. “I am going to get away with murder. Nobody is going to watch me. You should be insured as a national treasure.”

She laughed. “Well, that’s a new one. I thought you were going to ask me if I worked out.” A little tingle shot through her when she noticed him checking her out. She got the belly button tingle—a warning that the dirty little sex demon was sneaking up on her. That was all she needed right now, something that would annihilate her concentration.

“That occurred to me,” he said. “But it’s too cliché.”

“It rides up in places,” she said, adjusting the fabric.

“We’ll do some custom-fit alterations. I won’t have you performing in something that doesn’t feel right.” He pulled a few chairs from the main aisle, clearing a path. “Give me a few moves.”

She dipped, brought herself up on point. She did few high kicks then strolled down the length of the room doing the runway strut. After a bunny dip, she finished it off with a curtsy. He watched her with rapt interest, his mouth forming a little *O*.

“Fantabulous,” he said. “You’ve got the balance and coordination of a cat. I have the doves penned up on the roof getting some sunshine, so we’ll use my hand props. The music score I run through the sound system is choreographed for the acts. The volume fluctuates, providing cues. The music is also designed to hide some of the mechanism noises in the props, like the guillotine, trapdoor, and other tricks. You’ll be pushing a lot of props on stage from the wings, and removing

ones that have been used during the act. Try to be fluid. Always smile like you've won the lottery. If you stumble or falter, I'll snatch their attention away. Mistakes are bound to happen so don't let it rankle you. We can kick it in gear with a quick run-through if you don't have any questions."

She had no questions.

He led her out to the stage, inventorying various props parked in the wings. There were three acts per show. The first act used a table of small props—the card tricks, sleight of hand, cups, balls, and other manipulation items. The second act held the medium props used with illusions—the levitating woman, the heavenly rope, chair suspension, the twister. The large props occupied stage right. They too were marked in the sequence of order, beginning with the guillotine, levitating table, wheel of death, sawed woman, kettle of doves, and the finale, the disappearing assistant.

He walked her through the routine by the numbers without music. He positioned her body posture relative to the audience, which kept her at precise angles. While she loaded the props, he performed small fill-in tricks to distract from her physical chores.

He performed with such adept skill that she could not see the strings, wires, or magnets. She found it difficult to follow his hands—they moved with a fluid grace that would leave the world's best master magicians wanting.

She went through three dry runs sans music. While performing, she was amazed to discover the simple physics involved in each trick or illusion. She also learned the proper placement of props in the audience's line-of-sight.

It wasn't all smooth sailing. When it came time for the sawed woman, she needed to lie in a coffin-like box with her legs folded up against her chest. With her added height, she struggled five times to get in the proper position. That error threw his timing off. Once during a levitation sequence, she tumbled to the floor, taking the chair with her. He warned her that a fall to the floor was the worst accident to recover from. She repeated the maneuver several times until she had it down.

She rehearsed to the music through the entire show. It was near the end of the third act when she ran into trouble. After rolling a table with a huge kettle in its middle to center stage, she had to lift the lid of the vessel and place a single egg on the bottom platter. When she closed the lid, she had to depress a small button in the handle that dropped a dozen live doves onto the platter, or in this case, the stuffed props. A single bird was to be left lying on its back on the platter, appearing to be dead. She had to pick it up and blow a life-giving breath over it. Then she needed to toss it in the air, where it would take wing and fly over the awe-struck crowd.

With the volume turned up, the accompaniment was so loud she couldn't hear his verbal cues. She froze, giving him a confused look.

He performed an exaggerated hand toss in the air, demonstrating the move.

She nodded. "Like this?" She swung her arm up high, pitching the prop into the air just when the music hit a high, frantic note. The move was too energetic.

She turned, smiling at Sebastian. He looked pleased, even to the point of shock. She walked across the stage to stand before him. "I think I nailed it this time," she said.

He smiled at her, but his gaze dropped below her neckline, then zoomed up again.

She looked down. She'd thrown herself out of her suit.

Sebastian fumbled with a prop. "Now that is misdirection," he mumbled, the side of his cheek twitching in nervous pulses.

She turned around, adjusting her costume. The heat of embarrassment rushed up her neck. She could almost feel her face beginning to broil a hot shade of pink. "I screwed it up!" she said. "I feel like such an idiot." To her way of thinking, this rehearsal was over. She marched toward the wing.

"Oh no you don't!" he called after her.

She paused.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed," he went on. "Shit happens. You're going to get right back on that bucking horse. Nothing's wrong. I'll get alterations on that piece tonight. We can have an elastic decoration sewn into the middle to allow for the extra body length. It's the reason we've been having some trouble with the props, too. They were designed for a shorter person."

She wondered why she didn't just strip down and let it all hang out. Throw herself at him and shove it right in his face. The heat of humiliation was all consuming. She was so mad at herself she wanted to scream her throat raw.

"I'm a big, clumsy amateur. You need a smaller girl who has experience."

"What I need is my head examined for ever having a smaller girl in the first place. You're my perfect fit. You're better for the act. Now let's finish this."

The next trick was the disappearing assistant. She stood over a concealed trapdoor on the stage floor, trying to stem her emotions. He pushed a large curtained framework on wheels toward her, then lifted a slit in the drape, covering her from view. The large curtain box rolled around her while he delivered an incantation. From an earlier explanation, she knew that a remote device in his coat pocket would spring the trapdoor, allowing her to fall to a mattress below. From there, she would crawl under the stage to a utility door, then appear stage left.

He recited the last word of the incantation. The floor disappeared beneath her feet. She plunged downward. A bright flash went off behind her eyes, accompanied by a snap.

The next thing she knew, she was standing out in the parking lot in front of the theater backdoor, her vision swimming, legs shaking. She tried the door. It was locked. How in the hell did she get out in the parking lot?

First she hammered her fist on the door, then stabbed the service buzzer several times. She must have conked her head, and then wandered in a stupor until she had exited the theater. That had to be it!

The door flung open. Sebastian stood on the other side, his face blanched white. He took her by the wrist, ushering her inside. "Whoa, Avy, what in God's name just happened?"

“I don’t know. I went through with a big pop! I think I hit my head or something.”

Sebastian looked like he had seen a monster. “I just can’t figure how you got through!”

“It was easy. The hatch went boom, then I went whoosh. Just like we rehearsed.”

“Nothing went boom because the trapdoor never sprang. I clicked it about ten times. The remote batteries are dead!” Sebastian paced the floor, picking at the remote control device with shaking hands. The cover snapped off, and the batteries spilled to the floor. He threw up his hands in disgust.

“What’s happening to me?” Avy wailed.

Between prison guards who had fixations on her mother, poems of ghost lovers, longhaired priests, heavenly angels, miraculous pregnancies, and falling through solid trapdoors, Avy was convinced that she had reached the ultimate brink. She was stark raving nuts.

Chapter 7

Avy lay across the motel bed, her chin propped on a pillow. She skipped the pages in the diary that spanned the timeframe from six years old to the time she turned ten. Most of those entries were adolescent scribbles—subjects that dealt with school, persistent boys, stupid little girl things. She flicked through the pages, keeping alert for anything out of the ordinary. She hoped that she had described some weird happening or unusual event. She did have “dream-mares,” often recording them in detail.

Before long, she found one that was very familiar.

She was fourteen years old when she wrote: *I'm there again. At some kind of a gate looking out at a green hillside. It has lots of flowers with clumpy bushes. The sky has pretty pink ribbons in it. The mountains are bright purple with white snowcaps that look like little hats. When I step through to check the place out, everything goes black. Oh, well, I guess they charge admission to get in.*

Though it was a recurring dream, it still meant nothing to her. She slapped through more pages, settling on a passage about her relationship with Drake.

He makes me feel cheap, almost guilty. It's the way he looks at me. He's always looked at me that way, like I just committed some horrible crime. I don't know what I've done to make him so mad. I know he hates me. I'll bet he wishes he'd never adopted me.

Another passage caught her attention. She was fifteen when she wrote: *I was scolded today for asking questions about my mother. He said she wasn't worth the time or effort. He couldn't figure out why I was interested in bringing up such a horrible past. He said it would hurt me if I found out about the murder. He said I wasn't old enough to understand any of it. I told him I wasn't afraid to know the truth. He told me that I should be very afraid. Afraid of what? He wouldn't answer me. Now I suppose he won't talk to me for a week again. His loss.*

Another entry six months later: *I brought up the subject again. I asked if Mom and her husband had a fight the night of the dinner party. The night when everything went bad. I thought they might have been arguing about divorce or something. Drake told me to back off, because he was tired of hearing about it. He said it was always 'Tom this' and 'Tom that' when they were little. I thought it was weird that he got angry, so I ended up going to my room. I slammed the door real good. I don't think I'll ever bring up the topic again. What's the use? My mother is a murderer. End of story.*

Before she could get any further into the diary, a light rapping announced a visitor at the door. She stashed the book under the bed, then answered the door.

Standing on the other side, Sebastian gave her a weak smile. He had a large takeout bag in one hand, a bushel of yellow roses in the other.

“Don’t worry,” he said, pushing the bouquet at her. “These are real, not a prop. I thought you might like to share some biscuits ’n gravy this morning.”

She hesitated for a moment, then stepped aside. He went to the small kitchenette, took a vase out of the bag, and put the flowers in water. Ten minutes later, he had the breakfast prepared. They sat on the bed, sharing the meal together.

She couldn’t help asking, “How did you know where I live?”

“Kind of hard to miss that little Suzuki Jeep. Not many of those purple ones on the road. It was parked in front of number twenty-three. Didn’t have to use my clairvoyant powers to know you might be behind this door. Don’t worry, I’m not a stalker.”

“What are the flowers for? Hmm, these are good eats. Hits the spot.”

“For the wonderful performance. A great stage act often includes a token of appreciation from the fans when the show is over.”

“But the performance is tonight.”

“That’s the point. It’s already a winner, just like you. I hope you don’t feel bad about what happened. I’ve torn my pants, gone headlong off the stage, even lit my sleeves on fire. The act is full of hazards, I can tell you.”

“You’re gonna have me spitting gravy here in a minute. You don’t seem like the type to make mistakes. I hope you’re not saying that to make me feel better. Although, I am over it. It was kind of funny. Except for that weird route I took.”

“I thought about that. I figure the trapdoor dropped, then recycled faster than normal. It’s spring-loaded with a damper piston. The piston valve might be defective. A little maintenance will take care of it.”

“I’m glad to hear that it was something normal. But it still doesn’t explain how I ended up outside the theater.”

“You probably got confused. You just went the wrong way or something.”

She was seeing another side of him. He had a light in his eyes when he looked at her. His voice had a serious tone to it. It didn’t take a genius to know that he had more than feelings of friendship on his mind. He seemed to say all the right things. He could delight her one minute, amaze her the next. She’d had similar feelings toward him from the moment she had met him, knowing deep down she might return those affections. Her mind said, “Danger,” but her heart wanted to race ahead.

The silence grew thick between them until they finished the meal.

“I think I’m going crazy,” Avy blurted. “How would you feel if your assistant was a blithering mental case? What if I told you I have a truckload of skeletons in my closet? I’ve been preoccupied with something I can’t shake. I won’t lie to you.”

He answered while discarding their empty food containers. “Then I would say skeletons need rattling. If you’re on a mission of some type, you ought to see it through. Take whatever time you need. If you have something that doesn’t sit right in your guts you should purge it. If you feel like dumping some trash, just remember my ears work.”

“It’s a complicated story,” she warned. “I don’t even smoke, but I wish I had a cigarette right now.”

“Un-complicate it for me.”

She told him about her mother, including all the horrid details. She didn’t leave anything out—she even explained her visit with Chubby. She admitted ignorance of her birth father, explaining how she came to be adopted by Drake, outlining all of the personality clashes she’d had with him. The confession spilled like a torrent. After it was over, she felt somehow unburdened. Purged.

Sebastian blew out a whistling sigh. “Damn, girl. Makes my life on the road look like a Sunday in the park playing pitch ’n catch. I’m sorry about what happened to your mother. It must have been a living hell. Drake sounds like a real scumbag. Enough to raise anybody’s hackles. As for Janus, I think that might be a coincidence. Just my two cents worth.”

“I’m going to the library, Sebastian. Would you like to come along? It won’t take long.”

“Sure.” He winked. “If you let me drive that little Samurai. I haven’t got a thing to do except feed the doves and bunnies later.”

He was lonely too, she realized.

They made it to the library with Sebastian at the wheel. Of course, he had to present the clerk with a handful of fantasy flowers. Abigail Folger squealed with delight. She mentioned that she recognized him from a time she’d attended one his shows.

Avy found an unoccupied computer. She brought out a piece of paper that contained her pass code. Drake had allowed her special visiting privileges to tour the plant, giving her access. In addition, he had given her authorization to inside security features through the main website. It was a code level two clearance, not the highest, but it would be enough for what she wanted to find out. The code had never been used.

She brought up the website, entered her code, and found the company history of Cyberflow after clicking on the icon. She noted when it had been founded—the official date of incorporated status. Tom Labrador was listed as the original CEO, which was no surprise. Transfer of ownership was initiated by the courts a very short time after Tom’s death. The applicant was Drake Labrador, again no surprise except for the speed at which the company changed hands. Company earnings indicated that Cyberflow was already in the black and climbing in profits before Drake assumed ownership. The means of transfer was outlined in the will. The surprise involved the split of the company: Seventy percent went to Drake—the remaining thirty percent had been divided between Avalon’s mother and Drake’s parents. Avy did not know that.

“Now there’s a surprise,” she said. “According to this my grandmother owns fifteen percent of Cyberflow.”

“How well do you get along with her?”

“I don’t. She disowned my real mother after the conviction. From what mom tells me, she never came by to visit me when I was little. I sure don’t remember a letter or postcard for any holiday.”

“Bad blood,” he said. “You were guilty by association. That blows.”

When she studied the earnings statements from Drake’s administration to the present, the figures did not show a company that was making profitable strides, or at least a decent growth percentage that would have been anticipated with such a corporation like Cyberflow. She knew this from her business and accounting classes. Expenditures on advertising seemed high. Those figures could have been false, buried in unknown or secret accounts, Avy realized. It didn’t take a math major to understand it. Likewise, the general labor force had doubled since the beginning, showing an unclear understanding of profit and loss. The greatest expense in personnel came with the addition of an armed security force—a chief with about thirty officers.

Avy pointed at the screen. “Look at that.”

Sebastian, who had been reading along with her, squirmed in his seat. “What are they using, solid gold motherboards? High-tech electronics is a competitive field with lots of patents involved. Security is always extreme, but that’s a small army they have there. That excess alone is eating into profits.”

“You have a good head for business.”

“I had no choice but to learn off the cuff. I’m a barebones outfit. I have to watch my books. Comes from paranoia. But I did pick up a lot from Dad, who owned three computer stores.”

“I agree. I’m no expert, but it doesn’t look like he knows what he’s doing. There’s a big turnover in the secretary pool. But I knew he was a cad. There’s also lots of petty cash for tons of private purchases. I knew about the limousine service, but I didn’t know he had two private jets. I’ll bet Mom’s plastic surgery, personal trainers, and salon visits are coming straight out of the company expense account.” She gave her head rueful shake. “The company is wasting away. He’s the cancer who is eating it. His bio is bogus too. He doesn’t have degrees in management or business. He was a mail clerk at one time. I know that he sold insurance when he was younger because Mom told me. The dude’s incompetent—way out of his element.”

“Are there any records of him working for Cyberflow during Tom’s administration?”

She checked the files. “I don’t see it listed. Maybe Tom didn’t trust him enough to hire him. Something was wrong.”

“It sounds like Drake was a man who would create more problems by draining the expense account.”

“That might have caused some nasty disagreements. Which could have led to something more serious.”

Avy was exploring some very dangerous territory, but her eyes were wide open, seeing a disturbing trend. Sibling rivalry was common in the lives of professional men where one just happened to catch the brass ring while the other stood next to the carousel, destined to watch the world go 'round without him. Jealousy and resentment were heady emotions for a younger man who had to stand by listening to the cheerful calliope music while he watched his brother ride the golden stallion.

Avy kept her voice low. "Drake was the second to the last person to see Tom alive. One of Chubby's articles said that he drove right home from the dinner party. My mom testified that he arrived home late in the evening. She said he stayed there, but she couldn't be sure of the exact time because she was taking prescription drugs under a doctor's care. I wonder."

"Gee, Avy. There are a lot of bells going off in my head right now. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Would he have had the time to set that up, carry it out, and then cover his tracks?"

Avy brought up a county map on the screen. She studied the ledger, calculating the distance of the body position to the home of Tom Labrador. She factored in the speed limit of the round trip, and added an hour to the timeframe to account for the manipulation of evidence. She also added the time it would take to drive home for the final trip. It was possible. Drake's arrival time at home was undetermined, but it was within the window. The crime was doable within the timeslot.

She turned the computer off, gazing at the blank screen. "I knew he was a pig, Sebastian, but I never thought he could be capable of doing it. If it's true, he destroyed three lives with one act. Two of them were deliberate, but one of them—"

"Was collateral damage," Sebastian cut in. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

"I think I've had enough," she said. "Any more of this is bound to throw my timing off tonight."

They left the library and drove straight to Crabtree Valley Mall. Avy picked up some white dinner gloves and a pair of lavender pumps. On the road again, they decided to kill some time. They stopped for an impromptu picnic at Shelly Lake, sitting under the shade of an oak, talking about general subjects, admiring the weather and scenery. Avy enjoyed herself, relaxed with the easy-going manner of her companion. She chalked it up to a date, since the last time she'd been out had been to a movie theater with a high school boy who'd had a hard time taking no for an answer. She made a mental note that Shelly Lake qualified for a spot in her diary.

Leaving the park, refreshed from the brief respite, the couple stopped at a custom tailor shop to pick up Avy's modified costume. Swapping vehicles at her motel, their next destination was the theater. Once there, Avy arranged the prop tables while Sebastian attended to the animals, installing them in quick release cages in preparation for the night's performance.

Sebastian walked her through a complete show at faster than normal speed, sans music. This time the trapdoor worked without incident. Sebastian explained that their ticket-taker would arrive thirty minutes before show time. Her name was Mindy. Sebastian had hired her for her efficiency at keeping the receipts straight and disallowing sneak entries into the theater.

People began showing up at five-thirty, filling the first two rows, eager to get close to the action. Sebastian explained that they always did so in an attempt to spot the hidden wires or trick gismos.

Just before show time, the ticket booth was closed. The house lights dimmed. Sebastian began the music. Avy stepped out on stage, a smile plastered across her face, determined to dazzle the crowd.

The show began. She had no idea what to expect, but when she moved to hit her marks in the first act, she began to fall into a comfortable rhythm. She had acted in theater stage plays before, but those audiences seemed dignified compared to these viewers. The audience members “ooohed” and “aaawed,” often calling out, clapping after each trick. Sometimes they raised such a din that Avy couldn’t hear the music. She feared she might get out of sync.

The second act went without major mishap. She had to put some tissue in one of her shoes, since she hadn’t counted on getting a blister with the new pumps so soon.

The third act was a near perfect performance. When it came time to release the doves, she did it with even more gusto than before, but this time without the wardrobe malfunction. She vanished through the trapdoor and appeared stage left, just like it was supposed to happen.

The second show of the night mirrored the first performance. She felt she had entered the “zone.” The second crowd filled up just a third of the house, but they were a riotous bunch. The whistles and catcalls shrieked with a persistence that began to get annoying. But she ate it up, knowing that it was for her. After they made their last bow, Sebastian turned the house lights on. Avy squinted, watching the crowd depart. She couldn’t believe she had pulled it off. The boost to her confidence was indescribable—like a mountain that had been lifted from her shoulders—her grand initiation into the realm of professional theater.

A man walked down the aisle toward the stage. Funny she hadn’t remembered seeing him in the audience. Although anyone sitting in the back row dressed in black would have been close to invisible. Yet this man stood out above the rest.

It was the priest.

Janus gave her an energetic applause. “That was marvelous! I couldn’t take my eyes off you. What a performance. She is a quick study, yes, Sebastian?”

“That she is,” said the magician, holding out his arms to retrieve his pet doves. Avy watched the birds fly to perch on him one at a time. “Nice to see you, Janus,” said Sebastian. “Glad you caught the act, although you have me feeling a little self-conscious. Did anyone see anything I did?” He giggled.

“Stop it, you guys,” said Avy. “You’re giving me a big head.” She hurried back to the storeroom to change into her jogging clothes and let her hair down. When she stepped out of the bathroom, she found the two men sitting on the cot, drinking from coffee mugs. They were

speaking in hushed whispers. She made herself a cup of instant coffee, then pulled up a metal chair across from them. What she really wanted to do was sit between them—sandwiched between two beautiful men. It couldn't get much better than that.

Now that she had both of them together, it was time to straighten out a little matter. She favored Janus with a smile. "I remember you telling me that Sebastian was once a member of your parish. I was wondering why he's wearing a Star of David around his neck."

Sebastian answered, "It's just a star—an ego stroke. It's symbolic of my entertainment achievement."

Janus held up a hand. "It's a legitimate question. I think we've gone far enough, Sebastian. You are correct. Our friend is Jewish. It was discourteous of me to relay otherwise. I hope you won't hold that small fib against me. There was a reason I held back some truths. One cannot pour too much wine into a goblet if the vessel is incapable of holding the amount."

"My cup runneth over already," said Avy, giving Sebastian a surprised look, which prompted him to shrug. She couldn't understand why Sebastian would lie about the true meaning of the star necklace unless he felt ashamed to admit his faith to her.

"Let me see if I can't make this a little easier from the beginning," said Janus. "You see, I knew your mother. I was aware of her predicament from the start. I found it imperative to intercede on her behalf."

Avy raised a brow. "Wait. You mean you knew my mother eighteen years ago? Why would you get involved with her? I don't get it."

She could see Janus looking perplexed for a moment. Why was he hesitating or measuring his next words with such care?

"Avy," said Janus. "Have you ever had strange recurring dreams or visions of another time or place? Have you ever found yourself en route to a destination where you ended up lost or a step out of dimensional reality?"

She squirmed in her chair. "I've had some strange dreams, but everyone has them. Dimensional reality? I can be absentminded sometimes, sure. I've had some weird things happen in the past. I chalked it up to a stressful home life, schoolwork and other things."

Janus inched his chair closer to her. "The most prominent reoccurring dream you've had has been the one where you're standing on the threshold of a wondrous land—a utopia that promises peace and serenity. Do you remember that one? The reason it's ingrained upon your mind so well is because you completed that journey by entering that Gate. I took you there. It is where a part of you resides. To be more accurate, a part of the old you resides there. Heather hills of green, spring flowers, a cascade mountain range with billowing rose-colored clouds—that is the palate painted upon your mind—the one that you know so well."

"How do you know about that dream? It's written down in my diary. No one knows anything about that, or should, least of all you."

His expression turned grave. “Your mother’s physical life was cast off, leaving half of her soul-light in stasis—that part of her rests in the paradise dream. I know about the dream because I’m the author of it. Your real diary is the new beginning. That is the other half of you that lives on in this day.”

Avy couldn’t believe she was going along with this. “You’re speaking like there are two of us here now.”

“Half of a soul-light in the paradise dream,” Janus said. “The other half remains with you. The two will be joined when your vessel has withered. The sun and the moon, the key in between.”

Avy leaned forward to sniff his breath. She didn’t smell alcohol. “Why would somebody go to all this trouble for us? Or me, or is it just my mother?”

“Few are chosen for redemption. Your mother’s case was unique, special over the others. She suffered an injustice. For that, an intervention was called for. She’s innocent of the charges brought against her. The case required my interaction—a renewal. I am the guardian of pasts, futures, and new beginnings. Your mother received a new vessel to complete an assignment. You are the vessel.”

Avy looked at Sebastian. “Do you believe any of this pile?”

Sebastian avoided eye contact. “He’s telling you the truth. You’ll have to hear all of it so you can decide for yourself.”

“That figures!” She stiffened. “You’re in cahoots.” She looked askance at Janus, but her eyes drilled Sebastian. “So what am I supposed to do about all of this?” Sebastian didn’t answer.

“You have the chance to right the wrong and derail further disaster,” said Janus. “The choice is yours. Your suspicions have already set you upon the path. Your investigation at the library was the first step. The instincts you feel are correct, but the solution is more complicated than you realize. I cannot help you solve the puzzle. I can only point you in the right direction. Your path from here on becomes a super highway. You have the license to travel it. It will have to be done with haste before the merchant of death strikes again.”

“You’re talking about Drake, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “Jesus, Sebastian, you told him everything we talked about!” She tried to stifle the rising anger that surged, unable to believe he’d violate her confidence.

“He told me nothing,” said Janus. “I was there, bearing witness to the commission of the crime. I monitor the Gates when—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know—during new beginnings or endings. That was thirty-two years ago! You don’t look a day over forty. Unless you were cruising along on your skateboard in the dead of night, then just happened to see something.” She squinted. “None of this is funny. Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Janus cleared his throat. “I am the keeper of the Gates. I’m also a Walker.”

“Big deal,” said Avy. “I’m a runner.”

Janus went on unperturbed. “It requires a certain finesse to negotiate a Gate string. Depending upon the speed by which you travel, the time continuum can be altered. Sometimes it can be altered with severe results. I use this mode of travel, which affords me glimpses or prolonged stays in different time references. Practice is the primary goal for new initiates. You have already experienced a taste of the skill—it has lain dormant in you for most of your life. It happened yesterday—the trapdoor accident. But it was no accident. You are a Gate-Walker.”

“It’s like moving from midnight to sunrise in the blink of an eye,” said Sebastian.

“How would you know all of this?” Avy challenged, glaring at Sebastian.

He pointed to Janus. “I’ve seen him do it.”

Avy stood up, swapping hard looks between the two. “Dear God. I didn’t think the joy of this night could have been ruined, but between the two of you, you’ve smashed it to bits with your talk of gates, walking, new lives, and all this other crap. I’ll admit I’ve had my suspicions about Drake all along. That doesn’t mean it takes any potions or magic to set those things right. It was the lack of good detective work, bad lawyers, and a clueless jury that ruined my mother’s life.”

“Janus is just trying to help,” Sebastian offered. “He understands what you’re going through.”

Avy rolled her eyes. “You’ve sure got bizarre ways of showing sympathy! I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt and I’ll thank you for your concern. It’s over, done with. Now if you’re finished screwing around with me, I’ll be leaving. I’m tired, stressed, and more than a little bit fed up with all of this mumbo-jumbo reincarnation crap.”

Janus stood up. “I know this is upsetting to you. These revelations could test the sanity of anyone. If you allow this to pass, there will be additional funerals—other innocent victims. I’m asking you to reconsider.”

Avy turned on the priest, fuming. “Forget it! You should be ashamed of yourself for masquerading as a priest.”

“Permit me to leave,” said Janus. “I’ve caused you grief. It was not my intention. Please listen to your inner voice. Soon it will be screaming.”

Instead of walking down the length of the room to the back door, Janus stepped through the workbench counter and into the wall beyond, vanishing. The wall he’d disappeared through seemed to ripple like waves in a pond until returning to solidity a moment later.

Avy looked at the spot. “Awe, crap.” She dropped her coffee cup.

Chapter 8

It was no surprise when Drake read the report that indicated Cyberflow lacked the funds to break ground on a new plant in China. It was one more financial snafu that gave him a reality slap across the chops. He wondered if any of the underling departments were solvent enough to support the venture, something that might let him reroute the necessary funds. But the fact remained, he was having a serious brush with not meeting his payroll. Never mind venture capital. He could fire twenty technicians, then add a couple hours to the shift so they could maintain the production quota. He could even sell off a few acres of the parking lot for a premium price. Still, he would have to combine all three ideas to make the new plant happen. For once in his life he regretted the absence of Tom Labrador. Not the man, just his head for business—the ability to keep Cyberflow in the black while making a decent profit.

Thinking about Tom brought back uncomfortable feelings. He remembered how he had tried not to cry after Tom received his first puppy when they were little. He hadn't been jealous after being forced to attend Tom's Eagle Scout ceremony, when the whole school had turned up to give praise and acclaim. He hadn't expressed anger when it was Tom, not he, who had been offered a college education. He hadn't resented it when Tom had been given a new car upon graduation, even when Drake's time came and he'd found a secondhand vehicle parked in the driveway. It always seemed that the attention made its way to the firstborn. His parents constantly ran out of praise, energy, or money when it came to him. Oh, they made a good show of it by giving Drake the parental love he yearned for. But in the final tally, there was no getting over the favoritism. It hadn't been the same.

He wondered if the ghost of Tom Labrador hadn't returned to doom him to failure all over again.

Linda Wu blew a huge bubble that snapped over her nose. A few strands of hair snagged in the gum. She whined, trying to extricate her hair. The distraction reminded Drake of a cat stuck in a cardboard box.

"Cease!" Drake said. "Please go to the restroom if you have to overhaul your face. I'm tired, and I can't think. Don't I have a company rule against chewing gum? Aren't you supposed to get docked for it or something?"

"No," she said, pulling a stringy thread that snapped against her cheek.

"Well, I should. Find something on your monitor that's interesting. Please don't bother me until you have something."

"I have something."

"What could it be?"

"It could be an email from security. If you had checked your inbox, you would have seen it."

“That’s what I have you for. At least that’s what I keep telling myself day after day. What does it say?”

“It’s from Auggie. He wants to know if you were aware that your daughter used a pass code to enter the Cyberflow database yesterday. He just wants to confirm that you know about it. He says she’s never been online before. It looks like she was probing some sensitive areas.”

“I didn’t know that. Call Auggie up on the house phone, tell him to get in here and to bring one of our head programmers.”

He’d never considered Avy his real daughter. Adopting her had been done more out of courtesy to the family name. How would it have looked if the child had been adopted outside the family? Nothing honorable to be found in that. He had fulfilled his blood tie to his brother by doing the right thing—raising her to legal age. Then he’d handed her the ticket of freedom, severing the parental bonds. What more could a young woman want than the freedom of choice to pursue her dreams?

A few minutes later, Drake saw his security chief and a programmer enter his office. He motioned for them to take seats. “Linda, take lunch.”

“I just got back from lunch.”

“Eat!”

He watched her leave, and then he addressed the two. “It’s not an extreme emergency, chief, but you indicated that my daughter logged onto our website yesterday?”

“That’s affirmative, boss. Just thought you should know about it. She used a code two access to scan several departments.”

“Well, I did offer her a code card when she was younger. I think it was that Father-Daughter Day occasion or some such. She removed herself from my household not long ago, so I’m unaware of the company she keeps at the present. I wonder if you could trace the signal through the network, locating the origin and time of her inquiry. I would like a solid printout of everything she put eyes on. It’s just a matter of routine.”

“I can do that,” said the programmer. “Even from this station if you want.”

“No, take it down to security. I’ll wait for the results.”

Drake waited for them to leave and made sure the door was shut. He turned his monitor on, punched in the employee database, then scanned the listings. He found her listed under Labrador. Sure enough, he’d authorized the clearance three years ago. He placed the highlight bar over her pass code and hit the delete button.

When Auggie and the programmer returned to his office thirty minutes later, they gave him a five-page document. Drake read it while the programmer spoke.

“I traced it back to the Harvey Sibbitt Library. The exact time was quarter to eleven in the morning yesterday.”

“That’s all. You can go. Auggie, you stay.” Drake waited for the door to close, then dialed the library. A woman answered. Her voice seemed agitated.

“Yes, whom would I be speaking to?” asked Drake.

“You are speaking to Abigail Folger.”

“What are your hours, dear?”

“Nine to nine, except on Sundays. Then it’s nine to two.”

“Thanks, goodbye.”

Drake scrolled through his employee roster again. He found a Riley J Folger, who worked in the warehouse. He checked his emergency contact list, finding both parents listed. One of them was Abigail Folger. Riley’s hire date indicated that he had been with Cyberflow for four years.

Drake waved the papers. “We’re going to pay the library a visit. It might be nothing, but I want to check it out.”

He ordered one of his limousine drivers to pick them up at the front entrance. They rode downtown in silence. When they entered the library, Drake eyed a fat woman behind the main counter. He suspected she was the Abigail Folger he had just spoken to. He waited until she was free from talking with some patrons.

“Mrs. Folger.” Drake produced his Cyberflow identification card, letting her eyes linger on the CEO title. “I’m Drake Labrador. This is my security chief, Augustus Hollywood. It has come to our attention that our security network was breached yesterday around ten forty-five in the morning. It was an unauthorized entry. We know that the person responsible was my daughter, Avy. She’s been disciplined for this type of behavior before. She hacked into our system from this library, which appears in our database records. I’d like to know who she was with, or the name of anyone who accompanied her.”

Her face insolent, the librarian stiffened. “You’ve got to be kidding. She doesn’t seem like the type to do anything like that. I thought she was researching her family history.”

“What family history?” Drake pressed

“She wanted to check the archives. Look, I don’t think I should reveal to you what might be privileged information. I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Heat rose to his face. “Then I might have to ask Riley, your son, to leave his position at Cyberflow. That would be a shame, considering he’s been with me for four years.”

“Are you blackmailing me?”

“We are investigating an illegal security breach,” said Auggie. “We’re dead serious about this. I can assure you that if you’re not forthcoming with the information, Riley will be dismissed.” He leaned over the counter for emphasis, wheezing close to the woman’s face.

Abigail backed up a step, her eyes popping like a rabbit’s in the company of two wolves. “Okay, okay,” she said, “just don’t fire Riley. He’s getting married soon, he can’t afford to lose his job. She was in here with Sebastian. He’s the local man who has a magic act over at the old Stadium Theater.”

Drake hunched his shoulders at Auggie.

“The Amazing Sebastian, boss. You know, the magic kid that’s been written up in the paper?”

Drake nodded. "I think I remember somebody like that." Then to the woman, "Keep your mouth shut about this. It's a private matter." He left a dollar bill on the counter, then turned and headed for the door.

"What do you think they're up to, Auggie?"

"Up to no good and after money. What would you like to happen, Mr. Labrador?"

"Put some men on him. Run him down—monitor his movements. See if my daughter is with him. I don't like outsiders probing into Cyberflow business. That goes double for snooping relatives."

Chapter 9

Avy hadn't slept well, so she'd driven to the theater just after sunrise. She parked in the rear lot, trying to put her thoughts together in some coherent manner. Who could sleep after what had happened? It wasn't every day that you watched someone walk clean through a wall, then disappear. It wasn't normal to be told that you were special, capable of the same thing. Revelations like that could put a person's sanity out of whack, maybe for good. She needed answers—now. She had the feeling Sebastian knew a lot more about Janus than he let on.

She walked the short distance to the back entrance of the theater and hammered on the door. After a long wait, she tried again, this time ringing the service buzzer. The door creaked open.

"I was hoping it was you," said Sebastian. "Sorry, I was in the bathroom. Come on in."

After sitting on the cot, Avy looked around. He must have bought a coffee maker, because one now sat on the counter percolating. She noticed the pigeons were loose, perched high up on the joist beams. Two bunnies romped across the floor. A manikin stared down at her with blank, accusing eyes. Even with his efforts to domesticate it, Sebastian's residence still had a creep factor to it, which didn't do anything to ease Avy's mind or settle her nerves. How ironic that these little nuances hadn't pricked her senses before. She'd had enough crazy magic in the past few days to last a lifetime. To top it off, the man she had begun to have feelings for had demonstrated a need to hide things from her. Not good.

He poured some coffee while he spoke over his shoulder. "I worried about you last night. The way you stormed out of here I thought you'd never be back." He offered her a cup, but she refused it.

"We have to talk, Sebastian." She looked at the wall on the other side of the counter, the exact spot where she'd seen Janus vanish. "I'm not comfortable in this place right now."

"We can go to the park. I think I owe you an explanation."

"You think? That's the understatement of the century!"

They drove to the park in Avy's Jeep. She walked past the last place they had sat together. She wanted nothing to influence her emotions or the questions she had lined up for him. They took seats on the bank of a small side pond, where some ducks bobbed near the water's edge. She looked out across the water, speaking to him in a monotone.

"You knew about Janus all along," she said. "You kept that from me. What's your connection with him? He's not your everyday acquaintance."

Sebastian threw a pebble in water. "It's true. I guess I've known him ever since I can remember. He came to me when I was very small. I remember falling off my bicycle one day, hitting the pavement hard. It knocked the wind out of me. I was so stunned I couldn't move. A truck raced around the corner, barreling down the street. I started to crawl out of the way, but I knew I

wasn't going to make it in time. The truck slammed on its brakes, going into a skid. A pair of strong arms yanked me to the curb while my bike took a full-on hit." He paused for an uncomfortable moment. "My savior was a longhaired priest who came out of nowhere. It was Janus. He saved my life that day. That was the first time I shared some type of a bond with him.

"I never spoke about it to anyone. That included my parents who I figured would ground me for months and never let me ride my bike in the street again. I also thought it would betray the trust on a higher level. From the start, I just knew the obvious—that he was a priest. He started to come around more. I somehow knew that he was on a mission to help people. From what he told me, he could help people in some extraordinary ways. I witnessed a few of these heroic deeds later on. That's about the time I got interested in magic. In fact, he supported the skill in me. It was our secret."

"Did he ever ask you to do anything for him?"

"I volunteered a few times. He sent me on intelligence gathering missions. It always had something to do with a case or a prospect that he was working on. That's what he does—he makes things right." He looked at her.

"Did he ask you to get involved with me because I'm one of his prospects?"

"He asked, but at first I didn't promise that I would get involved. I decided to help after I met you. If it had something to do with protecting you, well, I wanted to be a part of that. He told me you were in trouble. He asked if I could offer support. I swear, he just stressed the job factor. You needed work. I needed an assistant. He put us together. He just knows these things. I've been discovering the rest of your problems right along with you."

"I don't know why I believe that, but I'll give you a pass. This guy has to be the same one my mother raved about while she was in prison. A handsome longhaired priest—that fits the description. He has to be the same person who appeared to her on death row. But there was no record of any unauthorized entry or visits into the prison. Chubby told me all of this. After what I saw last night, I'm positive we're talking about the same person."

"It's more than possible he's tied in with it. He's talking about injustice, Avy, the righting of a wrong. He says you're the vessel for this change."

"He goes a lot further than that. According to him, I'm not even leading my own life. I am some kind of resurrection. I have to clear my mother's name in order to stop some catastrophe. The way he says it, I am my mother—like some misfit doppelganger. Talk about a double life!"

"You're not exclusive. This has been going on for centuries. He's ancient. You're not the first one he's helped. Not everyone gets a second chance. But it's worse in this case because others are going to suffer or lose their lives."

"Then why doesn't he stop it himself? If he can perform miracles why can't he put an end to it?"

"He serves the part of a guide. He points the way, provides the tools to make things right. He can't interfere in a direct way."

“That’s pretty weird,” she said. “I’m willing to admit that if my mother was framed, in the name of justice something has to be done to clear her name. But why couldn’t he have teamed up with a real detective? Why am I the best one for the job?”

“Maybe you’re the only one for the job. I don’t think there’s anyone more qualified to follow up on this. It was a long time ago, but you’re tied into it through the bloodline. It could be that the participant has to be a blood relative. He also said something about heading off a future disaster. What if that disaster involves people close to you?”

So far, everything pointed to Drake, Avy realized. If he was going to kill again, he had to be stopped. No argument there. How would she accomplish that? That was the next question she posed to him.

Sebastian answered, “You’ve been given a wonderful gift, Avy. You have to realize that. I know it seems out of this world, but it’s real. You have to become a Walker. You have to learn how to use it, control it.”

“I don’t know the first thing about it. Where is Janus now?”

“He’s always on the move, traveling the Gates from one location to another. He’s not the type that has a permanent address. He’s more like a wavelength if that makes any sense, and just shows up when he does.”

“How am I supposed to know how to use these skills? This walking stuff?”

Sebastian adjusted his seat on the grass to face her. “I can tell you what I know. He says that walking is primed by an emotional state. Sometimes it’s stress or extreme embarrassment. But the most effective way to bring it on is with anger. It happens when the top of the shoulders, the neck, or the face flush with heat—like when you get real mad. It’s some type of an internal chemical reaction that affects a hormone surge in the nervous system. It’s similar to a nuclear reaction. I know that sounds crazy, but that’s the answer he gave me once when I pestered him about it. Something about atoms scattering, cells unlinking.”

“Then what?”

“Doors, hatches, and gates are the portals. Once you enter one, you can blitz to the next nearest one. To keep a string going you have to be good at controlling the emotional force, knowing when to slow down, then when to speed up. Attaining higher speeds is the challenge.” He tossed a rock in the water. “See the ripple effect? It’s like riding a wave—once it starts, you hop aboard.”

“You sure know a lot about this for just a friend.”

“My God, Avy. What magician wouldn’t want to know the barebones of that trick? That’s one I could never pull off, even with all the rehearsal in the world. He has the secret inscribed in his DNA—he’s a carrier. I think he’s selective of who gets that essence from him. You are the first face-to-face Walker I’ve ever met. You are part of him.”

She didn't care if the next question sounded like a trap or not. It was just something she had to know. "I wonder if you would be fascinated with me if I didn't have this power. I mean, 'potential', because I'm not sure I even have the skill. It's all hearsay so far. There's no proof of it, because I still think what happened to me was an accident."

This time he scowled. "For one thing, it wouldn't have made any difference. I liked you the first time I laid eyes on you. In case you haven't noticed, I'm a pretty fair judge of deception. I think I can say I'm competent enough to know what I like or trust in somebody."

Right answer. He could have muffed that. She couldn't deny what she had felt for him after their first meeting. It had started out so well. Now this other factor had come along to complicate everything. She didn't want any conditions laid down in a relationship. But it looked like they would have to pass some hefty bumps in the road to pick up where they had left off. It all relied on trust.

"Well." She sighed. "Maybe there's nothing left to do than to try this thing out. If it works like you say it does, talking about it isn't going to make it happen. Maybe I should experiment."

"No maybes. You know you have to try it out. Aren't you excited about it?"

"I'm a little excited, but afraid. How about you?"

"Are you kidding? I'm blown away! It will be the first time that I act the part of your assistant. I promise to help you get through it."

She allowed herself a small laugh. "You're an idiot. Just don't let me go poof somewhere. I'd hate to get lost in the waves."

"I'll tie a cowbell on you. I won't let you get away."

She fell back on the grass, smiling at a fat cloud. She swished her arms and legs over the ground, then began to giggle. He asked what she was doing. She said, "I'm making a snow angel in the grass."

He leaned close to her, saying, "You are an angel." He kissed her. She surrendered, almost swooning in his embrace. She liked his breath on her face, his body pressed up against hers. He didn't find the need to climb all over her. It was a gentle seduction with a sweetness she appreciated. Their first kiss. When they came up for air, they were not alone.

Three men stood on the bank facing the pond. They were no more than ten feet away. They looked out of place for such a serene setting—like Katz n' Jammer kids at a church social. They wore heavy dark suits and expensive-looking shoes. They were too "off" the look for wannabe CIA or FBI agents. When they turned around to face the two, it seemed choreographed. They gave the couple lingering stares before they walked down the bank to disappear between a stand of trees.

"That was creepy," said Sebastian. "Pervs, maybe."

"I swear I've seen them before somewhere. I can't remember where though. It's not important. Let's get out of here."

* * * *

They ended up back at the theater, but not without stopping at a pancake house to pick up a breakfast order. They sat on the cot together, eating. Every so often they had to shield their Styrofoam containers from one of the doves which flew overhead, since they were apt to release at the most inopportune times. One of those times was eating, Sebastian explained.

“Without a doubt I went through the trapdoor,” said Avy, “then ended up in the back alley. Why that direction? Why that door? How controllable is this?”

Sebastian grabbed some writing material. He began sketching a layout of the theater, marking off certain sections. When he finished he said, “The theater has a total of fourteen exits or entrances. Maybe the Gates are linked by proximity. Maybe you have to pass through each door within a structure before you can jump to another one. I still don’t know how you did it the first time, unless you were feeling intense hatred for me, or something.”

She couldn’t forget that feeling. “I felt embarrassed about coming out of the costume. I thought I was going to explode with rage. That’s when it happened. The next thing I knew I was standing in the back lot hammering on the door.”

“That’s the key,” he said. “You had an emotional surge. Anger. Do you remember the trip or seeing anything while it happened?”

“It happened real quick. I might have seen a flash, but that’s about it. I didn’t feel any pain or anything. Just shaky. But that could have been from nerves.”

She ate the last bite, finishing her breakfast plate, knowing it was time to test their theories. Part of her bubbled with excitement. Another part of her was terrified. Setting her empty container aside, she rubbed her hands together. “I need my head examined. Let’s do this before I change my mind.” She walked across the floor, stopping at the back entrance to the theater.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “How can I keep track of you?”

“Hang on a minute. I have an idea.” She went outside to her Jeep. She unsnapped a charm off her key ring. Removing her purse from beneath the seat, she pulled out a device, then returned to the storeroom.

“This is a key ringer,” she said. “I’ll keep the beeper in my pocket. You push this button on the ringer if I don’t show up. You can find me within three hundred feet, provided there isn’t a barrier between us that mutes the beep sound.”

“That’s better than nothing.” He looked anxious.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped to the rear entrance. She tried to duplicate the feelings she’d had when standing over the trapdoor—the deep humiliation, the pain of embarrassment. Sebastian inched closer, his eyes widening.

She closed her eyes, doubled her fists, then charged the door. Her chest hit the metal hard with a thump, the blow knocked her backward. Dazed, she stood there for a moment, massaging her chin.

“Damn, Avy, don’t kill yourself. Are you okay?”

“Fine. I didn’t have the right juju or something. I guess I’m not embarrassed over the incident anymore. You shouldn’t have kissed me at the park.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll try it again.”

“Yeah, you have to get hot—fuming mad. Something that lights your face on fire. Would it help if I cursed at you?” He looked more excited than she was.

“Don’t be an idiot—I’d end up laughing at you. Just wait. I’ll get it.” She thought for a moment, trying to bring something to mind that would fill her with rage. War, global warming, third-world famine topped the list. But she had something better. She thought about the injustice to her mother, the terror she must have endured on death row. She thought about the indignity, the bad press, along with all the people who had condemned her without knowing the facts.

The back of Avy’s neck bristled, her shoulders tightened. Her breath came in gulps. She remembered the letter her mother had written her. She had seemed so lost, abandoned by the world she loved. A tear came to Avy’s eye when she remembered how her mother had apologized and wished her well.

Now she had a full-on rage. It seemed like the atoms were breaking apart in her body, losing their orbits. That was it!

She marched toward the door, kicked up a leg, then she was through. A flash sparked in front of her face for a split second that stole her concentration. She fell forward in the dark, stumbling over her own feet, flailing her arms out to catch herself. She went down with a crash, taking something with her. The beeper squealed in her pocket. She looked around, trying to focus on anything familiar.

She was sitting on a floor amidst several broken cases of Top Ramen noodles and drinking straws. She saw light peeking from under a thick drape. She was not in the theater. She’d landed somewhere else.

The drape was flung back by a small broom wielding Chinese man who gaped at her in astonishment. After a few seconds, he found his tongue.

“You get out of Chin’s store right now, missy!” he told her. “How you get back here? No lavatory for you in here. No trespassing. You not belong back here in private property! Halp, police!”

Avy stumbled to her feet. She pushed past him, kicking noodle packages and mashing straws underfoot. She ran down an aisle toward the sunlight, realizing that she was in a Chinese delicatessen. She shoved the front door open just in time to escape a thrown broom that clattered off the door glass. She made a hard right turn down a narrow alley. The theater alley! She sped to the back lot while her key beeper squealed like a wounded animal.

Sebastian was running full force in her direction with his hand outstretched, his fingers clicking the beeper button. She ducked before he put her eye out.

“Sebastian!”

He stopped in his tracks, whirled around. "Jesus! I thought I lost you."

"You almost impaled me. Stay put next time."

"Sorry, couldn't help it." He patted her down, making sure she was in one piece. Then their eyes met. The realization of what had just happened struck. They danced around in the parking lot like two mischievous children. "We did it!" they chorused.

The revelry was short-lived. The little Chinese man came around the corner on bowed legs, brandishing his broom like a lance. "You in big trouble now. No trespassing, missy!"

They ran through the rear theater door, slamming it shut after them. They slid to the floor, laughing with hysterical fits. Outside, the Chinese man's rant went on, while he beat his broom on the pavement angrily.

"Oh, you weely weely gonna get it now!" he told them.

Chapter 10

Monday was their official day off, allowing them the privacy of the theater. The weekend performances had exceeded expectations, except for a faulty release mechanism in the guillotine and one stray rabbit that had escaped, but was later found cowering under the audience seats. The house receipts were down a bit from the last weekend due to a blockbuster movie release, but filling the theater to one-third capacity still brought in a nice profit. They would make a killing next weekend, Sebastian predicted. He explained to Avy that word was getting out about the pretty new assistant who drew gasps from the male crowd during the performances. She felt euphoric for having six shows under her belt. It was a small milestone, but at least it proved she had given up amateur status. She now considered herself a semiprofessional magician's assistant.

They had just finished pacing off the doors of the theater to record the distances in a notebook when they sat down in theater seats to take stock of what they had learned.

"All I can remember," began Sebastian, "is that Janus said there's a sequence to riding the string within a structure—that means going from door to door, each one represents Gates. I used to drive him nuts about the process, bugging him for the details. He would always laugh, but never tell me how any of it worked. I think it has something to do with a starting point."

"How do you mean a starting point?" Avy was dying to know the secret.

"Well, a main entrance door might start the string. The end of the string might be the last exit door. So it's possible to go through several then put the brakes on to stop at a door of your choice. Janus knows how to pull that off, but he goes it one better. He's able to travel through solid matter, so he's reached some type of advanced skill level. I've seen him do the solid thing three times. That last time was with you."

"You've never told anybody about this?"

"Are you kidding? A magician never reveals his trade secrets—that's ingrained in our creed. Besides, who would believe me?"

"It would be so much easier if we could ask him face-to-face. How does the student learn without the master? It's dangerous. There's curves ahead in this kind of traveling, things that I could never see coming up on me."

"He's not the type you can send a postcard to. It would never catch up to him. I think he cut you loose for a while so you could learn the technique yourself. Kind of like on the job training. You follow?"

"He's so strange," she said. "I wonder where he comes from."

"You know the story of Janus, don't you? The Roman god, Janus?"

“I never made that connection but, yeah, there’s a similarity now that I think about it. Don’t you think that a mythological god who is sharing the same existence with us is a little bit off the wall? Christians don’t allow for false prophets or mythical gods in this age.”

“Maybe he’s a leftover from the age of multiple deities—polytheism. Maybe the big guy upstairs sanctions him. Could be it’s just a front. He’s not dangerous. ‘So by the prophet’s works will ye come to know them.’ Avy, I don’t think we have to justify his existence or draw any comparisons. I don’t see any links to demonic or negative forces. You have to accept the fact that he’s here. This universe is more multidimensional than you could ever imagine—unknown phenomenon are all around us.”

“It seems easy for you to accept it. Maybe that’s because you’ve had so much time to soak it up, to understand it.”

“Yep. It started early with me. Houdini was my god, the master teacher. That was until I met Janus. He makes Houdini look like a grifter playing the shell game in a broken down tent. You’ve got to see the wonder in all of this. Stop agonizing over it. Accept it for what it is—a divine gift.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Sebastian offered some solace. He understood the subject matter much better than she did. Although she couldn’t help thinking that what had been given to her was a bucket of gasoline and a match. *Light me if you dare*. Janus had warned her that her path from here on out was a super highway—a highway she had permission to travel. He had failed to warn her that some people did not have any business behind the cosmic steering wheel. It was like licensing a drunk driver, giving them permission to navigate the inter-dimensional autobahn.

Avy pulled Sebastian out of his seat. She walked him up the aisle and out the front entrance. They ended up in the marquis lobby. She looked around. “Okay, we have to make sure no one is passing on the street or sidewalk. I’m going to try it from the front.”

He pulled the key fender out of his pocket. “I’ll give you the all clear.”

She faced the doubled doors, prepping her mind for the task. She dredged up that familiar feeling of anger, letting it boil within, keeping the lid on it until she needed that explosive thrust. She cursed under her breath. “Drake, you murderous bastard. You’re nothing but a low-life, scum-sucking pig.”

“All clear, Avy!”

She stepped through the door. She felt a thump, then saw a flash of sparks, followed by a shadow. She held on to the emotional charge while another cycle passed. After a third cycle, she stomped on the mental brakes. Something spit her out. Her legs wobbled with imbalance. She found herself on the north side of the theater just outside the exit. Her key beeper went off. Avy pounded on the door to let Sebastian know her location. She heard the lock mechanism a moment later. The door opened. Sebastian stood on the other side, his chest heaving.

"I'm okay," she said, knowing he wanted reassurance. "It works. It works if I hold the emotion. I felt three transits. They whooshed by quick, but I felt them. Just like you would feel bumps in the road if you were driving fast. I think the gas pedal is all in the head."

"That makes sense," he said. "You passed through three doors. You were headed toward the rear of the theater. I think you can come out of any door you want, but controlling the location is up to you."

"That's just it. It seems like it would be real easy to overshoot my mark. I could pop out in somebody's back storeroom again like I did last Friday. Not to mention the fact that I could scare the living daylights out of somebody by appearing out of nowhere."

She tried it again from her current location. When she stepped back through, she held onto the feeling even longer this time, counting at least nine transits before she decided to break her concentration. When she felt the full weight of her body on her feet, she threw her arms out like a tightrope walker, assisting her balance lest she topple over.

The next sensation she had was a mild breeze across her cheeks, the sun on her forehead. She opened her eyes to find herself on the theater roof, standing over the hatch. It was unlocked, so she pulled it open and stepped down the utility ladder. She jumped the last rung to hit the floor, then called out for Sebastian. Hurried steps thumped across the stage. He appeared in the back storeroom a moment later.

"Where this time?" He wanted to know.

She pointed up.

"Damn. The roof hatch. You must have gone longer, eight or nine maybe. Was it any different?"

"I think I started to pick up speed at the end. Things squeezed in around me. It's like riding in a subway car or a train, where you look out the window to see nearby objects flying past out of focus. I felt little gusts of wind hitting me. I don't smell anything, but I do get a little bit warmer, like I'm resisting something."

"Maybe friction—the atoms themselves. Do you hear anything?"

"Just a rapid thumping or snapping. It sounds like cards shuffling."

"How about the sound a card makes against a bicycle spoke? That flapping noise."

"That's close. That's what it sounds like. Wow, it's bizarre."

They took seats on the cot. Sebastian gave her a cup of water, encouraging her to relax. Staying calm was easier said than done. She'd just looped through the space-time continuum. A thousand questions raced through her mind. She wondered if she had burned any calories during the journey, or even carried the same body weight after making the trip. Maybe one could leave cells behind somewhere. What if her molecular structure had been rearranged or damaged? Could she have picked up some strange paradoxical virus? What about sterilization?

She wished Janus would reappear again. She needed to hear that everything was going to be all right, that her worry was needless. He was the expert, wasn't he? Would he cut her loose to solve all of the riddles and puzzles without any help? She needed to know she was on the right trail. Maybe this was his method of tough love.

Without doubt, Janus had been the mysterious visitor that night on death row. He had avoided the radar in order to slip in to deliver some type of message to her mother. He had been the ghost lover. He'd also delivered something more than just a message, leading to the most shocking revelation. He had fathered Avy.

It had been so long ago, yet the wheels of evil had not stopped turning. More pages were waiting to be filled in a new story. Avy was more than a part in that story. She was the story—the new beginning. But why had he allowed the tragedy to unfold in the first place? Hadn't he known it would end up with such a heart-breaking outcome?

Sebastian's hand settled on her shoulder, offering comfort. She had been lost in thought, unaware of his presence. She wondered if he'd read the troubled look on her face. "I'm okay," she said. "I'm going to have to take this a step beyond. I want to go further—stretch it some more. If I leave this building, I want to see where it takes me. It should start with the Chinese delicatessen next door. I think it'll follow a pattern, maybe hopping in stages down the street."

Sebastian reared back. "Now I don't know about that. I mean, I'm sure it's possible. But this might be too soon. What if you get lost out there or end up trapped inside something? You could even draw a crowd if somebody sees you."

"You said it yourself, Sebastian. It's meant to be used. I need to kick the tires on this. How else am I going to learn?" Of course, he wanted to change his tune now. Wasn't she the one who should have cold feet?

"If you're going to crank it up a notch we'll have to prepare. Wait. What are our safeguards here? Awe, damn it, Avy! I don't want anything to happen to you. I couldn't handle losing you right now. I'm not talking about the assistant part either."

She gave him a lingering kiss, then rubbed her knuckles on his scalp. "Just promise me that if something goes wrong you'll give Janus a big punch in the nose for me."

"Roger that. I'll illusion him away into the cornfield. But look, this is just in case." He reached into a pocket, retrieving something. He spilled the items into her hand. She looked down to see that they were coins.

"You don't know where you'll end up." He grabbed a marker from the workbench and wrote the theater phone number on her forearm. "That's so you can call me. Call me at the first fifteen-minute increment on the hour when you land or touchdown. Let's synchronize our watches."

They did so. Avy put her identification documents in her front pants pocket. She hoped she wouldn't run into any trouble requiring her to produce ID.

She stepped up to the back door, planting her feet. She brought to mind the energy she would need to make the passing. She knew this was the Gate that left the theater structure. From then on, she would follow the string. Sebastian opened his mouth to say something, but she waved him to silence. He would break the “anger” concentration.

She felt the familiar heat in her shoulders, the flush on her neck. Unchecked anger raced through her. She stepped through. Like the motion of a bird’s wings building up momentum, the strokes passed with each Gate passing. She could see flashes of color interspersed with shadows bursting in sequence. The cycles became machinegun-like in speed. Her body warmed, tingling with an intense vibration. Although distracted by the sights and sounds around her, she held on to the feeling of anger, pushing the threshold, daring the speed to increase. The fluttering sound became a heavy buzz that turned into a humming noise, the pitch increasing in amplitude. There were no flashes now, just a river of colors that coalesced into a stream that began to run like fast moving lava. With it came a perceptible rise in heat. With her arms extended in front of her, she looked down to see that they had disappeared. For a moment, she feared she might be vanishing, ripping apart to scatter like so many lost atoms.

She broke the mind spell. In an instant, the sights and sounds rushed backward and then forward again, throwing her into a loss of total equilibrium. She clamped her eyes shut, willing her mind to calm. The high-pitched drone became a buzz followed by the familiar fluttering sound, like that of a deck of cards. The noise ceased with a fading whisper, replaced by that of a car horn. Then she heard an urgent male voice. “Are you okay, lady?”

Avy checked herself, relieved that she hadn’t lost any body parts in the transit. She was sitting on a stone walkway near a huge set of glass double doors. A large building sat a dozen feet away. A man in uniform crouched near, staring into her face. At first she thought he was a police officer. When her eyesight cleared, she could make out his nametag and part of his shoulder patch. He was a security guard for Crabtree Valley Mall!

“I think I just slipped,” she said, accepting his hand up. Her legs felt like pasta noodles. She stepped around, testing her balance. Then she gave a great sigh of relief. “Oh, thank you!” she said, looking up at the sky.

“Gosh, I hope you’re all right, lady. This doesn’t happen very often. We try to keep the sprinkler water in the planters, but sometimes it sprays out onto the walkway. I sure hope that you —”

“I’m fine. It was just a bad step. My fault.” Avy strode down the walkway until she came to the edge of the parking lot. She saw drivers cursing at each other over a parking space. One of them blew his horn while the other gunned his engine. “Normal world accounted for,” she mused. She found a public phone, then waited for the prescribed time to call. She made the call at a quarter after two in the afternoon.

“Thank God you’re safe,” said Sebastian, answering it on the first ring. “I was worried sick. Where are you?”

"I'm near the front entrance of the Crabtree Valley Mall complex. I'll take a cab."

"Jeeze Louise, Avy. You skipped across town! Forget the cab. I'll pick you up out in front. You're still in one piece?"

"Just a little headache." She hung up the phone, then walked to the curb in front of the mall entrance. Fascinated, she pondered what she had done. She couldn't imagine how many doors or gates she'd passed through to get to where she now stood. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. They had whipped by so fast it had been a blur. *Gate-Walking*, Janus had called it. There was no "walking" about it. She'd flown at tremendous speed, an imperceptible blip on the cosmic radar. It was more like flying than any other sensation. The path seemed fixed with no way to navigate, make turns or take different routes. It appeared that once one was on the highway, it remained a one-way street. If inclined to exit, a rider had to get off at stations, much like a bus stop. Unlike a driver, she was destined to remain a passenger, required to pull the proverbial cord when she wished to get off.

Sebastian pulled up twenty minutes later. Avy jumped in, relieved to see him. He stared at her with an idiotic grin, then handed her some aspirin, along with a canteen of water. She swallowed the pills, grateful that he'd thought of her comfort. He pulled away from curb.

"I thought you were going to call on the fifteen-minute mark," he said.

"I did. I called at fifteen minutes after two."

"Not according to my time. You better check your watch."

She did, reading the time off. He checked his watch, shook his head. "Damn," he said. "You're four minutes off my time. You didn't bang it on anything did you?"

"No, not at all. I mean, I ended up in a seated position, but I don't remember falling down hard or smacking it on anything. Do you suppose..."

"Some kind of a time dilation thing?" he finished it for her. "Could that have happened? According to general relativity, such a thing could go down. Gads! Could you have been traveling that fast? Approaching the speed of—"

"Light? Travel? I gained four minutes somewhere."

"It makes a lot of sense now. Everything is starting to fit."

"How so?"

"Janus. He's never aged in all the time I've known him. He's always had the same face, body, personality—all of it. If he spends most of his time Gate-traveling at those high speeds, then it's reasonable that time has stood still for him. He ages when he's out of that dimension to interact. He never liked staying around for a very long time, so our visits have always been short. I was surprised to see him in the audience that night. I'll bet he caught just the end of the show, which would prove the theory. It explains why he's always in a hurry. Maybe he ages hours for each of our years. That's all relative, of course, depending upon how long he stays."

"Then it's possible my mother saw him pretty close to how he looks today."

Fifteen minutes later, they were on Hillsborough Street on the Westside.

“I knew he was ancient,” said Sebastian, whipping the wheel hard, bringing the car into the back lot of the theater. “I always wondered if he was immortal.”

Once inside the theater, Avy rummaged through her purse. She took out a small photo album and placed some pictures on the cot, arranging them in order. Next she brought out her driver’s license, compared it against the photos, and then asked for a pair of scissors. Sebastian found a pair, handing them over. She cut out a small picture of herself. One where she’d been with a girlfriend at a barbecue. It was a perfect headshot.

Sebastian watched, intrigued. “What are you doing?”

“I need to make an ID. With a little glue, this cropped photo will fit over a Cyberflow identification card. Good enough to pass anyway. It’s just insurance. I think it’s about time good ol’ Uncle Drake was investigated. You’ll have to do your part. Snatch one of the newest Cyberflow cards, the ones with the bulldog clip. I’ll need a security level clearance three—that’s top priority. Think you can do that?”

“I could snatch a wire pin out of Houdini’s hair.”

“Good.” Looking overhead, she picked out a female manikin that wore a red wig and a beige dress suit. Sebastian got it down for her. She changed while Sebastian watched. She couldn’t help but notice more than a little desire in his eyes. “There’ll be time for that later,” she said with a wink. It didn’t take her long to fit the wig and check her appearance in the bathroom mirror. Ann Margaret never looked so good. As a final touch, a clipboard was added to the ensemble.

“How do I look?” she asked.

“Like an executive.”

“That’s the look I’m after—the official look. Let’s go to Cyberflow.”

They took her car again, riding in silence through the metro area until they reached North Hills, the home turf of the Cyberflow plant. Sebastian parked in the visitor’s area while Avy slipped on a pair of sunglasses.

Sebastian said, “I’ll be back in a minute. Get your glue ready.”

Avy watched him cross the parking lot, then enter the main entrance. She fidgeted, trying to quell the anxiety, knowing that if he were caught she wouldn’t forgive herself.

Her suspicions were groundless. A few minutes later, Sebastian approached, making his way across the parking lot. He jumped into the seat, handing over the document.

“You are too awesome,” she said, examining it. The owner of the tag was an employee named Rita Levy, a redhead. It couldn’t have been better if it had been custom made. She put a smear of glue on her photo, superimposed it over the other, and clipped it to her collar.

“This might take some time,” she said. “I’m going to get the layout of the building, so I’ll know the location of all the doors, security areas, and executive offices. I’ll try to rig a door or window for access.” She produced a pair of large toenail clippers. “Will these cut a small sensor wire?”

“Sure, in a heartbeat. Why are you going to rig a door or window? You can go right through them.”

“Because you’re coming with me tonight.”

* * * *

They arrived back at the theater in two hours. Avy had toured the plant from one end to the other, including the basement. She was glad that she had. The place was a maze. She stopped counting doors after the figure reached three digits. She suspected there were at least two guards assigned to the graveyard shift, both of them stationed at opposite ends of the plant. There were over twenty-five clock stations, which meant they were on the move every hour, covering every square foot of the property. It was not known how many tens of thousands of square feet the plant comprised, but she felt certain that a few guards would have trouble covering all of it in a speedy manner.

Her greatest discovery was the dress of the plain-clothes security officers. There was no doubt they were the same types she had seen out by the lake. Recalling her visit to the plant years ago also jogged her memory. The double-breasted Pasquale suits were a dead giveaway. They looked like hit men instead of genial security officers. She wondered if their appearance at the park had been a coincidence or if they somehow had decided to follow her. There was no need to reveal that information to Sebastian, causing further panic.

They waited until night to make the trip to the Cyberflow property. Shutting off their headlights beforehand, they pulled into a dark corner of the parking lot. The plant building looked gray in the black of night, illuminated by a sliver of moon. Light spilled from only a few of the office windows.

Dressed in dark clothing, soft-soled sneakers, and wearing latex gloves, they inched their way through a small row of trees. Avy led the way, knowing where a basement window stuck out just above the surface on a building wall. The window had fly hinges. She had cut the alarm wire and opened the lock during her previous visit. They crouched when they reached the window.

She kept her voice low. “This is your way in. Stay put until I come around to find you.” He nodded, ducked down, then squeezed through the small opening. She continued down the wall until she found a steel entrance door. She summoned the emotional surge, then stepped through to the other side. She now stood in a long corridor that smelled of fresh paint. It was poorly lit. She pulled out a small penlight, keeping it at her side just in case. She crept down the hall, stopped at an intersection, then made a right turn. She entered the second door down the hall. Sebastian stood next to a snack machine, eating an apple pie.

“You idiot,” she whispered. He looked at her, offering a helpless shrug.

They stepped into the main hallway. She counted doors, and made another turn, hugging close to the wall. She froze in step when she heard the distant chatter of a handheld radio. The words were indistinguishable. They hurried on.

Before long, she entered the door she was looking for. Filing cabinets banked two of the walls. The main floor was occupied by four long tables laden with scrap paper and pencils. It was the Employee Records Room. Avy found a cabinet with the correct alphabetical listing. Sebastian made quick work of the thumb-sized lock, snapping it open with a screwdriver. She flipped through the files and pulled out Drake's personal folder. Sebastian rigged the lock, disguising the fact that it was broken.

They exited the Records Room, Avy in the lead. She followed the blueprint in her head, remembering how many turns and stairwells to take to get to her destination. At one point she became lost, doubled back, then tried again. They found Drake Labrador's executive office on the third floor, after spotting his personalized nameplate glued to the center of the door. It was locked. Sebastian, producing a pick wire, nudged her aside. He had it open in ten seconds. They stepped inside.

She'd been in his office once before, but it had been three years ago. It hadn't changed much, except for one addition—a tall, gray standup safe sat in the corner. She whispered to Sebastian, "Don't worry about the safe until we find a key or combo number."

She went straight to the large walnut desk. The desk drawers were unlocked. She would start from the top side drawer, then work her way down. The first drawer was disorganized chaos, papers and report folders lying in helter skelter disarray. She tucked anything that looked written in Drake's hand in her pants. She rifled the next drawers, sifting through the scatter. She picked out slips that looked like personal notes. She shoved a small address book she'd found in her pocket. Opening up the belly drawer revealed piles of candy wrappers, condoms, cotton swabs, gas receipts, pink slips, memos, clips, rubber stamps, and other flotsam. She tore a few top sheets from a yellow legal pad, believing them to be recent notations.

She wasn't quite sure what evidence she was looking for. Anything that would incriminate him for something would be a boon. Proof of tax evasion, manipulation of funds, insider trading, sexual discrimination, harassment, forgery, blackmail, or any other suspect documents were ripe for a court case designed to bring prosecution against him.

She found a heavy, gold ring in a corner pocket. It was set with a cat's eye. On the back was a tiny inscription. She had to use a magnifying glass and her penlight to see it. It read, *I've Got My Eye On You, Baby—Love, Avalon*. It was most likely a gift from her mother to her husband, Tom. She felt a sudden revulsion knowing that Drake had such a sentimental keepsake sitting in one of his junk drawers. She wanted to take it but decided against it. She gave it a small kiss, then put it back where she found it.

"Psst." Sebastian motioned to her. He stood next to the safe. The vault door was wide open.

She crept to the safe, cocking her eyebrows in surprise. He smiled, handed her a journal, the equivalent of a man's diary. She looked around the room, noticing the dim outline of a photocopy machine. She signaled for him to watch the door while she began copying pages.

She turned the copier on, beginning the task. The machine wasn't that loud, but anyone close enough to the door might pick up the slight cycling noise. Her motions became automatic—push, lift, flip, push, then repeat in a steady rhythm, fast enough without fumbling or dropping the journal to the floor. It was a race to copy everything she wanted to while not knowing the precise time the guards would make their rounds. She cringed when the photocell flashed, spilling out an explosion of light. Since the large viewing window was wide open against its blinds, anyone patrolling the parking lot might see strange lightning bolts within one of the executive offices then come running. Intruder alert!

When she finished the last page, she hurried to the safe. After throwing the journal in, she eased the door closed.

Sebastian waved his arms, then put a finger to his ear. She froze, listening. She could hear heel strikes in the hallway, along with another noise that resembled a door rattling. A guard was on his rounds checking the doors! Panic swept over her. There was no way out of the office save for the main entrance. She might have enough time to hustle up the feeling to Gate-Walk, but Sebastian had no way out except into the arms of the approaching guard.

She waved him over behind the desk. They stooped to crawl under it. Cavernous in size, it was an easy fit. She knocked a container over and brushed her nails against a small space heater. It gave out an annoying ring. She flicked her penlight on, cupping the light. The cramped space revealed a plastic jar of Vaseline along with a bottle of cough syrup or mouthwash, she couldn't decide which. The objects nauseated her. But what else could have been expected from a disgusting scum bucket like Drake Labrador?

The office doorknob rattled, and then opened. A voice broke the silence. "Son-of-a-bitch. Yeah, right. I don't think so." Soft pads across the carpet, the voice again. "You tell us to keep the electric bill down, but you can't even shut off your own shit, never mind locking your own goddamned door."

Avy grimaced. The copy machine was on! There came a click, then the fading whine of the machine, followed by soft footpads. The door closed. She put a palm on Sebastian's forearm, signaling him to stay where he was. There was no hurry to leave. She hadn't heard the retreating steps of the guard down the hall and was uncertain if he'd left. They waited for five minutes in silence, then crawled out from under the desk. There were no hallway sounds.

Avy placed an ear against the door, smiling to Sebastian in relief. He nodded, clearly understanding that it was safe. She turned the knob the wrong way, rattling it. Tried again. The mechanism gave an audible click. She eased the door open, motioning for Sebastian to follow. When they stepped out, Avy looked both ways down the corridor. What she saw on the left made her go bone-cold still. The guard had just turned. Dropping a cigarette to the floor, his eyes met hers. He reached inside his coat jacket.

Before she'd had a chance to react, the guard had assumed a combat stance, with his pistol pointing at her forehead. The air over his head swirled with a cloud of tobacco smoke.

“Freeze or I’ll cap your ass,” said the guard, backing up a step. He cocked his head, looking at the papers hanging from Avy’s pants.

“You losing a little stuffing there?” he asked. “Looks like I’ve got me a couple of cat burglars. What’s in those pockets?” He brought his handheld radio up to his jaw, then spoke with a nervous urgency. “Hildegard, be advised that I have two in custody over by Mr. Labrador’s office. You copy that?”

Sebastian stepped to Avy’s side, throwing his hands up in the air. He said, “Give him the paperwork, sweetie. He’s got us cold. Give him the whole batch.”

Avy rolled the paperwork up into a tube. Sebastian stepped to her side when she leaned forward to hand it over, watching the guard shift to extend a hand. Just when the gun dipped down, Sebastian’s hand rose up, two playing cards wedged in the crook between his fingers. With the snap of his wrist, he pitched them into the guard’s eyes. The guard howled and stumbled backward. Sebastian leapt, snatched the gun out of his hand, then kicked the man’s legs out from underneath him. The guard’s ass hit the floor with bone-jarring thud.

“My eyes!” the guard gasped. “I can’t see!”

Sebastian bent over him, using swift hands to take the guard’s belt off. He looped the guard’s hands behind his back, then secured them with a knot, using the belt. Then with a deft stomp, he crunched the radio under his foot. “That’s what you get for pulling a gun on my girlfriend.”

The two ran down the hallway at breakneck speed. Avy’s heart knocked in her chest. She hoped the high anxiety state would not cause her to go flying through the next door she entered. She wasn’t up for being spirited away to another part of the building, or dumped in the parking lot. She had to get Sebastian out. Everything else was set on an alarm that tied in with the local police station.

Avy got Sebastian to the basement window, then ran to the same door she’d entered. She went through with an excess burst of energy, ending up on the other side sprawled in the grass. Sebastian got to her in three strides. Together they ran to the car, not looking back once.

They pulled out of the parking lot, tires squealing. To shake off any pursuers, Sebastian made several evasive maneuvers down some side streets. He eased off the pedal after a few miles, slowing to a law-abiding speed. They decided to go to her motel room in the belief that the theater might be too “hot” for a hideaway. He took the long route around town. When they arrived at the Flat On Your Back Motel, he parked in back to conceal the vehicle.

Once inside her room, they collapsed on the bed, chests heaving for breath. Avy could hear the blood rushing through her ears while she stared up at the ceiling. It took them more than ten minutes to regain their composure.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen playing cards used to fend off a gun,” she said. “I hope you didn’t blind him for life.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. He had the drop on us.”

She giggled, finding the whole episode hilarious, in a dangerous sort of way. “What else do you have up your sleeve? Mr. Magic Man?”

He turned to her, giving her a sly wink. There was mischief in that look, she thought. It wasn’t clear if the danger had prompted it or if it had been the pure adrenalin rush. But a moment later, they found themselves wrapped in each other’s arms, cracking the damn of passion they’d held in check. Avy unclenched her hand, dropping the tube of papers. Soon they were thrashing amongst the pages, smearing them with body oil and sweat. She found Sebastian to be adept in another area of magic that delighted her. He brought her to peaks of pleasure that had her clenching the bedspread white-knuckled. He took her on a few side trips that gave her the shivers, prompting her to curse with an exhilaration she’d never known. The man acted the part of the giver too. At one point during some vigorous thrusting, she screamed her wild abandon so loudly, the occupants next door had tossed objects against the wall to silence the two.

When it was over, they lay in a tangle of flesh, chests heaving, breaths hissing between their teeth. She now had a better understanding of the “amazing” connotation in his name.

This was the passion she had been looking for all along. The first time she felt wanted—safe in the arms of a man who cared about her. She had become one with Sebastian, achieving that bond of trust. Now there was someone who would cherish her for however long it lasted. She never wanted it to end, and thought her heart could explode from the joy of it at any moment. He spoke to her after a moment of silence.

“Avy, I’m so damn in love with you I think I’m going to lose my mind.”

At those words, Avy cried. She'd never felt so happy in her life.

Chapter 11

His chief of security called him at three-thirty in the morning. Drake hopped in his Mercedes and made it down to the plant in thirty minutes flat, running three stop signs on the way. A break-in at Cyberflow was unheard of. No one had ever been caught trespassing or loitering on the property. His security outlay was horrendous, with one exception—he had kept minimal personnel on the graveyard shift to cut expenses. Now that he thought about it, he could kick his ass up around his neck for cutting those corners. He wondered if anything had been picked up on his security cameras. He felt certain he had one hundred percent surveillance on the property that covered all areas. Unless somebody had neglected to switch out the tapes. If that were the case, they wouldn't have a job the next day.

He stormed into his office. Five security men were standing, one seated. The seated man held an ice bag to his forehead. Auggie gave the injured guard soothing shoulder pats.

Drake plopped in his high-back chair, glaring at the gathering. "Anybody who wasn't an eye witness or who wasn't directly involved, get out!"

The room cleared except for the seated man and the security chief. Drake looked at Auggie. "What happened to him?"

"He caught a couple of cat burglars on the third floor. One of the suspects threw some playing cards in his face. Nearly blinded him when they hit him in the eyes."

Drake couldn't resist. "Got dealt a bad hand, did you? Tell me it was aces and eights. Please tell me that, you fucking moron! You're packing heat, right? You're telling me some guy throws cards in your face and gets away? That's what I pay you three-hundred a week for?"

"I'm sorry," said the injured guard. "I had them cornered and was about to make an arrest. Then all of a sudden, I'm on the deck. You see, I was on my clock rounds shaking doors when I came upon your office. I discovered the door open. I went inside to find the copy machine running. I shut it off, locked the door from the inside, then stepped out into the hallway to have a smoke. A few minutes later, these two come creeping out of your office."

"Who came creeping out?" asked Drake.

"A guy and a gal, I think. They were dressed in black, carrying sheaves of paper. I pulled my piece, then called for backup. The next thing I know, I'm laced up on the floor with my hand-held busted in pieces. The warehouse guard, Hildegard, found me ten minutes later. We did a sweep of the property, but found that the suspects had vacated the premises. With my eyes the way they were, I couldn't see all that well anyway."

Drake looked at his safe. A wave of nausea came over him. He hadn't been in it for a few days, but did remember locking it with his last visit. He next thought about the desk drawers, wondering if they contained anything incriminating. The mixed company in the room prevented him from any cursory examination at the moment.

"I was wondering if I could be excused," said the injured man.

"You're excused for good," said Drake. "You heard me. Don't sit there with your mouth agape like a sea bass. Get your knees in the breeze. You're finished at Cyberflow."

The injured man, former security officer, past proud member of the Hollywood Mafia left the office, closing the door with a soft click.

Drake dialed the combination on his safe while Auggie looked on, a trickle of sweat running down his cheek. The CEO of Cyberflow opened the safe, then looked inside. Two rows of small cardboard boxes took up the back half of the safe, stacked to the top. In front of them lay sheaves of papers, folders, receipts, notes, and other spillage. He picked up his brown journal, and paged through it, not remembering if he had thrown it in or if it had been placed there with care. The thought that anyone had opened his safe to copy documents seemed ludicrous. Who would dare pull such a stunt?

Drake looked over his shoulder. "Why are you standing there with your thumb up your butt? Haven't you got anything to say?"

Auggie took a few steps, handed him a photo printout that he pulled from his vest pocket. "I think this says it all, boss. It's a little grainy, but one of our hallway cameras picked it up. You can draw your own conclusions, but with those wool caps removed, I think we can agree about the identity of those intruders. The long blond hair is a dead giveaway."

Drake studied the photo, his fingers pinching it so hard it left smudges on its surface. He tossed it on his desk. "Okay, we know my daughter and that gutter trash magic man of hers was behind this. I just can't figure out what they're after." Although he had a good idea why she was infiltrating his company. He believed it had everything to do with revenge for having thrown her out of his household. There had never been any love lost between them.

Drake sighed. He didn't mean any offense to the girl, but the only way he could wipe her mother from his mind was to boot her. He had gotten so tired looking at her face day after day. It had brought back so many memories—haunted him, accused him. She'd been a pox on him ever since he'd signed the adoption papers. Well, no more! She'd stepped in it this time. She'd rue the day she ever put a knife in Drake Labrador's back.

"I'm not going to put up with this harassment," Drake said. He opened his desk drawers to forage through their contents. He slapped papers aside, wondering if he had left anything incriminating, something damaging to his company or his reputation. It was a crapshoot. Almost anything could be used against him if one knew what to look for. At the very least, a tax audit would sabotage him.

There were other skeletons in his closet that could never be allowed to surface into the bright light of judicial scrutiny. Right now, his mind spun with those horrific thoughts—thoughts that brought back very dark, ominous memories.

He found a ragged tear across his legal pad. He could not remember if he had ripped a sheet off or if other hands had removed it. He checked his waste pale. It was empty. He couldn't remember! What had he written on the legal pad?

"If you don't mind my asking, Mr. Labrador," said Auggie, "is there anything in particular that they might be after? Why would your own daughter be doing these things?"

"I do mind you asking," said Drake, aware that he'd always told Auggie that he had adopted Avy. "It's just been bad blood in the family. However, things have changed—she's a thief now, demonstrated by her actions. You know how touchy I am about company business or security issues. I've gone to extraordinary lengths to sew this place up tight against entry. Now I'm faced with the realization that a couple of kids invaded our network, escaping with God knows what kind of sensitive tech data. I think they're after copyrights or patents, groundbreaking stuff. We're a leader in software. Who better to steal from? Maybe they're moles for IBM."

Drake was grasping, pitching shit pies against the wall, but it had the decided effect on his security chief, who now had panic etched on his face.

Drake put his arm around Auggie's shoulder and stepped him out into the hallway. They walked like Siamese twins joined at the hip, with a slow, deliberate stride. Drake pulled on his chin, gearing up for one of his deliveries.

"It occurs to me now that if we don't put a stop to this, our reputation as a secure facility will end up squat. This bug screams to be stepped on. We're not in the position to let some juveniles run herd over this company unchecked, stealing security sensitive documents, committing assault and battery on our staff. This is a personal affront to me. I think we can deal with it without any probes or assistance from external agencies. I'm just putting a couple of clear coats on this topic, if you understand my meaning."

"Yes, sir. No cops. I can smell the varnish from here."

"That's good. Fear is a good motivator, a great deterrent. I don't believe in violence, but I'm not against a show of force. Sending just the right message can rid us of this bogeyman. You've got to make them think it isn't worth the effort. If they persist, well, things can get real messy—fast. You've just got to hit some people over the head with the proverbial stop sign."

"Everybody has to obey the traffic signs, boss."

"Fine. We know this astounding what's-his-name has a magic act on Hillsborough Street. We know that his bitch might be very close at hand. I'm concerned with where this boy lays his head at night. His home base. A personal visit to his premises, accompanied by a clear message, should dissuade him from further violence. I'm not talking about any arm breaking or flying teeth—I wouldn't lower myself to such tactics because it would make me no better than my oppressor. It would be even better if he were not home or near the premises."

“Like a surprise visit,” Auggie said, obviously following the thread.

“That’s it. I’d leave a calling card, but nothing that could be traced back to Cyberflow. Random acts that never get solved happen all the time in Raleigh. No witnesses. That kind of stuff. Real swift—shock and awe. Use your imagination.”

“That can be arranged without a problem.”

“I thought so. The operative word here is ‘creative’, something that will leave a lasting impression. That way we won’t have to deal with this again, which means we can go on with business as usual.”

“Gotcha. How soon should this party get under way?”

“Yesterday. While it’s fresh in their minds. Assemble some of your best men. Use non-descript vehicles.” Drake paused in the hallway, placing his hand on Auggie’s shoulder. “How is that other matter taking shape?”

“We’re lining that up right now. We don’t have all the pieces together yet, but the overall picture is taking shape. The skies are looking friendlier by the hour.”

“Glad to hear it. If you find any property that belongs to Cyberflow at the other site be sure to bring it back with you and return it to its rightful owner. Do whatever it takes to find it.”

Drake watched Auggie walk down the hallway with his shoulders thrown back, hitching up his pants. The security chief of Cyberflow was on a mission. Drake could see the determination in the man’s stride. It was the fastest he’d ever seen Auggie walk.

Chapter 12

They'd been poring over the documents on Avy's motel bed for the past three hours, coming up with very little information about Drake Labrador's doings other than indecipherable "notes to self," company documents, old work ledgers, and other fodder. They hadn't had sufficient time to snatch the best paperwork before they'd been forced to leave.

The journal proved disheartening since it contained chicken scratch messages with weird codes that only the author could have understood. Acronyms were everywhere, sometimes connected to words, at other times strung together in hodgepodge fashion. It was obvious that anything Drake had written was never meant to be interpreted at face value. Some of his personal notes contained strange little emoticons that conveyed his temperament during the note taking. The one thing Drake hadn't doctored were the voluminous expense tallies that he'd run up to cover his personal activities. Company write-offs. Even these had received some strokes of a felt marker, blackening out damaging dollar figures.

Then pay dirt.

Avy found a few accident claims filed by one employee, along with partial pages of the insurance claim that included some testimonials. Then she found some copies of suspicious checks written by the claimant to Drake Labrador for amounts that were slightly less than the insurance settlement. It was an obvious sign that both parties were profiting.

"Here he goes again," said Avy. "I think he's been staging accidents in his own company, with willing employees, just to reap the profits. There's evidence of a laboratory fire that he collected on. This is just the tip of the iceberg."

Sebastian had his nose in a document. "Yeah, I would imagine he has a lot of tax deductions for things that are iffy or don't qualify. We haven't got a whole lot to go on. Most of these dates are old."

"He's had a long time to fuck things up," said Avy. She covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. That's not like me at all—the foul mouth. I'm running on pure emotion. You're right. We have to find something more recent." She picked up a crinkled yellow piece of paper that had a recent date. Cartoon characters filled its margins. Remembering the legal pad from which it had come from, she thought it might have belonged to his current memo stationary. It had been on the top pile in his desk. Fresh notes.

"This is weird," she said. "He's drawing little pictures to himself instead of spelling things out. He has what looks like a small black circle with a chain on it. Below that is a stick airplane with an arrow pointing down to some squiggles. Along the margin, he writes 'five, nine, nine TANGO'

in descending order. The name 'Auggie' appears. Below that there is a little cross or crucifix sitting in a batch of flowers. Then it says R-I-P. Below that is the name 'Buck.' It looks like some kind of an anagram."

"Lemme see that."

She gave him the paper, prepared to watch his reaction. Janus had said disaster was on the horizon. There might be a connection. What a twist of fate it would be if Drake had sketched out a diabolical plan, allowing her to find it by pure chance. That would be too juicy. The odds of such a thing were astronomical. She was about to wipe the theory from her thoughts when Sebastian spoke.

"Wait a minute. We might have something here. The squiggles sure look like water to me. You know the little spikes and waves? R-I-P means 'rest in peace.' That fits with the little cross, which looks like it could be a grave marker. The little line attached to the circle looks like a bomb and fuse. I don't get the rest of it, but just that part looks suspicious. You think he's going to bomb a plane or something?"

"A commercial airliner? I don't think he has the balls for that, or the brains. A plane going down in water is a scary thought though. Maybe some kind of an insurance scam? It's obvious he does those things. We have evidence of that right here. But that would mean he... Oh, hello? Maybe a little plane, huh?"

"Maybe a corporate plane, Avy. How did your stepfather fly to business meetings? Do you remember him telling you anything about it?"

"Just that he was taking Citation, a small charter airline. Maybe Citation has something to do with the planes we found in his company inventory."

"I've never heard of Citation Airlines. That doesn't make any sense."

"I'm sorry. I never paid much attention. He was always leaving, never telling us where he was going. In fact, I was glad to see him leave most of the time. It got to the point where I didn't care if he ever came back home."

"Do you remember any 'Buck' in the company?"

"I might have seen the name when I was visiting their website, but I can't be sure. It would have been just another employee name. Let's Google all of it at the library."

They drove to the library and went straight to the desk. Abigail Folger hurried toward them from a back aisle, her face etched with concern. The large woman held a palm over the top of her bosom, panting like she was out of breath.

Abigail kept her voice low but intense. "I thought you should know that there were some strange men in here the other day asking about you two. They were from Cyberflow. They threatened to fire my son if I didn't answer their questions. I didn't tell them much, I swear. I would be very careful if I were you. You might even report them to the police. But please don't say I had anything to do with it."

There was little doubt the woman was terrified. They'd had their own run-in with the security thugs, although she didn't tell Abigail that. Avy apologized for the scare, but added her thanks for the tip-off. She produced her card then walked straight to a computer. When she brought up the Cyberflow website, her code wouldn't clear. Access denied. She tried again, getting the same result.

"They kicked you out of the system," said Sebastian. "You're more of a threat than you realize."

She looked at him. "I was a threat the day I was born. Now what do we do?"

"Key in five-nine-nine-tango."

She did so. It produced gibberish. Next she tried "Citation." The website of an aircraft manufacturer came up showing different models of Cessna corporate jets.

"Gotcha," said Avy. "It's the model name of a jet. He has a corporate jet, a Citation jet. Now it makes sense. Oh, Sebastian, do you think we're on to something here or are we just blowing smoke?"

"We've got to check it out. What if he slipped up and by a coincidence we blundered right into it? Wouldn't you say we owe it to ourselves to see if we're on the right track before we call it quits? Can you remember what airport he flew out of?"

"That one is easy. It was the Raleigh-Durham airport. Sometimes Mom would have to drive him there when the limo didn't show up on time. He never wanted to leave his car in the parking area. He said it cost too much so he always got a ride both ways."

"Heh. His extravagance, coupled with his notions on how to cut corners is asinine. The man is a loon—a dangerous one at that. We have to figure out a way to find out what's in store for that plane. In particular, if it's scheduled for any flights in the next day or so. It sure would be nice to know who will be on it, not to mention where it's going."

Avy thought about that for a minute. "If I can locate where the plane is stored at the airport, maybe I can find out if there's anyone in charge of it. Maybe a few general questions would tell us what we need to know. I'll have to take up the guise of an authority figure—someone who might make that call."

"I'm not following how you're going to pull that off."

"I'm an actress. I'm no stranger to voice-over. Drake's secretary makes all of his appointments. Her name is Linda Wu. I've talked to her dozens of times. She's Drake's filter. She's also Chinese American, chews a lot of gum, and always talks like a thug on the phone. Not real bright. I'm sure I could mimic her voice. I remember her being there two weeks ago, so there's no reason to think she isn't still on his payroll."

"Hell, yes. Give it a try."

Avy stuffed three sticks of gum into her mouth. She found a phone inside the library. She called the airport and spoke to several people before an operator routed her to a hangar manager. A male voice answered on the other end, almost incoherent from chewing noises.

"Yap, maintenance bay. Mr. Bad Wrench speaking. What can I do for you?"

“Yah, this is Linda calling. We need to—”

“Linda who?”

“Linda Wu. Drake’s secretary. I’m calling for the boss.” She snapped the gum over her lips then made a mewing sound.

“Oh, yo, Lindeee! What’s the haps? You sound like you have a cold. How you doing?”

“It’s been a bitch. I think I’m coming down with tuberculotus or something. The big man wants to know what the fuck you’re doing with the Citation.”

“Look, we’ll have a technician on it in plenty of time. We’re waiting on a fuel injector that has to be Fed-Exed. Those things take time, you know.”

“Just double checking. You do know when it has to be ready, right?”

“It’ll be ready at the agreed upon time.”

“Let me jog your memory about the agreed upon time. I hope you got the timeframe down. No screw-ups. You better have the right day. You would be so busted if you had it wrong, dude.”

“Nothing’s changed, it’s still Tuesday morning.”

“So how long do you think these bullshit repairs will take?”

“Just a few days. Don’t worry, she’ll lift off next week. Hey, are we still on for lobster tomorrow?”

Avy blinked, missing a beat. “You’ll have to ask me again when I’m feeling better.”

“Oookaaay. So what about—”

Avy blew a small, puffy sigh when she hung up the phone. Sebastian’s face was one big question mark. “It’s a morning flight next Tuesday,” she said. “He took the bait, he thought I was her. Let’s just hope Mr. Bad Wrench doesn’t compare notes with Linda Wu over a conversation that never happened.”

“Hell, you had me convinced. That gives us time to dig. So far his notes jibe with what we’ve found.”

She nodded. “We’re onto something. I just don’t know what yet.”

“We can talk about it over a late breakfast. My treat.”

“You’re the hungriest guy I know.” She wouldn’t mind having something light, like a salad. She would have to watch her figure around him.

“What can I say? I also make food disappear.”

* * * *

They drove downtown to a small restaurant called the Burgersaurus that had rickety chairs and tables the size of manhole lids. Everything on the menu topped at least three grand in calories. And here she thought she’d get a healthy salad. Not! But she wasn’t about to mock the restaurant or the menu, it might have been one of Sebastian’s favorite haunts. Figuring out his priorities was fast becoming one of her preoccupations. After the order came, she discovered he liked onions so she gave hers up. Another little detail she added to his “like” list.

“So,” he said between bites. “If this plane is headed for an accident of some type, we better figure out how it’s going to go down. Too bad we couldn’t get a flight plan ahead of schedule. I think they fill those out the day of the flight, along with a passenger list. I wonder who is supposed to be on that flight. Think that could be the disaster Janus is talking about?”

“All good questions.” She dabbed her chin. “I wish he would show up right now and offer us a little help.”

“That’s just it. With Janus, it’s one shove on the swing. From there on out, you pump. He told me once that to take you there would dilute the whole process—contaminate it. He said he could ‘show’ you how to get there.”

“I wonder who his higher power is,” Avy dared to ask.

“Don’t know. I’m not sure if a man who can walk straight through walls has one. Not to say he doesn’t have a higher authority. I just think he might be his own internal power balance. I’ve always suspected that he doesn’t belong in this dimension, but just pops in like he’s got some kind of a visitor’s pass. I think he belongs everywhere at the same time if that’s possible. But I know his premonitions are right on.”

“How do you know that?”

“He’s led me to more than a few accident scenes where I was able to help out. One time I stopped a father from beating his daughter. I got a busted lip and a black eye in the process, but I stopped the violence. I’ll never know what might have happened to that little girl if I hadn’t appeared at that precise moment. He could have killed her. Janus led me there, like laying down a breadcrumb trail. It’s hard to explain how he works. You have to pay attention to every word he says to get the full gist of it.”

She looked thoughtful. “It’s just hard to imagine that a man like that can share our environment without being discovered.”

“Avy,” said Sebastian, pausing in mid-bite. “You’re not hard to imagine. You’re part of his essence. Janus is your father, the other half of you. It’s a pure miracle.”

She had a hard time facing that realization. It was so complex, it was almost unimaginable. Yet something had happened to her for which she had no explanation. She just wanted to be Avy Labrador—normal like everyone else. It never occurred to her that she could be abnormal.

“It’s easier to understand him if you know his origins,” said Sebastian. “The first thing I did was look him up at the library. I found some interesting stuff. Janus is the Roman god of gates, doors, beginnings, and endings. It’s said that he originated from Greek lore. He’s shown having a double face. Each face looks in opposite directions, symbolizing the past and future. He was worshipped at harvest time, while he reigned over planting, marriage, and birth.”

“Do we know about any of these miracles he’s pulled off?”

“One story relates that when the Sabines attacked the city of Rome, they attempted to climb a hill, but Janus made a hot spring erupt from the ground, driving the attackers off. After that, the gates of his temple were kept open in times of war so he could be ready to protect the city

occupants. The gates remained closed in times of peace. He was worshiped as a deity—a vanguard against oppression, invasion, and injustice. January is named in his honor. That’s about the extent of what I know.”

“Fascinating. It sounds like he fits that description.” Avy saw Sebastian’s eyes directed over her shoulder. She turned in her chair. A hefty man in uniform stood behind her, clutching a takeout bag. She looked up into his face. The man’s eyes brightened. Raymond Hammersmith dithered.

Flustered for a moment, Avy pulled a chair next to her. “Chubby, what a surprise! Won’t you join us?”

“Hello, Avy.” Chubby looked at Sebastian, his face souring for a second. “Oh, no. I see you have company. I just stopped off to grab a quick breakfast. I’m on my way to work. It’s nice to see you again. I was wondering how you were getting along.”

Avy introduced Sebastian, explaining that he was a “good friend.” They engaged in some small talk. Chubby stumbled in conversation a few times after glancing at Sebastian. The tension in the air was palpable.

Chubby handed her a business card. “If you need me at any time you just call so I can come running. You see right there? That’s my home phone number. Okay?”

Avy thanked him. She watched him leave the restaurant, then turned back to Sebastian. “I think I owe you an explanation. He’s the man I told you about. Raymond, or ‘Chubby’, was a good friend of my mother’s. He spent over fourteen years with her at the Women’s Correctional Facility. He became her deathwatch guard, staying with her up until the end. He took her death very hard—never recovered from it. When he saw me for the first time in Raleigh, it brought back some haunting memories for him. I went looking for him so we could talk about what happened in the past. We shared coffee at his trailer home.”

Sebastian cleared his throat. “He’s not dangerous is he?”

Avy waved it off. “It’s nothing more than a fixation. He’s sweet, just a little lost. I wouldn’t hesitate to call him if we ran into trouble. He’s loyal to my mother’s memory—even honor-bound by it.”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes.

“It’s not like that. It’s the resemblance.”

Sebastian glanced at his watch. “I hate to break this up, but I’d better get back to my babies. They need some food and sunshine. They’re probably wondering about dad right now.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry. I forgot all about animals.”

They left the restaurant. Sebastian took the wheel, giving Avy a chance to unwind. She watched the scenery, grateful for the reprieve. Her mind had been unraveling one strand at a time, like cheap carpet. But when she glanced at the man beside her, she knew that at least most of those dark thoughts could be canned. He understood much of the baggage she carried. He acted the part of her sanity preserver, a life ring in the middle of the ocean—a support system she hadn’t expected. She wondered if this was what true love was supposed to be like.

They pulled into the back alley and parked. Sebastian held out the keys. "I sure get off driving this little purple heap. I hope you don't mind."

Avy didn't mind. It felt nice to be chauffeured around town, not having to fight her way through traffic. When they stepped up to the rear theater door, Sebastian threw his arm back, halting her steps. The door creaked, ajar. The lock mechanism had been pried out of the frame. It lay in pieces on the pavement. He gave her a look that said, *break-in*. She took a few steps back. He eased the door open and peeked his head in to look around the corner. She saw his shoulders stiffen, his fists clench.

"Whatever you do," he said, "don't come in here until I give you the all clear."

"I'll stay." She watched him disappear inside, wishing he hadn't ordered her to stay outside. She wasn't completely defenseless, but she appreciated the gesture, knowing he had gone in to check the interior for thieves or burglars. She hoped that nothing of value had been disturbed or stolen. Everything Sebastian owned and loved was inside the theater.

She became more fraught as time elapsed, wanting to barge in. Finally, he appeared at the door, a grim, ashen look on his face.

"It's not a pretty sight," he said, his voice wavering.

She followed him in, having not gotten more than a few steps before she froze in shock. At least eight doves were scattered about the floor in a gruesome spray of bloody feathers. It looked like a slaughterhouse. One rabbit lay broken at the foot of the cot. Two manikins, torn from their wiring, occupied fold-up chairs. Red paint slashes adorned their throats. Their glass eyes had been gouged out. Screwdrivers protruded from their chests.

Avy tried to speak, but couldn't manage more than a squeak.

"They shot the doves from the rafters," he said, kicking a few shell casings at his feet. "It looks like the rabbits were slaughtered on the floor. That message was meant for us." He pointed to the manikins then raised his fists in the air, trembling. "Goddamn you for this! Hell is coming. I promise you that!"

She didn't know what to do at first, other than attempt to get a grip on her emotions. She stepped across the floor, hugging her shoulders while she looked at the carnage. It seemed hard to imagine that anyone could have committed such a vile act. They had torn the place apart, scattering all of his personal belongings from one end of the storeroom to the other.

Sebastian picked up one of his birds and held it to his chest. "There goes the act. Everything is ruined. It's all been for nothing!"

She had no idea what to say. Outrage had now taken the place of horror. There was little doubt that Drake's men were responsible for the devastation. This had been acted out on a personal level—one side warring against the other. A cold-blooded retaliation like this would not have happened out in the open. Yet if they called the police to investigate, accusing Cyberflow of the act, they

would need proof, not to mention concrete evidence linking them to the crime. Making accusations or starting an investigation would drive Drake Labrador deeper into his secret catacombs, which meant they might never find out what he was up to.

"I know this is little comfort," began Avy, "but those two plastic dolls could have been us. It's not over either, Sebastian. We both know who did this. Damn them all to hell. They're going to pay for this." She gulped hard, blinking back tears. It took all of her resolve to continue. "You remember what you told me—the show goes on. That means we have to get through this. They're trying to scare us clean out of our minds."

He looked fed up. "They did a pretty good job of it if you ask me."

"I'm so sorry, baby. This is not going to happen again. We're going to fight this thing. They know we're on to something—all of this is proof of their guilt. Please, please gather your cages and go where you have to go to buy some more of your beautiful babies."

"I'm not leaving you. I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you."

She took three strides, grabbed his shoulders, the tears threatened to flow in a dam burst. "Now you go! They can't hurt me. They couldn't catch me if they wanted to. We are not giving up or leaving. We're staying right here. I'll call Chubby. We'll get help."

His head lolled. She could see him battling with the emotional turmoil. He walked to his cot, pulled a small pistol from under his pillow, and gave it to her. "Okay," he said. "More babies. You take this in case. Just point and pull the trigger if anybody other than me comes through that door. I won't be long. I'll get another deadbolt for the door. I just feel bad about leaving you here."

"I'm going to clean up. Now get going. Remember I love you!"

They kissed. Sebastian walked to the stage wing to gather his animal cages. After he left, she went to find a cardboard box, then gathered up the dead animals, making sure they were all accounted for. The small corpses had to be wrapped in newspaper, then sealed in the box. The box was taken out to the back alley and set against the wall. Back in the theater, she swept up all the feathers and bits of flesh, then picked up bits of bone, sinew, and entrails from the benches and joist beams. The janitor supplies in the bathroom provided a hot vinegar solution to disinfect the entire room. The manikins ended up in a dumpster out back, covered with sheets. It was hard for her to ignore the tragedy of the scene, and it took all of her willpower to think of pleasant thoughts.

It took her two hours to finish the cleanup. The backroom was now spotless, with little or no evidence of what had happened there aside from a few obvious bullet holes in the overhead.

Sebastian arrived home just when she sat on the cot for a breather. He wrestled the pens in through the door and took them to the stage wing. When he came back, he gave her an appreciative look. "Are the animals in that box out there?"

She nodded. "Yes, I thought you might want to bury them. The dumpster didn't seem the proper place."

"Thanks. Thanks for all you've done, sweetheart." He left again.

Avy went to the phone, digging in her purse for a certain business card. Chubby had his workplace number on the card he had given her. She called the prison and waited until they patched her through to Raymond Hammersmith.

“Chubby, this is Avy. I’m sorry to bother you, but you said to call if I needed anything. I’m in some kind of danger. I wonder if you could help me.”

“Danger? Holy shit! I’m glad you called. What can I do?”

“Thanks, would it be possible for you to locate some people for me? I need addresses. No phone numbers. These people are part of the security force that works at Cyberflow, my stepfather’s company. Is there any way you could get that information for me?”

“Okay, I know somebody who works in records at the downtown precinct. I can also check out the NCIC index. I can cross-reference that with Cyberflow employees to see if any of them show up there with records. But my best lead will come from the gal who does Cyberflow payroll—I had a couple dates with her about four months ago. That should cover most of the bases. Are we talking about just the security personnel at Cyberflow? All of them, Avy?”

“All that you can find. That would be a great help.”

“Do you mind if I ask about the problem?”

“I was threatened, harassed. My evidence points to Cyberflow security employees. I’m afraid that’s about all I can tell you at the moment.”

“Gee. That’s just not right. I’m sorry you have to go through something like this. I’ll get right on it. Do you want me to come over?”

“No, that’s okay.” She gave him two phone numbers where she could be reached, making him repeat them back to her. “You’ll call me at the theater when you have something?”

“Sure will. Bye, Avy. You stay safe now. We won’t let anything happen to you, gosh no!”

She hung up the phone, then stood there for a reflective moment. Something about Chubby wrenched at her heartstrings again. He appeared to be so accommodating, but so aimless, so much alone. She suspected that he’d been living a soulful existence with the memories of Avalon Labrador packed deep down inside. Her mother seemed to have left such an impression on him that she might have been the single thing in his life that kept his clock ticking, filling his mind full of hopeful dreams.

Sebastian came in after his burial detail. Avy could almost feel the heavy weight of his thoughts. She sat with him, placing her arm around his shoulder.

“You’re the best,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “Now, what are we going to do about these thugs? I feel like going off half-cocked with a loaded gun. You know, cap their asses.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I suppose not. But I do want to get even. They have to pay for this.”

“I know they do. Just listen. I called Chubby. He told me that he might be able to dig up the home addresses on these security people. He can’t guarantee all of them. We won’t need all of them, though.”

“What have you got brewing in your mind, Avy Labrador?”

She gave him a grave, determined look. “I think Halloween is going to come very early this year.”

Chapter 13

Chubby had dropped off a notebook containing twenty-two addresses belonging to security personnel at Cyberflow. They were current addresses with fifteen of them located in the Durham and Chapel Hill areas. Seven addresses were located in Raleigh. She had the book with her now while they cruised the back streets of West Raleigh, looking for the first house number on Tipper Lane. Sebastian pulled the small Jeep to the curb, three houses down from the target residence. He said, "Be careful."

She stepped out, clutching her small prop bag. Dressed in black, along with a cap and dark gloves, she figured she could blend in with the shadows. The overcast blocked out what little moon hung in the sky. A slight drizzle made the air sultry, causing her clothes to cling. It was so quiet, there hadn't even been a dog bark on the street, which had to be a good sign.

She stepped onto the property of the first house on her list, creeping to the front door where she waited to listen. Total silence. All the lights were out. Two cars sat in the driveway. Sebastian followed her to the edge of the curb, obscured by a large tree.

She readied herself. It was a two-story residence. She estimated that it held at least twelve doors or Gates. She needed to pass through the front door, stopping the cycle just like she had done at the Cyberflow plant. It would be disastrous to overshoot her destination. It wouldn't do to end up in a bedroom amongst sleeping parents or a child. She could not use the negative thoughts she'd used at the theater. With such pent up anger, she would travel through the entire neighborhood unchecked before she could stop herself. She thought of something that irritated her to a lesser degree, then walked through the door. Two brief sparks flashed before her eyes.

It was completely dark. She reached a hand out, finding the surface of a wall. She followed it until she found a light switch, then turned it on for a mere second. She'd landed in a very small half-bath. She opened the door and stepped into a downstairs foyer that was attached to a sunken living room. She crept up to a lounge chair and turned it over on its side. She piled the sofa cushions on an end table, then tiptoed into the kitchen. There, she stacked several dining room chairs onto the kitchen table. At the kitchen counter, she turned one faucet on low, then plugged the sink. Out in the living room again, she noticed the fireplace had a gas log in it. She turned the gas valve on and struck a match to it, allowing a small flame to burn.

It was impossible to exit through the front door in the conventional way without rousing alarm, so she Gate-Walked through to the other side. She trotted across the lawn to the Jeep where she joined Sebastian. After a moment, they were headed down the street, out of the neighborhood.

Sebastian had trouble keeping the excitement from his voice. "That was quick! Everything go okay?"

“Yeah. I made a little goof, but nothing earth shattering. Let’s just say they’ll wake up to a new arrangement in the morning.” They headed for the next address in the area. Sebastian drove to it, keeping an eye on his watch. They had just so many “dead” hours in the early morning to accomplish the mission.

At the next house, Avy stepped through without incident and went right to work. She scooped up the contents of a cat box to distribute into bowls. She set the bowls on the dining room table, complete with full place settings. She found a hallway where she turned all of the family pictures upside down. She upended the couch, then hooked kite string to several pieces of furniture, fashioning a web. When the job was complete, she made the magical step through the front door. A moment later, she was secure in the Jeep.

The next house presented a problem. When she appeared on the other side, almost blind in the dim light, she heard a low, throaty growl very close to where she stood. She made a quick pivot, stepping through the door again, hearing the sound of the dog hitting the front door with a frenzy of barking.

“Dog,” she said when she had taken her seat next to Sebastian.

“Have to watch that. Cats aren’t a problem. Dogs will chew you a new one.”

They continued on their route, taking one house after another. During one visit, she had popped into a darkened house only to find the husband and wife watching TV in the living room. A teenage girl, reclining back in a chair just happened to look her way. Avy made a quick exit. A high-pitched scream came from the house while she dashed for the Jeep. That young eyewitness would have a chore trying to convince her parents that she’d seen a ghost appear in their home.

As the night wore on, Avy became more creative, and began adding dye to aquariums, stacking library books, unplugging appliances, setting table lamps on end, blocking front doors with trashcans, propping refrigerator doors open, along with other mischievous pranks. She always made sure that no one would injure themselves because of her handiwork, having no desire to cause harm to any of the occupants. Her sole mission consisted of perplexing, even frightening the residents. The sole objective was to drive the security officers clean out of their minds.

She got better at stepping through single Gates, allowing herself short bursts, which landed her just on the other side of the door. She never spent more than a dozen minutes in each house. In all her entries, she never once set off an alarm.

She had a second incident with an animal at one house. A large dog had greeted her at the door, wagging its tail. She didn’t run from this one. She ended up feeding the dog two pounds of fresh ground round, three T-bone steaks, and a pound of hotdogs.

The light of dawn had just begun to give the sky a grayish hue when they parked in front of the twenty-second house on their list. A few people in the neighborhood were already leaving for work. A paperboy pedaled down the sidewalk.

She ran across the street and entered a large brownstone. She snuck into the living room, pausing to look around. It was a mess—popcorn, magazines, toys, and CDs littered the floor. She cracked a few diskettes underfoot. Something moved, then snorted nearby. She froze. A man lay on the living room sofa covered by a sheet. He was just starting to rouse. With his eyes closed, he threw his feet over the end of the sofa and rubbed his face. Avy stood five feet from him not knowing what to do. His eyes would open in a second, she was sure of it!

She stepped up to him, grabbed the sheet, and threw it over herself. She waved her arms under the sheet, then made a few ghostly warbles. “Whooo—bwahh-ha-haaa,” she said in her most sinister voice. She backed up toward the front door, careful not to trip.

The man let out a howl, summoned God, and called on the devil, all in the same breath. Avy heard the frantic barefoot slaps of somebody coming down the hall. A woman’s voice asked, “For God’s sake, what is it, Harold?”

Avy made one last dramatic flurry under the sheet and said, “Whah ha ha.” She stepped through the door, the sheet collapsing to the floor behind her. A woman’s hysterical scream came from the house while Avy ran across the street to jump into the Jeep. Sebastian hit the gas. Avy broke out in a peal of laughter, almost gagging. It took her three miles to calm down enough to explain to Sebastian what she’d done. It was another two miles before he stopped laughing.

* * * *

Everybody wanted to talk at once, but none of it made any sense. Drake sat in his office chair making frantic throat-cutting gestures to Linda, which meant he wanted her to hold all calls. Three security officers had taken up seats on his conference sofa. One stood in the corner. Three others paced the room, while five more waited out in the hallway, eager to meet with their boss to discuss “matters of extreme importance.” Nine other members of the Hollywood mafia had called in sick.

Linda hollered over the din that they now had a tenth employee begging off work.

Auggie sat in a visitor’s chair, wringing his hands, looking from one face to another. Accusations flew. Denials were thrown about. Two men were visibly frantic while the man standing in the corner looked around with vacant eyes, nervously picking at the hem of his shirt.

Drake reared up from his chair, then slammed his telephone book down hard on his desk. The loud crack stunned the men into silence.

Drake said, “That will be enough! I want one voice at a time. You, Harold. Run that by me again.”

“Honest to God’s truth, Mr. Labrador, I woke up this morning to see a full-body apparition in my living room. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Nor do I ever want to see such a thing again. My wife fainted dead away when she caught sight of the thing. I had to call nine-one-one. Like I was saying, I think I need some time off. Either that or a visit to the company psychiatrist.”

“Sit back down. Art, you’re next. What do you have to say?”

The man stood up from the couch. His eyes were red-rimmed. It looked like he had been crying. “It’s just been a damn mess, that’s all. I guess I’m coming apart at the seams or I’m doing a hell of a lot of sleepwalking. My living room looked like a house of horrors this morning. Coffee cups were hanging from strings attached to the chandelier, looking like some damn voodoo doctor’s wind chimes. I still can’t get that image out of my head. Who in their right mind shoves household slippers over bowling trophies, paints big happy faces on the walls with lipstick, and then stacks drinking glasses on the kitchen table in pyramid fashion? Do you think that was me? Hell, my wife says so! I thought it was that worthless Goth-ass mutha fukah who hangs around with my daughter. I figured he got into my joint to fuck things up on purpose. Problem is, I have more security alarms than a NASA Titan launch—nobody could have entered my house without me knowing about it. I would appreciate some answers or solutions, if I can get any.”

One of the men stopped pacing. “I don’t think it compares with my place this morning. I have some very expensive tropical fish that are now worthless. Somebody sabotaged my tank with dye. Those fish cost me two grand—all I have now is a bunch of blue retards headed for the sushi market. All of my downstairs light bulbs were in my fireplace. A mountain of cottage cheese sat on my kitchen counter with a dozen pencils stuck in it.”

“Maybe it was a practical joke,” suggested Drake.

“Doubtful. I was about to ground my kids, thinking that they were putting one over on the old man, but then I remembered that they were off for the week with their uncle. So I called the cops. They came roaring up, sirens blaring. But when they looked the place over they chalked it up to a misdemeanor vandalism. Imagine that!”

“I take it the rest of you had similar incidents?” Drake asked.

They nodded. Somebody whistled. The man standing in the corner stared at the carpet, continuing to pick at his shirt.

Drake looked at his chief of security. “What about you, Auggie? Any goblins in the night?”

Auggie cleared his throat. “Well, I had few things go down that I couldn’t explain. I have no idea how my dog opened the refrigerator and wolfed down about fifty bucks worth of meat. There was nothing but empty packaging lying all over the floor. My dog was so bloated he couldn’t stand up. Hell, other than that, I’m all green—good to go.”

Drake called the others who were waiting out in the hall into the office. They relayed the same types of incidents. A few of them were terrified. But there was one man in the room who said he had the answer to the mystery, suggesting it was tied in to the theater incident. He asked for permission to speak his mind.

Drake cleared the room, including Linda, who he ordered to go to lunch at a quarter after eight in the morning. That left him alone with one security officer and Auggie.

“Go ahead, Floyd,” said Drake. “What’s your theory?”

“I think that magic fellow is in on this,” said the security officer. “I feel it in my bones. Nothing else makes sense. We messed his place up real good the other day. I figure he hit us back last night. Now, I’m certain your daughter didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“You don’t have to protect my daughter,” said Drake. “If she was with him, it means she had an equal hand in it. To the point—this is a hell of a lot of breaking ’n entering going on. I can’t figure out how they pulled it off without tripping an alarm, slipping through a window, or picking a lock. What’s the count, twelve or thirteen employees hit?”

“About that, and those are the ones we know about,” said Auggie. “We’ve got nine that called in sick, which means it could be a lot bigger than we thought. Looks like at least twenty-two. All of them were Cyberflow security officers. The cops don’t have any similar break-ins or trespassing incidents on their blotter. This was localized, meant for us. I think what Floyd is saying makes sense. For example, the timing. We hit him—he hit us very soon afterward with no lag time.”

Drake scrunched his face. “You’re telling me one guy is responsible for all of this?”

“He’s a magician, boss. He can do all of these, what do you call them, contortionist moves? What’s to say he didn’t come down a chimney or through a basement window? Maybe he has a whole set of fancy lock picks. Maybe he knows how to neutralize every security system in existence. So bang! He gets in and out without being seen or leaving any evidence. I’m telling ya, he fits the bill. That magic man hit us!”

“I guess I underestimated him,” Drake mused. “Maybe he’s more skilled than I thought. It makes sense, though. He’s light on his feet. His talents involve manipulation, with that sleight of hand magic stuff. Considering what we did to him, he had every right to retaliate. But I didn’t think he would have the guts to follow through with it. Got to give him credit though.”

“Where is all of this leading?” asked Auggie. “How far do we go with this?”

“Okay, so he doesn’t scare off so easy. That leaves us one choice. We up the dosage.” Drake excused the security officer, which left him alone with Auggie. He took the phone off the hook, then turned off his in-house speaker.

“We need to ruin this guy, Auggie. We need to sack this punk until he’s left with nothing. That’s the first order of business. Just in case this guy has the moxie to hit us back again, we have to be ready for him. I want you to hire a professional. I would prefer that it be out of state. Just get somebody lined up who can take this guy out if need be.”

Auggie bit his lip. “Uh, what if we’re dealing with something that’s kind of out of this world? Not that I’m saying we have ghosts or goblins, but I’m beginning to wonder.”

“Then get something out of this world on our side. I don’t care where you have to go. Handle it!”

* * * *

Avy and Sebastian slept on the cot when they got home from the mission. All the theater doors had been locked with extra reinforcements against entry. When they woke up in the late afternoon, Avy busied herself by cleaning the stage props, checking the mechanisms, applying

touchup paint, and then feeding the new animals. Sebastian had made a run to the grocery store to stock up on canned goods, bullets, and bottled water. He'd made a special trip to the hardware store to buy a motion detector equipped with a screech alarm. He had the security system installed in four hours. That night, they slept fitfully, often coming fully awake at the slightest noises.

The next day they stayed indoors, rehearsing the act to live music. Training the new animals took extra time, adding to the workload. Avy welcomed the extra training sessions since they served as a distraction. Keeping busy was the only way to restore some normalcy.

Thursday blurred into Friday. They went through their first evening performance, hitting their marks with perfect timing. The second show came off without incident, but Avy couldn't keep her eyes from straining to see past the stage lights, trying to pick out faces that didn't belong—individuals who didn't have their best interests at heart. She could almost see those pasty faces leering at her—people who belonged to Cyberflow.

The weekend passed without incident. When they approached the end of the second Sunday show, Avy caught a glimpse of someone in the crowd she recognized. She almost muffed one of the last tricks, unable to keep her eyes on her work. When the audience began to clear out, Sebastian asked her what had happened, but she just pointed to the rear of the theater. A man in black sat in the very back row, but it was not hard to discern from the overhead lights that this person had long blond hair.

Sebastian hurried to lock the front doors after the last of the patrons had left. He then walked with Janus down the aisle. Avy watched them approach the stage. She blanked for a moment, having no idea what she would say to the priest. Denial was still winning the war in her head.

"I'm so very glad to see you, Janus," she said, breaking the spell. "We'd be delighted if you'd spend some time with us." There, that was diplomatic.

"I don't have long to linger, but a short visit would be nice."

No, he wouldn't have long to linger, would he? Avy dashed to the bathroom to change into some slacks and a sweater. She checked her lipstick in the mirror, but her hands shook so much she doubted if she could apply it without scribbling her face up. She primped her hair and palmed down a belligerent cowlick. "Breathe deeply," she whispered. "He's just a man." True, he was a man who could be her father, but he was still just a man. Exiting the bathroom, she stubbed her toe on the door jam. She hopped pogo-like to the cot and sat down, hissing through her teeth. Sebastian cocked an eyebrow. She grimaced, let out a huge breath. "Whaaah have you been up to, Janus? This is an unexpected pleasure."

"I was in the area, so I thought that I would stop by. Are you feeling well?"

"Toe," she said. "Just smacked the toe. I'm feeling fine. I'd like to apologize for my behavior when we last met. I've learned so much since then. I hope you don't hold hard feelings against me for my attitude." She looked at him, begging him with her eyes to understand her position. "Things are becoming more clear," she added.

“What’s important,” he began, “is that you have arrived at the crossroads and chosen the destination. There’s nothing to forgive. You reacted in a normal fashion, like anyone would have. To understand the other’s shoes you must don them sometimes—a step here, a step there. You are beginning to comprehend your own complexity.”

“I’m, I’m *walking*,” she stammered. “The only thing is, well, I’m walking through things—doors.”

“Those are your Gates. That was to be expected. Have you learned to feel them in passing?”

“I can get through several Gate openings. It seems to happen when I concentrate on an emotional state. Hatred or anger to be precise. If I stay in too long, I pick up speed. It scares me. I held on a little long once, which took me miles from here. I’ve learned to make short hops with no problems. But I sense there’s something farther on, something uncharted.” She went on to explain about the longer trip she took across town that involved the four-minute discrepancy. He listened to her every word. He waited for her to finish before he commented.

“You can liken it to a highway,” he said, “with one’s foot on the accelerator. There is a peak velocity that causes a time dilation. You were correct to be concerned about it. Walking is a skill that must be learned in gradual stages. You will have to progress at your own rate until you become proficient. I would suggest you limit the distances—remain within your current experience base. The gift, with what you know of it now, will serve the purpose to find the answers you seek.”

Avy could get that part of it. Babies had to crawl before they could walk. She had to ask, “Am I the only one besides you who has this gift? I’m feeling a little nervous about being, well, exclusive. I mean that in a creepy sort of way.”

“You’re one of many. There is a select multitude that travels the network. You’ll glimpse them when you venture deeper into the realm.”

She didn’t have a clue how to word the next question. The implications were staggering. She didn’t know if such a disclosure from him would be forthcoming, but she had to know the answer. “Is it true that these Walkers might be your children?”

His expression grew soft. “All of you carry my essence. The other half of you is quite normal, or what you would call mortal. It is the mortal part of your existence that keeps you grounded. The other half allows you another freedom. The selection process is rigid, with certain criteria that has to be met. There are just so many candidates. I made the decision to give you birth—your second breath of life.”

“What kind of a thing does that make me?”

“You are not so different than any other, although you are special, holding the privilege of an entitlement. I can assure you that you will not wake up one day covered in hair, with horns sprouting from your head.” He laughed.

She couldn’t stop herself from busting up.

Sebastian sat transfixed, listening with rapt attention like it was first time he had heard such things. It was apparent that Sebastian's preoccupation with Janus amounted to nothing less than hero worship.

Avy said, "I don't know if you're aware of it, but we've had some trouble. We know that Cyberflow is responsible for breaking into the theater and killing Sebastian's animals. To be honest, we started the feud." She dropped her gaze, not pleased with her confession.

"The War Gate has been opened," said Janus. "I would expect you to defend yourself. There will be more disharmony, more violence to come. The outcome of this trial rests with you."

"I'm afraid there are a few things I've done that I'm not very proud of," Avy confessed. "You have to understand what they did to us, first."

"We traded blows for blows," said Sebastian.

"It is a war," Janus said, like it was that simple. "Why should you be ashamed of defending yourselves? Let your conscious be your guide, but don't be afraid to confront those who would show you or others no mercy. They are the harbingers of ill will and death. Craft your designs to stop them in any way you can."

"Sebastian told me that you're limited in how much you can become involved. Something about staying out of mortal affairs. But you're willing to show us the direction we need to take. I think Drake is responsible for framing my mother. I believe he's the real killer who had it planned all along so he could inherit the company. For that, he has to pay. I also think he is planning some kind of an accident that involves a plane crash. You talked about funerals once. Are we on the right track?"

"You will learn from the inside out—that is the core—the core is the heart. I cannot tell you from the outside what you have to learn from the inside. In regard to the other, you have picked up the scent. It's time to give chase. Don't be deterred. Others who are very close are depending on you."

"How will I know if I'm doing the right thing? What if I make a mistake that gets somebody hurt?"

Janus stood and slapped the wrinkles from his slacks. "You haven't strayed. You've fulfilled all of your expectations so far. Can you feel that small triumph?"

"Yeah, I guess so. But how are you so certain? You never stay around long enough to see what happens. This might not have a good end."

"I have already seen the end."

"What do you mean you've already seen it?"

"Love and hate is the sun and the moon, the future and the past. One face looking forward—the other looking back. The bridge to each is within your grasp. A turn from either direction takes you to another place. You are the key. I promise you will learn all the paths. One day you will know it all."

Sebastian blinked. "Huh?"

“Janus gave them a curt bow. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I should be on my way. I’m afraid I’ve aged a good hour on this side.” He chuckled.

Avy jumped to her feet. “Oh, by all means! Don’t hesitate to walk through whatever you want.” She pulled a chair out of his way, thinking he might stumble over it on his way out. Then she realized what a ridiculous notion that was since no obstacle could have ever stopped him. She blushed.

Janus stroked Avy’s hair with a loving pat. “Sebastian, I wouldn’t let this one get away if I were you. You’re quite lucky to have found such a treasure.”

“Sir, I’m reminded of it every day, just like a beautiful sunrise.”

Janus turned on his heel, stepped through the workbench, and disappeared into the wall beyond. Sebastian let out a breath. Avy stared in wonder, finding it amazing that he passed from one dimension to the other with so little effort. He didn’t need doors or gates. He made them.

She hurried to the workbench, grabbed a scrap piece of cardboard and a carpenter’s pencil. She began writing.

“Whatcha doing?”

“I’m doing one better than remembering what he said. I’m writing it down this time word for word. I have the feeling he laid a clue down to something very important.”

Love and hate is the sun and the moon, the future and the past, she wrote. One face looking forward—the other looking back. The bridge to each is within your grasp. A turn from either direction takes you to another place. You are the key. I promise you will learn all the paths. One day you will know it all.

She knew she would record it again in her golden diary. She vowed that every time he started speaking in funny riddles, she would write it down, no matter how ridiculous it sounded.

“You know,” said Sebastian, looking at the workbench. “No matter how many times I’ve seen him leave like that I never get tired of it.”

“Yeah, ditto. You were right. He doesn’t like to stick around for long. He has a world wide web of his own to surf. Did you catch that bit about already seeing the outcome of things? That was spooky.” She looked at the words she had written down. “It’s all here, too. I know for sure he’s been moving through time. How would he know how things are going to turn out if he didn’t? He’s guiding me, guiding both of us. He checks in every so often to make sure I’m on the right track. That’s all part of it, too.”

“Then so far we’re doing everything right. We have until Tuesday morning to figure this out. Then we can find out what’s up with that company jet.”

“How are we going to get access to it? We need to find out who is going to be on it and where it’s going.”

Sebastian cracked his knuckles, heading for the door. “Keep it locked—stay armed,” he said over his shoulder. “I’ll be back. I might have to camp out all night to do it.”

“Where are you going?”

“Federal Aviation Administration.” He left, locking the door.

Chapter 14

Avy knew that no one could have recognized the true identities of the two people who pulled into the Raleigh-Durham Airport at five in the morning. Decked out in a navy blue skirt, matching blazer, silk blouse, and red scarf, Avy looked like she belonged on the senate floor. A grayish blond wig, cut in a pert pageboy style, framed her face that was painted with eyeliner, mascara, and rouge. The sunglasses were huge, with gold mirrored lenses. A broach fashioned in the shape of a small bi-wing airplane was pinned high on her lapel. Sebastian smiled under a thick stick-on mustache, while wearing a jet-black suit, brown loafers, and pilot's sunglasses.

Postures erect, clipboards in hand, they marched toward the airport entrance. They knew that anyone within a dozen feet away could read the FAA identification tags swinging from their pocket clips—the same FAA tags that Sebastian had lifted from the district office the day before. A simple cut and paste had replaced the original photos with their own.

But the true goldmine came in the form of the FAA pamphlets that Sebastian had brought home, which explained the procedures of the organization, and what type of power they possessed in regulating the aircraft industry. Sebastian and Avy wasted no time in studying the most important functions of the administrators and officers, sure that the information would prove helpful. From what Avy and Sebastian had gleaned, airport officials knew that FAA administrators rarely good-newsed anybody. Whenever they showed up, it meant something terrible had happened or something was headed in that direction. They had complete authority over anything that flew, including jurisdiction over the maintenance bays and hangars. Moses never had such power over his multitudes, even after parting the Red Sea. The couple expected the same reaction.

They walked into the main lobby and bellied up to the information desk. The clerk did a double-take, swallowed her first words, then pulled back in silence. Avy let Sebastian speak for them, following their exact rehearsal.

“Good morning. We'll be doing a walkthrough of your facility this morning. Just so you know, it will be a cursory safety sweep.”

“Oh, by all means,” said the clerk. “I'll call security or our manager if you'd like a personal escort.”

“An escort won't be necessary. We'd prefer to solo around the premises. We're going to check on some maintenance improprieties. We would appreciate it if you wouldn't announce our presence.” He read her nametag. “I'm sure you understand, Ms. Worthington.”

“That's your prerogative, sir. At least let me afford you the use of one of our shuttle carts. There's no sense in wearing out your shoe leather.”

Sebastian gave her a wide, knowing smile. While they waited for the transportation, he had the clerk give him a map of the airport facility, along with the precise hanger location of a certain aircraft. When the cart arrived, they jumped in and drove through the lobby until they found an exit ramp that led to the tarmac.

Several employees gave them a wide birth, stepping away from the rushing Cushman that darted between the parked aircraft. Their anonymity wouldn't last long. Surely bonafide sightings of two FAA inspectors would soon alert the entire airport. Avy hoped that they were the only FAA officials on the premises that morning. They didn't need to run into a supervisor who might be keen on who did and didn't belong to the organization.

They found a bank of hangars that housed several commuter aircraft. Sebastian slowed the cart so Avy could read the tail numbers. She squeezed his thigh when she spotted 599T. He pulled into the hangar and stopped.

Avy took note of two people, one man in overalls stood at a small podium while another stood next to a large Lear jet, applying wax to its body. They dismounted next to the man at the podium who had inserted a donut in his mouth that was the size of a small tire. She had a feeling that he was the Mr. Bad Wrench she had spoken to before. Even though his name patch said Ron, she guessed he would trip himself up very fast.

"Ah, customers already," said Ron. "How can I help you nice folks?"

Avy recognized the voice. This was her guy.

"No help needed," said Sebastian. "We're just on a little inspection tour." He cast disapproving eyes at the floor. "You know, you should watch these oil spots on the deck. It's a liability issue."

"Uh." The words clogged in the man's throat. Avy could now see Ron staring at their nametags. Mr. Bad Wrench had just blown his first impression with them. Recovery might be impossible. "I'll get right on that," said Ron. "Would you like some coffee? Perhaps some pastries? Heck, I didn't think FAA people got up at this time in the morning."

Avy scribbled something down on her clipboard, giving the food a dismissive glance. "I'm trying to watch my weight. Coffee makes me nervous. I'm on edge most of the time without it."

Ron looked distressed already. They'd been there for a mere thirty seconds. Avy looked down the length of the hangar, counting five private jets spaced ten feet apart wingtip to wingtip. Citation 599T sat second in the row on her side of the hangar.

Sebastian glanced at Ron's ledger. "Mind if I have a look at your paperwork?"

Ron stepped away from the podium with his donuts. "Be my guest."

Avy took that as her cue and walked off, stepping up to the first plane she came to. She tried to look official. She imagined that real inspectors walked around planes much like a judge would scrutinize a dog at a show—glance up, then down, reach out with a hand, pet it, back off, pull on their chin or scratch their head. She did these things while Ron leaned up against a workbench, looking on with apprehension. Sebastian began to have a quiet but serious chat with him.

Avy looked at the control surface on the wing. Having no idea of its function, she touched it—wiggled it. She did the same with the vertical tailpiece at the rear of the plane, shoving it back and forth. Satisfied, she moved on to the second plane. This was the one, the plane with the matching tail numbers.

She went through the motions of inspecting it like she had done with the other. The technician, waxing the third plane, stopped what he was doing to watch her. She kicked the nose wheel tire. “Huh, needs air,” she said.

The technician scratched his head. “That’s the way they’re supposed to ride—a little low.”

“I like them a little on the firm side,” said Avy, injecting some authority into her voice.

“I’ll bet you do,” said the technician before he went back to work on the other side of the plane.

Avy rounded the Citation to gain access to the hatch. She worked the latch to open it, finding it locked, no less than she expected. They wouldn’t open it up until they were ready to board. To make a good show of it, she walked to the third plane to check it over. She resisted the urge to touch this plane since the man waxing it might be the owner. She asked him what kind of wax he used. He shot back with, “Mothers.”

“Yes, they can be a pain,” said Avy.

The technician missed an application stroke. “I meant Mothers California Gold Wax,” said the man.

“Oh.” Avy decided right then that she would not offer up any more conversational tidbits that would trip her up. That’s why Sebastian was doing all of the talking, she reminded herself. All she had to do was look official and kill some time while her boyfriend pumped Mr. Bad Wrench for everything he had on the Citation flight.

She walked to the end of the hangar to take a slow stroll around the last plane. She could see the hint of the dawn sky outside, a ribbon of pink peeking over the spine of some hills. The air was fresh, crisp. She imagined how fun it would be to fly somewhere under such conditions. But that nagging feeling in her gut had warned her that this would not be a pleasurable or routine flight. This flight promised disaster—the scope of it had yet to be determined. She had one daring move in mind if things got out of control.

She could see Sebastian walking in her direction, having finished his conversation with Ron. When he reached her, he steered her to the back of a plane and spoke through tight lips. “We were right. The flight is six this morning. Buck Reynolds is the pilot. He’s flown for Cyberflow for the past ten years, in particular, this old Citation. I examined a copy of an airworthiness document on the plane. Everything seems to be in order, but I’m really winging this, Avy. The destination airport is Bermuda International.”

“So Buck is the pilot. That fits with the note. Anything on the passengers?”

“I pumped Ron for the info. You’re never going to believe it.”

“Try me.”

“Drake’s parents are scheduled to be onboard. An Emily Chambers is also on the passenger list.”

“Emily Chambers is my grandmother on my mother’s side. This is unbelievable. Three grandparents on the same flight to Bermuda.”

“How is that important?”

“They’re major stockholders in Cyberflow. Between the three of them, they own thirty percent of the company. They might be silent partners, but they’re entitled to those profits. If Drake was having trouble meeting those outlays, he might want to dump that debt. He would take control of that interest if the grandparents were out of the picture. I’ll bet it’s written in the will that way.”

“Do you think he’s capable of doing that to his own parents?”

“It hasn’t been proven that he’s incapable of doing it. Something is going to happen to this plane. I don’t think we can stop it from the ground. We have no evidence or legal reason to keep it from taking off.”

“Or real authority. If we raise a ruckus it could rouse the police. Then we could get arrested on several charges, least of which would be impersonating federal officials.”

“Then I’m going on that flight. They have to be caught in the act. I have to stop it.”

“Are you serious?” Sebastian’s voice carried down the hangar.

She hushed him. “I’m more than serious. We talked about the possibility of my boarding the plane.”

“I’ve changed my mind about the scenario. You’re not going on that plane alone. It’s too dangerous.”

“I’ve got to go alone. Hand me that gun.” She wasn’t about to budge.

“No problem. I’ll bring it with me.”

“Yeah, right. What’s our excuse for both of us taking the trip? Because we want to flight-check some pilot who works for some stupid little charter service? Get real! We’ll end up in Bermuda, way off our personal schedule and out of our environment.”

“At least we’ll stop anything from happening. Mission accomplished!”

She took him by the collar to emphasize her next words. “I need every bit of evidence against Drake I can get. This is the only way it’s going to work. Either you give me the gun or I go on without it.”

Sebastian passed her the thirty-eight revolver, looking fed up. “That is the wrong thing to be taking on a plane. You can’t use it.”

“I’m just going to use it for leverage if I see something going down.”

“Yeah, like the plane. I don’t like this—I hate the whole setup! What if this thing is meant to blow up a few minutes after takeoff? Remember that little bomb symbol?”

“That’s way too messy. Drake isn’t very bright. But he is not a moron. I have to be on that flight.” She knew her plan seemed harebrained because Sebastian was having a hard time grappling with it. But she had to commit to a plan of action right now. That meant damning the risk.

“You stay here, honey,” she said, her voice softening. “I’ll bring the plane back, I promise. Now give me a distraction.” She handed him her clipboard, then pushed the gun into her waistband behind her back.

He gave her a firm hug, then a passionate kiss. She could tell his heart still wasn’t in it when he walked down the length of the hangar toward Ron. Soon she heard his raised voice accompanied by the sound of a clipboard hitting the floor.

She walked to the Citation, stepping up to the hatch. After looking both ways, she clenched her teeth and stepped through to the other side.

She found herself in the plane’s cabin. The interior contained a double row of beige leather seats over brown shag carpeting. She pulled a porthole curtain back and peeked out a window. Neither Sebastian nor Ron were in the hangar. She moved down the aisle and opened a thin door on a box-like room—lavatory. It provided the only area she could hide from the passenger cabin. She looked toward the front of the plane. A curtain hung, pinned back to expose the cockpit interior. If that curtain stayed open, she would be able to monitor the pilot’s movements. She looked at her watch—it was five-thirty.

Voices came from outside. She peeked through the window. There were two men rounding the plane, dragging a large ice chest. She felt certain one of them had to be the pilot. She ducked into the lavatory, latching the door behind her. Her panic that she could be discovered if someone happened to test the door or needed to use the facility increased. It was too late for second thoughts. They would have to break the door down if they wanted to gain access.

She heard the boarding door latch click. The floor under her feet wobbled. A few voices reached her, but she couldn’t make out the words. A male voice boomed with laughter. Something scraped across the pavement, followed by a lady’s loud voice, “Pick that up, you old fart.” She seemed just a few yards away, and sounded like an older woman.

Avy hoped that the elder passengers had already used bathroom facilities and wouldn’t need to enter the one on the aircraft. Seniors were fickle like that anyway. They would take care of business beforehand so they could avoid the awkwardness of using an in-flight facility. But what if someone got airsick? She wondered about that when she sat down on the stool, preparing for a long wait before they were airborne. She tried to listen to pieces of conversation, but there was too much movement going on with the loading. If someone wanted in the lavatory, the pilot would have a passkey to open the lock. She tried not to worry about such things. This was not the time to lose it!

She heard the hatch slam. The craft wobbled again. A moment later, the engines whined to life, sending a vibration through the craft. Avy took hold of the grasp rails, planting her feet. She could feel the plane rolling out of the hangar onto the taxiway. The pilot’s voice told the passengers to buckle up. There came a jolt, then the sensation of moving again. After a number of tight turns, the craft stopped for a brief moment. Then the engines throttled forward until they

howled. Perceptible thumps vibrated under her feet. Certain they were runway seams, she held on tight for takeoff. The next sensation she had was the g-force acting upon her body. They were airborne.

She waited ten minutes before it seemed they had leveled off. Cracking the door open, she chanced a look around it. There were three elders seated on the right side of the passenger cabin. The aisle was clear. The pilot sat in the left cockpit seat, wearing headphones. A large cooler was strapped on the other seat.

"I hope you made the reservations," said Drake's father.

"We're booked at the Fairmont Southampton. I told you that twenty minutes ago. Are you going to ask me in another ten minutes?"

"I'll think of a new question, then ask you in five."

"You're impossible, you know that? Did you take your Dramamine?"

"I thought you packed it."

"I don't take it or need it. That is your responsibility."

"Please take a nap," he said in a tired voice. "By the time you wake up, we'll be there."

"I'm too excited to take a nap. I'd rather watch the scenery."

"There will be nothing out there but blue water."

"All right then, I'll take a nap."

Five minutes later, Avy heard the first snore. After fifteen minutes, all three adults were slumped in their seats, expelling heavy breaths. The pilot had a navigational chart up against his face. Was now the time to confront the pilot? The problem was, he hadn't done anything yet. She could approach him in an accusatory fashion with the claim that she had enough information to know that this flight was highly suspect. But she had nothing more than that. But if she waited for the scenario to unfold, it could allow things to snowball into disaster, thus putting all onboard at risk.

Before she had the chance to act, one of the passengers stirred, letting loose a loud sneeze. The woman unbuckled her seatbelt then struggled to push herself up from her seat.

Avy pulled the door shut. She could not latch it—that would arouse suspicion. She prepared herself. It would take precise timing to pull off the maneuver. She waited, watching the door latch for any sign of movement. When the lever turned, just when the door began to swing open, she stepped to the other side.

She now stood on the other side of the lavatory door against the bulkhead. The woman had just locked the closed door. The door handle did not move for five minutes before Avy heard the audible click. The seam opened in a torturous slow motion. At that precise moment, she stepped through to the other side and turned around. The door clicked shut. Once again, luck had been with her. So far, the Gate-Walking had been confined to the inside of the aircraft. She shuddered to think what might have happened if she had extended her travel too far. Would she have ended up outside the plane sharing airspace with the seagulls?

The sound of the jet engines began to decrease in intensity, creating a whistling sound through the cabin walls. The plane was slowing.

Avy looked around the edge of the door again. The old woman had resumed her seat. A moment later, her head lolled to the side. It seemed all of the passengers were now asleep, at least it looked that way. But a view of the cockpit showed the pilot standing. He was out of his seat, fumbling with the lid on the ice chest. She watched him, more than curious about his intentions. A glance at her watch revealed they had been airborne for twenty-five minutes.

What she saw next made her stiffen with fright.

The pilot pulled a large pack from inside the ice chest and began to unsnap buckles. He stepped through some straps, pulled a harness over his shoulders, and then cinched a waist belt. Next, he bent over the console to twist a dial. The attitude of the plane did not change. Automatic pilot? That had to be the answer. Was the pilot going to bail over the Atlantic Ocean? Was the plan to allow the craft to fly on until it surpassed its fuel limit then plunge, taking the grandparents with it?

She'd seen enough.

The pilot made a few quick adjustments on the parachute pack, then stepped from the cockpit into the aisle. Avy made quick strides down the aisle to stand in front of the exit hatch. When the pilot saw her, his face blanched white. A second later, he was all attitude.

"What in the flyin' fuck," he growled, "are you doing on this plane?"

"Step back into that cockpit and take that parachute off," she said through her teeth. She wiggled her ID tag for emphasis. "You're violating FAA regulations by contemplating leaving this aircraft in mid-flight. I know who you are, Buck. Your little plan isn't going to work like you thought."

He hesitated for a moment, looked at the hatch, then back at her. "I don't think you have what it takes to stop me."

He made a desperate lunge for her, but with the added weight of the pack, and in the confined area, she performed an easy sidestep around him. His eyes narrowed on her like a wolf's. She knew she'd pissed him off good by out-maneuvering him.

The grandparents snored on, having not heard the exchange of words or the commotion.

She reached around her and brought out the thirty-eight, pointing it at his chest. "Oh, I've got plenty to stop you with. Keep your voice down."

"Go ahead, shoot. This is a pressurized cabin. You'll blow us out of the sky. Even if you manage to stop me, who is going to fly this rig?"

"I think the bullet has just enough velocity to go through your chest and end up in that parachute pack." Then came the big lie. "I am also a licensed pilot. Bring it on." She brought the muzzle of the pistol up against his neck, shoving hard.

Buck stood there for a moment, tiny beads of sweat popping from his forehead. It was a fast moment—he had no options. She still didn't trust him.

His face sagged. He turned around to waddle toward the cockpit. She followed close behind with the gun held at the back of his head.

“Are you the stewardess?” said a voice from behind her. “Where have you been, dear?”

Avy glanced back toward the cabin, aware that one of the grandparents had awakened. Now that she could connect the voice to the face, she knew it was her grandmother, Emily Chambers. But the woman did not recognize her own granddaughter. “Yes, we’ll be serving refreshments in a few minutes,” said Avy over her shoulder while concealing the gun. “Try to relax.” Then to the pilot, “Take that pack off and get back behind the controls. Keep your mouth shut. I don’t want the passengers to panic.”

The pilot obliged, stuffing the parachute pack back into the ice chest. Avy pulled the privacy curtain closed, then shoved the ice chest to the rear of the cockpit. She stood next to the copilot’s seat waiting for him to resume control of the plane. He did not move. She could see the slightest tensing in his legs muscles, a perceptible shift in his body weight. Though he wasn’t looking straight at her, he had her in his peripheral vision. If she were not so apt at reading body language, she would have never seen it coming.

His arm swung around in an arc in what almost looked like slow motion. It just appeared that way because she was faster, anticipating the move. She swung her gun hand around in a right hook, catching him on the side of the temple. She ducked before his arm made contact with her face. He staggered once, then dropped to a knee behind the pilot’s seat. He remained there for a long time, his breaths coming with shuddering gasps.

At first, she thought she might have incapacitated him, or knocked him unconscious. She remained drawn back against the cockpit wall, poised in case he had it in him to try it again. The gash in the side of his head, along with the trickle of blood that reached his chin, appeared proof enough that he might be finished with any further resistance.

“Where in the hell did you get reflexes like that?” he slurred, reaching for the seatback to pull himself up. He regained his stance in painful increments.

“You don’t even want to know.” She shook out a hanky, then threw it at him. “You’re bleeding.”

“Thanks to you.” He dabbed the wound, looking feverish, unsteady on his feet. “Now what?”

“Turn this plane around. Get back on a course to Raleigh.” She sat down and buckled in.

He disengaged the autopilot, took the controls. “ATC is gonna want to know why I’m returning,” he said, massaging the back of his neck. His eyes closed in apparent pain for a few seconds.

“Tell them that replacement pump has a fuel leak. Don’t declare an emergency. Ask them for a priority landing.”

“How’d you know about a new pump?”

“It was part of the investigation. Do what I say.”

The plane made a gentle banking turn to the left. Avy watched the compass to make certain it registered a one hundred-eighty degree turn. The plane leveled out. They were now headed back to the coast. Avy kept silent but continued to watch the pilot's every move. He might have been sure fire cocky when he boarded the plane, but now he looked to be a nervous wreck, in need of a stiff drink. He watched her from the corner of his eye while he made the radio call. She felt a moment of triumph, knowing that her plan was working.

"This wasn't my idea," Buck said under his breath. "I was following orders."

"Yeah, your orders amounted to murdering three people. You would have never gotten away with it."

"I would have if you hadn't shown up."

"You think so? Any man who could order the death of his own parents could keep you from surfacing again. You think you were supposed to be picked up by prearrangement below? What do you want to bet that nobody showed up with that rescue craft? You were the next thing that was going to disappear, but you were too dumb to realize it. Now you can look forward to a life in prison."

Buck made a moaning sound. He spoke through tight lips. "I've got a wife and kids."

"You should have thought about that earlier. Listen up, I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll forget this ever happened, but the whole incident rests on one very big condition."

He put a palm to his head wound, grimacing. "What kind of condition are we talking about?"

"The condition that you stay in Cyberflow's employee pool and keep your local residence. You'll agree to testify against Drake Labrador when you're called upon to do so. You'll promise me that you will not involve yourself in any other activity that would bring injury or death to another person. When we land, you'll tell your passengers that this flight has been cancelled due to safety reasons. You will also tell those passengers to never use a Cyberflow aircraft again because of those reasons. Finally, you'll tell the engineer that in your opinion this craft's maintenance records should be gone over with a fine-tooth-comb until it proves airworthy. Have I left anything out?"

"I guess that about covers it for you. What if I don't agree with those terms?"

She couldn't show one ounce of weakness with this thug. She had to keep up the act—dig deep for the Betty Davis attitude. "Then I'll testify against you for attempted murder. It'll be my word against yours." She wiggled her ID clip again. "Who do you think they'll believe? A flyboy, or a federal officer with a spotless record?"

She could almost see the thoughts in his head bitch slapping each other. His hands tightened on the control yoke, his forearm muscles bunched up in knots. She gave her seatbelt an extra pull, cinching it tighter.

This time her voice lowered with a dangerous tone. She cocked the hammer on the revolver. "I swear to God I'll put a bullet through your head if you even blink wrong. Whatever you're thinking about doing with this plane, don't try it. We're all going to get down in one piece. So, do the right thing."

His chest deflated. He looked whipped, resigned to her demands. "Then I guess I'll have to agree to those terms. I'll make myself available when the time comes. Just don't turn me over to the authorities. I'll do what you say."

"Then you have nothing to worry about from me." Avy looked out the windscreen, the coastline loomed like a big brown welcome mat.

They got priority clearance, landed, and taxied back to the hangar. When Avy walked down the aisle to leave, Emily Chambers demanded to know why they hadn't been served the pastries, and why this airport looked so much like the one they had left. Still, not a hint of recognition in her eyes for her granddaughter.

"We've had some in-flight difficulties," said Avy. "Your pilot will brief you about the problems." It was hard to keep the resentment down when looking at her grandmother face-to-face. The grandmother who had abandoned her own daughter, then refused to adopt her child. Good riddance.

Avy disembarked amongst curses of dismay coming from the grandparents, who were now awake. She pressed through a small group of technicians who had been alerted to the cancellation of the flight. One of the technicians asked her to explain what happened. She ignored him, hurrying her pace. Sebastian met her at the Cushman cart. They jumped in the cart and sped off. Sebastian pulled the cart out of the hangar and drove back through the airport. They arrived at the information desk where the clerk tried to engage them in conversation about an administrator needing to talk to them, but they left the premises without explanation.

They were well on the road when Avy told of the incident onboard the plane. She explained the conditions she had arranged with the pilot. After a moment, Sebastian spoke his mind.

"Jesus. You got lucky, Avy." He blew a nervous sigh. "Drake is the author of misery, that's for sure. He's got to bump off his own relatives to get his company back in solvency. If that isn't bad enough, he's the one who murdered his brother, then set your mother up to take the fall. There's nothing he wouldn't do to either of us if he finds out how deep we are into his well of secrecy. If this pilot tips him off instead of keeping his mouth shut, it's sure to go bad on us. I don't think we're safe in this city anymore. I'm not talking about me, either. We need to get you out of here."

"I'm not leaving. I don't care if he has an army behind him. We can always get Chubby. He's not such a bad sort. He's had a lot of experience around rough types."

"They're going to come looking for us. We're not invisible. You're the exception to that rule, but even that's temporary."

He gave her a comforting thigh pat. She knew he wasn't thinking of himself. They were trying to stop one man's insane need to devastate the lives of others. Drake was a person who had no compunction about killing anyone who got in his way or hampered his business plans. He had an entire corporation behind him. He also had the support of the community leaders, since he employed hundreds of local residents. Even though the lines of battle had been drawn against Drake, it seemed they would have to go through an empire to get at him.

It wasn't long ago that Avy had nothing to worry about other than keeping her grades up, practicing her acting talent in front of a full-length mirror, or helping her mother around the house. She was not normal, she thought, the perversity of it tormenting her. She was a teenage girl who had gone through an emotional and physical change—a complete overhaul of life. She never asked for it. In fact, she resented it. She was on someone else's path with no way to stop it. If she couldn't understand herself now, would she hate herself even more after becoming some kind of perverse monster? The inner voice screamed at her, nagging, harassing. She wanted to scream at it to shut up.

Sebastian turned the wheel to pull into the back theater lot. He glanced at her. "You don't look so good. You okay?"

Her previous thoughts had nothing to do with what ailed her now. She gaped in astonishment, pointing a finger at the building façade when they pulled up to it and parked. Sebastian got out, his face taut, full of horror.

The back wall of the theater had been splattered with paint from the ground up. Obscene words, gang logos, and graffiti marred its surface. The gruesome artwork ran in a swath along the beige cinderblock wall, seeming to disappear around the corner.

When they walked up closer to inspect it, Avy could smell the paint fumes lingering heavy in the air. Transfixed, they walked down one of the alleys to find that the side wall had not escaped the macabre renderings. But it was the window glass and admission booth on front of the building facing the street that held the most shock for them. It had been a wild, swift attack. The artists had been more graphic on the theater front, painting outlines of copulating couples, oversized genitals, mixed with other unsavory depictions. It was the worst case of artistic thuggery Avy had ever seen attached to a place of business. The word "ungodly" came to mind while she gazed upon it. Evidence of the vandals came in the form of dozens of paint smudged footprints that led off down the sidewalk. The second thing that assaulted Avy was Sebastian's reaction to the scene.

He looked ready to hurl.

Chapter 15

They spent Wednesday renting the professional spray unit, buying supplies, mixing paint, and masking off the building. Sebastian had received a quote from a contractor who wanted no less than fourteen thousand dollars to paint the old theater. That was the lowest estimate. Sebastian decided to save the expense by doing it himself. They took paint chips to the hardware store to have the original color matched. They bought a twelve-foot aluminum ladder—it was just high enough to paint the damaged areas from the ground up. The hardest task was the time spent on the front of the theater, masking the trim, then shaving the paint from the display windows with razor scrapers. Turpentine had to be used to remove the prints from the sidewalk.

A few police officers had stopped by to ask about the damage. Sebastian downplayed the incident, attributing it to typical juvenile behavior. Avy knew they had no real proof that Drake was behind the vandalism, and felt sure he would deny any involvement.

They painted the building on Thursday. Avy trailed behind Sebastian, mixing the paint, handling the hose, and positioning the trough bucket every time they had to paint another section. It was an arduous task. Avy had to change out her mask a dozen times when it became clogged by the persistent mist of paint that seemed to get into every pore of her body. They hadn't shared more than a few sentences during the work detail. There had been nothing to say—no salve to the open wounds, just a determined resolve to clean up the mess, to restore the theater back to its original glory.

After strapping the commercial sprayer into the back of Avy's Samurai, they took a sit-down break on the pavement, pulling the masks from their faces. Avy looked at her hands, knowing that it would take a quart of turpentine to remove the dried paint from them.

"You know damn well they hired some street kids to do this," said Sebastian.

"It's not a new low for Drake," Avy said under her breath. "Hit men, hired assassins, gangsters, it all fits into his personality. All he had to do was offer a hundred dollars between a half dozen kids to get the job done. The end result was thousands of dollars in damage. He wanted to ruin the act by stopping our income. I doubt that anyone would have come to the performance in a building that looked like this one. They hit us right in the pocketbook again."

"Not just that, but they took the time to organize it after we interrupted their plans with that flight. It sure is peculiar how they knew we were not on the property again."

"They've been following us—a fulltime tail, watching our every move."

"I don't think they had one following us to the airport. I did some fancy driving. If we had a tail, I shook it. Otherwise they might have known what we were up to and stopped us there."

"I didn't say they were perfect or the brightest bulbs on the string. We have to be ready for more of the same. We can't leave the theater unless we have someone to babysit for us. I have a good idea who could do it, at least part time. I wouldn't put it past them to try it again."

"I agree. Get that Chubby fellow. I have some of my own ideas on how to set up some traps around here. For now, I'd better get this equipment back. You can come with me if you want."

"I'll lock myself in. I have a call to make."

Avy watched him drive off. She entered the theater, then went to the bathroom to clean up. After showering, she got on the phone and called her friend. She had a long chat with Chubby, telling him about the recent vandalism. He listened with rapt attention, asking numerous questions. At the end of the conversation, he promised that he would be right over.

Chubby arrived thirty minutes later, wearing an oversized Alpine pack. He had a sleeping bag tucked under his arm. His first impressions of the theater backroom came after stepping through the door.

"Gosh o' mighty. What a magical place! I'll bet you never get tired of looking at things. Oh, I knew this was urgent so I cashed in on three weeks' vacation. I've never used my off-time, so I figured this was a perfect opportunity. I hope you don't mind—I had to bring Gretchen. She throws a hissy fit if she doesn't get to ride along. Well, half a hissy fit, she's pretty old. She's taking a wee wee outside right now."

There was that look again—the whole universe could have collapsed back in on itself but it wouldn't have mattered to Chubby. He stared at her with a mixture of wonder and shy endearment.

The small dog appeared at the door. It made arthritic steps across the floor. Gretchen looked up at her, wagging her tail in a crooked circle. Avy said, "I remember her. She's more than welcome. She can have the run of the theater. We have a few bunnies on the bound around here from time to time, so she'll be in good company."

"How neat," he said. "I wonder if I could look around. This place brings back memories. My mom used to bring me here to watch old Vincent Price movies. It was fifty cents for a double feature back then. I've never been in the backroom before."

"Knock yourself out."

Chubby walked the length of the room, stopping every so often to eye some piece of machinery or prop. He disappeared around the corner into the wing. A moment later, she could hear exclamations of wonder—lots of "oohs." He'd found the large stage props. She made some coffee while waiting for him to return, which he did minus his pack. She thought that odd, until he cleared up the mystery a moment later.

"I found the perfect bed," he said, looking like a small boy in wonderland. "It's a little narrow but it will do just fine."

"Where would that be?"

"The guillotine pad."

Avy cocked her head in surprise, and then offered him a chair. They began to chat. He told her that his parents had both passed on, revealing that he had been especially close to them. He said he'd felt lost when they both suffered strokes three years apart. He touched upon his interest in law enforcement, explaining how he never seemed to be able to pass the government or state police exams, but did well enough to qualify for the correctional facility.

Chubby had been "big boned" during his childhood, suffering the barbs of jokes and rejection, in particular when it came to the opposite sex. His teachers were endeared to him because he never disrupted class, shirked his studies, or played hooky. He had never heard the call of the sport's machine, being neither inclined to join in the physical contact sports nor desirous of bonding with the hardcore jocks. What he had known of life had been restricted to solitary pursuits, sometimes escaping into his own world through comic books, then later novels. But when he spoke of his contact with the inmates he'd met over the years, he expressed joy in having played a part in their rehabilitation. When he spoke of Avalon Labrador, his eyes brightened and his face took on a glow. Of course, Avy had heard much of this before.

"I always knew that Avalon was innocent," he said. "You can tell about those things when you are around so many different people. It's easy to spot the grifter folk, the liars, those who don't respect personal rights. You can tell who is guilty or who might be an accessory. It's in the eyes, you know—they are the window to the soul. Innocent eyes are unafraid, filled with an inner peace. Guilty eyes are like..." He pointed to a manikin overhead. "Like that. Dead—uncaring. They always shift like they are running away from you. Now, Avalon, her eyes were always full of questions and easy to read. She had the most calm composure, which was part of her nature, too."

"She seemed like a sweet, unselfish person," said Avy.

"Oh, yeah. She always seemed to have enough even when she had nothing. In prison, you apply for all the privileges you can get your hands on because that is your world. If it doesn't come your way, you take it away from somebody else. It's a shark pool. But Avalon? She never wanted to put anybody out or asked for anything. Like she wanted to make my job easier! Imagine that. She draws the short straw, but she ends up concerned about what I need. Not for just the first couple of years, either. For fourteen years, she never changed, never lost her dignity. She never put another person through anything like she had to suffer. I think they call that grace under fire. I'm not sure. But she had loads of it."

"I didn't even know her," Avy said. "From the little I've learned, I believe she lived a righteous life. I'm convinced that Drake set her up to take the fall for her husband's death. I know what you're saying about her integrity, too. She wrote a note to me that was like a last dying creed. She seemed to take the blame for everything that happened, like it was fate. I could tell the strength had left her because she had given up. It's heartbreaking when somebody apologizes for something they didn't do."

“That was Avalon,” Chubby said putting his hand over his heart. “As God is my witness, I don’t often come across people who are innocent. Your mother’s case just never felt right from the beginning, all the way up until the end. We talked about possible suspects all the time. Drake’s name did come up. She said he wasn’t the type to commit such a crime. She said he lacked conviction in whatever he did—that he was the gutless type.”

“How did you feel about that?” Everything he told her confirmed what she had suspected all along. He was much brighter than she expected.

“I disagreed. He had motive with opportunity, from what I knew of the evidence. I’m not saying that I was a better judge of character than your mom was at the time, just that I think she was too forgiving where he was concerned. After all, he inherited the business. The one good thing he did was adopt you, but even that left me with some bad vibes. I’m just so glad you turned out the way you did.”

Avy smiled. “Let’s just say that I have more than enough truth on my side to know that Drake Labrador is guilty of homicide. If I knew of a way to plant the evidence back into his hands, I would do it right now. He’s never liked me. He couldn’t get me out of his home fast enough. I think he is suspicious of what I know about him right now. He’s trying break my spirit.”

“Yeah, you told me about the graffiti attack. We know he has a security force that was in on it. I just don’t understand why you don’t turn the case over to law enforcement.”

“Because I have no case—no real evidence. Not yet, at any rate. I have to get out there and find it. I have to rediscover it—it’s there—just buried somewhere. He’s trying to throw me off the scent. He’s using his security for the muscle.”

“Are all these security men armed?”

“Yes, I think they call themselves the Hollywood Mafia.” She described the general appearance of Drake’s security personnel, emphasizing that they stuck out in a crowd.

“Well I’m packing, too,” said Chubby with a stern look. “It’s a hog leg and I can punch a two-inch group in paper at twenty-five yards. They best not pull a weapon on the likes of us.”

Chubby did not possess great stature, but he seemed a pillar of strength and determination. She had a feeling his gentle “behavior switch” could toggle in the opposite direction, birthing an aroused monster. He might have been polite, even kindhearted, but there did beat within the breast of this man a savage drum that could pound with the best of them. Chubby was no coward. Somehow, she had known that all along. She felt she knew this man, almost like she had known him for a lifetime. More to the point, the mother within her called out from a deep secluded place inside, confirming that Chubby was a true ally of her heart—a defender of her soul. If those premonitions were not enough, how could she mistrust a person who loved a small ratty mop of a dog that had brittle sticks for bones and a face that would make a child cry? No contest.

She offered her hand for a shake—her seal of approval. “We’re partners then. We’ll stand against this together.”

“You damn betcha we will!”

She owed him more than a partner agreement. She owed him a deeper secret, an explanation of how she knew of Drake's guilt. Her mother had been on the receiving end of a Janus visit. Chubby had never told her that he had seen Janus, just that he'd heard of the mysterious visitor from her mother's lips. Though he seemed receptive to the strange visions, she wondered how he would react to the wondrous skills Avy possessed. In particular, her Gate-Walking magic. How would he react if he saw her use it? Would it push him over the edge of believability? It wasn't every day that one could disappear through a solid object. She remembered her own first impressions watching Janus vanish into thin air. A normal mind could not grapple with such things. She knew that a time would come when she would have to explain everything.

The backdoor latch rattled. Chubby flew to his feet, grabbing a fold-up chair to brandish over his head. Avy calmed him, explaining that Sebastian had arrived back from his trip. Chubby relaxed, then assisted Sebastian through the door, hefting some large packages.

Sebastian upended the containers on the cot, spilling out numerous hardware items. "I think I bought out the surplus store," he said. "I've got some laser rifle sights, motion detectors, security cameras, intruder alarms, extra deadbolts, and other cool stuff. They'll think twice about breaking in here again." Sebastian extended his hand. "Nice to see you again, Chubby. Welcome to our little abode."

"Nice to be here. Avy gave me a rundown on your troubles. I had some time off, so I thought I could help. What's first on the list?"

"For a starter, we can set up this gear. I have hand tools on the bench."

"No time like the present."

Good, thought Avy. The men were going to twist wrenches together. That would give them a chance to bond. It would also give her an opportunity to slip away for an indulgence. She went to the workbench and picked up a piece of cardboard.

"Wanna help, Avy?" asked Sebastian.

"I'll pass. I need to practice on my act for the next performance."

Sebastian's eyes fell on the piece of cardboard at her side. He nodded, then went to work opening the packages.

She walked through the wing into the main theater and down an aisle to sit in a back row seat next to an exit door. The house lighting afforded her the illumination to study the words on the panel of cardboard. She read the words aloud, pausing, digesting the implied meaning of how the words related to each other.

Love and hate is the sun and the moon, the future and the past. One face looking forward—the other looking back. The bridge to each is within your grasp. A turn from either direction takes you to another place. You are the key. I promise you will learn all the paths. One day you will know it all.

She could see the parallel in the love-sun, hate-moon reference. It implied a positive-negative connotation, or a yin-yang. The future and past, she thought, must indicate the one face looking forward into the future, and the one looking back, which signified the past. She went back to the love-hate. She knew she had to use hate as the driving passion that moved her forward through the portals. She did not understand how love might have anything to do with traveling through the Gates. Love was the opposite of hate—the other side—the reverse direction. It was the other face, too. Therefore, hate and the moon were tied to the future. Wait. That made sense now. To travel forward through the Gates she used the intense emotion of hatred, so moving forward was traveling into the future! That's how she had lost time with the longer trip. She had accelerated into the future, but just a tiny bit. She reasoned that love was the opposite direction—back in time. How did she travel backward? She had to summon the most positive emotion of all—love.

She looked at the writing again. “The bridge to each is within your grasp” meant she was capable of both directions. That went without saying. “A turn from either direction takes you to another place” had to mean that it was an alternate route. But from what? The starting point?

She stepped into the aisle. She thought of a mock scenario, taking a step forward like she was going through a door, pretending that she was now traveling forward in the hate mode. Then she pivoted around one hundred-eighty degrees to face the opposite direction, thinking thoughts of love. This was sending her back in time, hurtling through the Gates. Okay, that simulation seemed to make sense. There were two major paths. The intensity of her thoughts coupled with the duration she stayed on one side was the throttle. One direction was one hundred-eighty degrees to the other. Her body posture was the compass needle. Turning toward either side would keep her on the same path, but traveling through side Gates. It was possible to steer herself. That made sense because she had never moved from a forward standing position while testing the Gates before. She had been too terrified. Was it that simple?

She sat down, trying to put it all together. How could she travel to where she had to go and know when she had arrived? How did Janus do it? She reasoned it had to be in his head—ingrained in him. Who would know better than the master of the transportation system? That did not solve the problem of how the Gate-Walkers manipulated direction, distance, or time. What would an amateur need to guide them?

Then she had it.

The sphere of travel was three hundred-sixty degrees. A small compass would work. An electromagnetic disturbance would render a compass useless though. Would an ordinary wristwatch work to move through time? Sure, why not? If so many minutes on her watch represented months or years, she could calculate her landing zone by experimenting. Moving full throttle forward, stopping to exit, and then ticking off the exact time it took her to get there in conjunction with discovering the date would be the benchmark, provided that her speed was constant. But that was up to her, wasn't it?

Besides positioning herself and walking off the distance, to travel in all directions and times, she would have to change her emotions from one extreme to another with the skill of a Tibetan monk. Was it even possible to master such emotions? Normal humans didn't possess such powers, let alone the ability to control them. Yet when she read the last three sentences it occurred to her that she might be wrong.

You are the key. I promise you will learn all the paths. One day you will know it all.

She held the key. The key gave her the privilege. Learning all the paths meant she had to practice. One day she would know all of it. She needed to earn that driver's license first though. She shivered at the thought of such trips. How many Gate Masters were out there on the super highway? She likened herself to someone traveling around the circuit in a model T Ford, while all the NASCAR drivers zoomed past her. Her luck would be to run off the road and crash into a ditch.

She walked to the back of the theater to find the men busy installing an alarm system on the backdoor. Gretchen wagged her tail, tried to bark, but gagged. Avy gave the small dog a loving pat, then motioned for Sebastian to join her.

"I need a small compass," she whispered. He went to a chest under the workbench. He dug through it, bringing out a small wrist compass that had a Velcro strap. "It's a Boy Scout model," he said. "Shock and water resistant. Are you planning to—"

"Yes," she interrupted, strapping it on. She kissed him. "Don't worry about me. I'll be back for dinner."

"Oh, great."

Avy walked back into the theater to stand before an exit door. She readied her finger over the stopwatch button, while holding the compass up, noting the direction and degrees relative to her body position. "I'm facing north-northwest," she whispered. "I'll return back by traveling south-southeast." She pulled up her thoughts of Drake Labrador, feeling the heat race across her face. When the inner surge peaked, she stepped through. Like before, the fluttering sound came, replaced by a heavy buzz. While the seconds ticked past, the sound transformed into a high whine. The air crackled around her, flitting specks of light began to run out into a river of colors. The river stretched like strands of taffy. Avy took mental note that the rainbow river was terminal velocity. At least it was her terminal velocity. She concentrated on holding the emotion of hate, trying to keep it consistent. The smallest fluctuation between the forward and reverse trip might be enough to knock her off course. She had to travel with the exact intensity both ways—a delicate balance.

After what seemed like several minutes passing, she commanded her mind to relax, wiping it clean of all negative thoughts. The cycle wound down. The fluttering came. She took a deep breath. Her world came to sudden stop with an audible snap.

She appeared in what looked like a parking lot in the dead of night. She hit her stopwatch button then read the tally. Just over four minutes had elapsed. She made a mental note of the time. "My return is south-southeast." She noted that her head did not spin as badly with this trip. Maybe it did get easier.

She found herself standing near a warehouse door. She could make out a field of thin broken trees nestled near a fringe of grass on the other side of a parking lot. Her intuition said this looked like some place on the edge of the city. It could have even been in the suburbs. A distant smear of hazy light showed evidence of some type of commercial or industrial area. Her curiosity piqued, she headed in that direction. She followed a street to a T intersection. She made a right, following the street for about a mile. She found a small shopping mall comprised of a grocery, a mail stop, liquor store, and a chicken franchise. The shops held no interest to her. But the small newspaper rack did. She put her face up against the yellowed Plexiglas, looking at the front-page edition of a business journal. It was the right city, she mused. She gulped hard after reading the date.

Ten months had flown by!

In spite of the accomplishment, she felt like an alien Pandora's Box had been opened. A strange panic gripped her with the knowledge that her boyfriend had been left behind. If she continued to remain in this new time jump, he would suffer from the loss of her. She also knew that something could go wrong on the return trip, causing her to get lost in the time flux.

Avy made a circuit of the small shopping center, taking bearings on the positions of the doors. She found one that pointed SSE, being off about five degrees off her return heading. She would adjust for the five degrees by altering her body position with a slight increment.

She prepped herself, but this time conjured up thoughts of love. It was easy—she thought of Sebastian then stepped through. Trying to maintain the same intensity of the opposite emotion demanded all of her concentration. She occasionally glanced at her watch, holding it close under her chin. She ignored the distractions, allowing just pleasant thoughts to consume her. When the time was right, she pulled on the emotional breaks and exited.

She ended up in a small executive office. She looked around to survey her surroundings. Judging from the literature on one of the desks, she knew she'd landed in a tax office. It had a large front window that opened onto the street. She recognized the street immediately. She Walked through the front door onto Hillsborough. She looked both ways, the Stadium Theater sat just eight doors down. Relieved, she hurried to the theater and rapped on the rear door. A motion detector tripped overhead, spilling a funnel of light onto her. A screech alarm pierced her ears. Sebastian answered the door a moment later after shutting off the alarms. He pulled her inside.

"What happened?" he asked. "You've been gone for hours!"

That meant her timing had been off. She looked around to see if they were alone.

"It's okay, Chubby went to bed an hour ago," he said. "Don't ever do that again." He gave her a fierce hug, then took some simmering stew off a hot plate. He served it to her after she sat down. She started in on the meal, trying to explain what happened between mouthfuls.

"I ended up somewhere in the north suburbs, near a warehouse. At first, I didn't know where I was. Then I found a small shopping center, which told me just how far I had gone. But then I checked the date on a newspaper." She lowered her voice. "I jumped ten months. Forward."

"Oh my God."

“Love brought me back—it changes the direction.”

“Wow. You boomeranged. You found the formula!”

“Shush! Just part of it. I think I traveled a default distance, almost the same distance when I went to the Crabtree Mall. The distance stops after you hit a peak speed. Then time starts ticking super fast.” She explained the rest of the theory to him, at least the parts she understood. Just reliving the experience left her breathless, with the anxiety showing in her voice. She gave him a desperate hug. “I swear I’ll never try that again. Losing you is a very bad option.”

“You relax now, finish eating,” he said, smoothing her hair. “It’s starting to upset you. We can talk about it later.” He brightened. “Chubby and I got a lot done. We rigged the theater up tighter than Fort Knox. They’ll have to come through the wall with a tank to get at us without tripping an alarm.” He gave her a tender kiss. “After you’re done you can sleep. ’Kay?”

“I’m too keyed up to sleep. I still have the address list of those security people, which has got me thinking about some new moves. We still need to trade blows with them for what they did to us. Are you up to it?”

“You’re kidding.”

She was not kidding. After securing the doors and setting the alarms, they snuck out of the theater.

This time it went off without a hitch. Avy knew which households had pets and avoided them. She had memorized most of the home layouts, keeping her travel time to a minimum. They arrived back home just before dawn, tired but fulfilled. They snuggled, wrapped in each other’s arms on the tiny cot. They surrendered to a deep sleep that night. Every so often, they heard the lethargic bark of Gretchen.

* * * *

Drake Labrador would not suffer through another hectic round of wild accusations having to do with ghost hauntings. He’d already been over it once. He told Auggie to solicit written reports from the nine security personnel who had reported for work with the same type of complaints they’d experienced before. The rest had called in sick, offering various excuses, which he suspected were lies.

When Drake read the reports, he seethed. The incidents had escalated into more frightening displays. Ketchup had been used to write foul messages on floors, pools and saunas had been soaped, doors and windows were left wide open, bathroom mirrors were smeared with deodorant sticks, while lipstick devil faces smiled from refrigerator doors. There were no reports of injuries. But there were many incidents of distraught children and terrified wives who had awoken to the carnival of horrors and screamed bloody murder.

He dropped the reports in the trashcan and blew a gale force sigh. He glanced at Auggie, but trained his eyes on Linda Wu.

She snapped a marble-sized gum bubble between her teeth. "I know, I know. Go to lunch. Even though it's a quarter to ten in the morning, I am headed for lunch." She picked up her purse. "Don't mind me. It's just my birthday. But what does that matter?" She stomped to the door, jerked it open.

Drake raised a finger. "Happy—"

The door slammed with a hard crack.

"Birthday—go fuck yourself." Drake stabbed a finger at a chair. "Sit."

Auggie sat.

"Look, boss, I can't figure it out either. This guy should have crawled up his own asshole after the mess we left at his place. Those kids we hired did a righteous job. It had to be a hell of a kick in the teeth for anybody to come home to that. Just out of curiosity, I drove by the theater. He's already repainted. The building looks better now than it ever did. What's left? Hit him again?"

"That's a given. We fucked him over—he fucked us over right back." Something else irked him, for which he needed an answer. "Don't you think it's a little strange that we had trouble getting a certain plane to a certain destination?"

"Yeah, I've been wondering about that, too. I think that magic geek had something to do with it. Buck swears that he had an in-flight emergency before he was ready to set things in motion. I leaned on him heavy. Either he's telling the truth, or he's hiding something."

"He's not telling the truth. You know how I know this, Auggie? My parents called me. They bitched me out about the cancellation. Besides ripping into me for having flown them in a piece of junk, Emily Chambers told me that she was upset with the in-flight service."

"What in-flight service?"

"There was a stewardess in uniform on that plane. Emily Chambers swore to it. Now when have we ever had a stewardess on one of my private jets?"

"Never. Well, Linda's been on a few flights because you like her to service the—"

"Forget about that. I need to know the identity of this female. She had an ID tag, but my parents didn't catch the name."

"Maybe she was one of Buck's toys."

"One parachute, Auggie? He brings some slut onboard for a little action just to lose her over the Atlantic? Why would he try to complicate matters?"

After an uncomfortable silence, a few synapses seemed to weld a thought together in Auggie's mind. "Damn, we had an intruder!"

"To think I pay you for this. I have a good idea who was masquerading as a flight attendant on my plane. My list of suspects is pretty damn narrow, and all I would have to do is show my parents a picture of Avy and ask if she was the person onboard the plane. I want you to extend a personal invitation to my daughter to meet with me in private. Tell her that I harbor no animosity—that I am willing to resolve our differences. I don't need Mr. Magic to accompany her. This matter is between the two of us."

“I can make the arrangements.” Auggie leaned forward in his chair. “I’m having trouble grasping your daughter’s participation in these attacks. Why would she bring all of this down on her father?”

“She has some type of vendetta against me. She’s pissed off about being kicked out of the house. So now she shows her displeasure with a teenage fit of angst.” He knew better than that. He had a feeling her persistence in probing his activities reached far deeper into a hidden corner of his life. In particular, his past. No other explanation made any sense. Except one. It had nothing to do with the vengeance of an angry teenager being kicked out of a house. It smelled of an investigation that he wanted no part in reliving—something that dredged up sinister betrayals.

Drake leaned back in his chair. “How are you coming along with our special guest? Have you located anyone yet?”

“Two of my men have someone lined up from New York. He’s a specialist of sorts. We had to use some weird channels to find him. Last I heard, they were arranging for his transportation.”

“Why can’t he provide his own?”

“Well, he doesn’t have any. I couldn’t tell you how he gets around because we don’t know that much about him yet. I just know he’s never been in one place long enough to be collared. From what I understand, he’s some kind of gypsy assassin. He works cheap.”

“I told you I don’t need some two-bit thug who is going to step over his own balls. No amateurs.”

“He’s no amateur, boss. He made a major impression on our boys. We’ll know more about him when he gets here.”

“What’s his name?”

“He doesn’t have a name. The boys said he goes by a handle, which is how they found him. They call him Wax Man.”

Wax Man sounded like something out of a museum, Drake thought annoyed.

Chapter 16

Since Avy had checked out of her motel to move in with Sebastian, she'd noticed that his mini-fridge was incapable of holding more than three or four day's supplies. Unless they purchased something larger, the trips to the store would remain frequent, hampering a low profile. Avy wanted to add a real bed to the shopping list. She'd convinced Sebastian to take a trip to the purchase both items. They piled into her Jeep and headed out. Their first stop would be a small appliance store that Sebastian had picked because it was "off the beaten path." He glanced in the rearview mirror, mumbling to himself, prompting her to ask him if he thought they were being followed.

"I don't know. I keep seeing a black Cadillac, a white van, and a gold Supra too many times to be a coincidence. I hope it's not my paranoia working overtime."

She understood his feelings of paranoia. Sebastian had a remarkable sixth sense for reading a situation that was off center. If Drake's men were playing tag with them, Sebastian would be the first to know.

When they pulled around to the rear loading dock of the store to park, it became obvious that neither of them had seen the tails. With a screech of tires, two white vans hemmed them in on either side. Eight men, dressed in dark suits, rushed from the vehicles. None of them wore ties, but all of them had on gaudy sunglasses with silver-mirrored lenses. The couple had no time to jump out of the vehicle. They were surrounded.

A swarthy overweight man stepped close to Avy's door, giving her an insincere smile. Sebastian rose halfway out of his seat, poised for trouble.

"Miss Labrador, I'm Augustus Hollywood, your father's chief of security. My employer has asked me to arrange a meeting with you for the purpose of hashing over some differences."

Avy watched a few men unbutton their jackets, exposing shoulder holsters. They were not in a high traffic area. A lone store employee sat on the loading dock, smoking a cigarette. Things could go sideways very fast with only one witness in attendance, yet just one could be easily dealt with.

"You guys have a lot of nerve," Sebastian huffed. "She's not going anywhere with a bunch of thugs. Back off so we can go about our business."

Auggie glared at Sebastian and jabbed a finger in his direction. "This is none of your affair, magic man! We've already sworn out affidavits for your arrest for trespassing and vandalism."

"That's a laugh," said Avy, smelling garlic on Auggie's breath. "Did you forget about your own trespassing? Or your terrorism? You're on Animal Control's most wanted list for what you did. That was a felony! Care to start again?"

Auggie stepped back, fixing black little eyes on them. "That's why we're having this meeting. I'm sure Mr. Labrador wants to put an end to this."

"You could put an end to this by leaving us alone," said Sebastian.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” said Auggie. “The offer stands with the young lady. We’ll provide her safe escort. When the meeting is over we’ll furnish a ride back to her location of choice.”

Avy had no idea why Drake would want to meet with her. Unless he wanted to find out what she was planning or what she knew. It had to be a sign of desperation to want to see her face to face. Which meant guilt, fright, or both. She admitted to a burning desire to know how close to the truth she had come. Maybe he would confess—slip up in some way, or indicate his guilt by offering some type of deal. Did this man even have a conscience? Or was this a trick? She would have to find out. Otherwise, it would nag at her forever.

“If I go, Sebastian goes,” she said.

“You’re not serious about this,” said Sebastian. “They wouldn’t think twice about pumping slugs into you, then burying you in a shallow grave out in the hills.”

“You have our word,” said Auggie. “She leaves in the same condition she arrives. We’ll allow him to wait outside the property line to pick you up, if that suits you.”

Avy spoke soft words to Sebastian. It took her five minutes to convince him that she had to go. He relented, but not without strained reservations. He had one plea for her.

“Okay, I’ll be there to pick you up. If things don’t go right promise me that you’ll take one of those therapeutic walks.” He added a last parting shot for the security men. “You bend one hair on her head, so help me, I’ll hunt down every one of you so I can do to you what you did to my animals!”

She promised Sebastian that she would be all right, then gave him a firm hug.

Auggie extended his hand, helping her out of the Jeep. They led her to one of the white vans, where she entered through the loading door. The driver backed out of the lot, then onto the street a moment later. She sat stoic in the vehicle, watching the four security guards study her. They whispered to each other, a few pointed. Some of them might have been on the receiving end of her night raids. She had to cover her mouth to hide the smile that threatened to crack through. She was tempted to blurt out a “Boo!”

They arrived at Cyberflow fifteen minutes later. They took her through a back entrance door that led down a long hallway. The corridors were vacant on the way up to his office. She had the feeling that Drake would not want any attention from curious employees during this meeting. It would be a closed room session.

A few moments later, she found herself standing alone across from Drake Labrador’s desk. He offered her a seat. She refused, preferring to remain standing. A coffee thermos and a box of fresh donuts sat on the end of his desk—obvious gratuities. She wouldn’t be here long, so why try to make her comfortable?

“You seem pensive, Avy,” Drake said. Yet he was the one wearing the glint of sweat on his temples.

“Get to the point. What do you want?”

“The point is that I find this grudge you’re holding against me very disturbing. Is there something deep in your psyche that compels you to torment me? Young lady, this is a side of you I’ve never seen before. To say I’m shocked at your behavior is an understatement.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Drake, the skeletons you have in your closet are fossilized. I don’t know who you think you’re fooling, but I can tell you that I’m on to your wicked, wicked ways. Don’t look so shocked. I’ve never been your real daughter, and I am not one of your employees you can shove around, nor one of your lackeys. You don’t have any control over me anymore. My days of being grounded are over.”

“I don’t think you’re mature enough to demonstrate rationality or common sense. Maybe that’s what’s bothering you. You required more guidance than I was willing to give you. Now you resent it. Isn’t this so?”

“Don’t even talk about rationality or common sense. You own a company you can’t even keep in the black because you’re too busy terrorizing me. Try taking care of real business matters.”

“It escapes me why you find a persistent need to infiltrate my company, commit burglary, assault my staff, then terrorize my employee’s families with gruesome acts of property destruction. Do you know that I could have you prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law?”

“I wouldn’t go there if I were you, Drake. You would have a lot to lose in an open court. I would hate to see your past activities and records dragged through a trial. Even if you won, you’d never get your public image back.”

“What do you mean?” Drake held his palms up, a hurt look playing across his face, giving the impression he was misunderstood by the accusations.

“I think you murdered Tom Labrador,” Avy spat it out. “You set my mother up to take the blame. You wanted his company. You accomplished all three with one act. We won’t talk about what you just tried to do to the grandparents.” She took a breath. “There, I can’t make it any clearer than that.”

Avy kept her calm. She watched his eyes. He dropped his stare, which had moments before been steady on her hers. Now he avoided eye contact. His eyes were “runaway” eyes, like Chubby would have said. She watched the way he rubbed his fingers, like he had grit between them that he couldn’t get rid of. When he tried to pour a cup of coffee, he struck the cup against the thermos—the sound went off like a gunshot.

“So where is your proof about this horrible deed?” he asked. “It seems to me it was your mother who was found with the evidence, right down to the blood, the weapon, and the prints. Isn’t it strange that I wasn’t labeled a suspect? I even passed all the polygraph tests. Why? Because my alibi was bulletproof. So, since you seem to be an expert on our judicial system, I wonder if you wouldn’t mind telling me how I managed to perform this heinous act and escape prosecution.”

Avy expected to be caught off guard with his rebuttals. She did not want to admit to a total lack of evidence. It didn't mean she couldn't be a tad nebulous. "I haven't put it all together yet, Drake. I know what you did, where you did it, why you did it. The how is coming together while we speak."

He leered at her. "Were you on one of my commercial jets the other day? Say, a Bermuda flight?"

This is where she would allow him to hang from the cliff by his nails. "I don't know what you're talking about. Don't try to blame me for all of your problems. Check your own roster to find out who else is messing with you. You have the whole world to choose from."

"I know the two of you are behind this felony vandalism. Are you going to stop this or continue? Trespassing on private property is a good way to get yourself shot. Is it worth the risk?"

"I'll stop trespassing when you do. Or until you get tired of it. Better yet, let's drag the police in on this. Just dial the number. I dare you."

He took a savage bite out of a donut, then waved it at her. "I've got a company to run with zero time for investigations. I'm sure you want to get on with your life without legal entanglements. Besides, aren't you in the throes of a brand new relationship? You should play it smart." He leaned across the desk. "I would dump that conman loser if I were you. He's nothing but trouble. There's no doubt he put you up to this. So what's left to say?" He stood up, drawing his wallet like a handgun. He fanned several one thousand dollar bills across his desk. "Is this what it's all about? Well go ahead, indulge! You can tell him that his little extortion plan worked. There's no need to rake good ol' Drake Labrador over the coals any longer."

Avy tried to contain herself from an outburst of laughter. Drake was not below a last ditch play of desperation, especially when he knew the cards were stacked against him. But it was worse than that. He'd just offered her a bribe to forget about everything. To top it off, Drake was convinced that Sebastian was the root cause—that he had influenced her into carrying out the acts.

Avy shook her head, then locked eyes with him. "Keep the money, Drake. Spend it on something useless like you always do. Find some more kids to tear up the outside of the theater, sugar our gas tanks, or hire somebody to run us off the road. You go ahead, do what you think you have to do. But it won't stop me. I'm always going to be around to remind you of what you did. This ghost is real. It's not going to leave—ever. You can't get rid of it with money."

Drake closed his eyes, then pressed his fingers into his temples.

She would have loved to have picked up the bills, giving him the impression that she was considering the deal, and then torn them to shreds, letting the pieces flutter to his desk.

"What can I do to stop this attack you're perpetrating against me?" he asked.

"Nothing. For now, your cover-up is our little secret. Soon, I'll be ready to expose you for who you are and what you did. I don't mind going the distance because I have plenty of energy to spend on the project."

"Don't force my hand."

“I think we’re finished.”

Drake slapped the desk with his palm. Some money flipped into the air. A vein on his forehead stood out like a fat worm ready to burst from the skin. “This is the thanks I get for raising you, seeing to your every need! I was always there for you. I provided you with a beautiful home and decent upbringing. Your mother slaved to see that you had everything you needed. Yet this is the thanks I get!”

She knew there was nothing more to say, so she stepped toward the door. When she opened it, she looked back. He was punching buttons on an intercom system. She walked down the hallway, but didn’t get very far before she heard footsteps from behind. Turning, she found three of Drake’s security men making swift strides toward her. She took off at a trot and made a quick left, ending up in a dead-end hallway. Her pursuers appeared, making a flanking move toward her. A door on her left that might have lead to one of the inner offices was her sole escape route. They would be on her in a minute, if they didn’t put a bullet in her first. She didn’t have to reach very deep to conjure up thoughts of hatred—they filled her now, bristling to the surface.

She stepped into the other realm, trying to count gates while she flashed through them. When she reached over a dozen, she froze her travel, which propelled her out of a side door located on the other side of the main production building. She ran around a corner, hitting the parking lot with long strides.

Sebastian was parked on the street, staring through the window of the Jeep. He started the engine, then drove onto the property, screeching to a halt to pick her up. When she was secure inside, he gunned the throttle across the lot, then out onto the street.

“I knew something was wrong when you didn’t come out where you entered,” he yelled over the squealing tires.

She tried to catch her breath. “I don’t think he was happy with the way the meeting went. I didn’t cooperate.”

“That’s my girl. They’ll be looking for us now. But we’ll be ready for them.”

They drove to the opposite side of town to pick up the needed groceries. They bought a full bed set at a small furniture store, which they strapped to the Jeep’s roll bar. When they made it back to the theater, Chubby helped them unpack. They settled in for bite to eat, discussing the recent events including what needed to be done to protect themselves from a raid. Avy explained the details of the conversation she’d had with Drake, mentioning his tantrum at the end of the meeting. She told them how security had chased her through the building and how she’d managed to elude them. She did not elaborate on her means of escape, just indicated that she had slipped out a back door.

“I can’t believe these people,” said Chubby. “They have no honor or dignity, chasing a helpless young woman around the city. I’m used to dealing with this type, but they’re always locked behind concrete walls, gun towers, and barbed wire. I just can’t figure out why it’s connected to Cyberflow, one of our city’s biggest employers.”

“You have to consider who runs the place,” said Sebastian. “The guy is lower than a snake’s belly in a wagon rut. He was not even a father to Avy. Now he’s running a company like a dictator, using an army of thugs to do his bidding.”

“He’s a frickin sociopath,” said Avy. “They’ll be here tonight. He doesn’t allow his temper to fester. He acts on it, like a child who has been kicked in the shins. We should get ready, like yesterday!”

The conversation ended at that point. They spent the next two hours rigging traps, setting up snares and mechanical devices. They spoke about using lethal weapons, but decided against it, unless they were fired upon or it became necessary to defend themselves. They stowed the animals on the stage away from the doors. Chubby placed Gretchen in a large cardboard box to keep her from underfoot.

When night came, they sat on the floor facing each other, drinking coffee. They kept their voices low. There were no sounds other than Gretchen’s occasional gagging fit or the soft cooing noises of the doves above the stage area. After a while, a digital clock blinked ten after four in the morning. Avy fell asleep at last, her back up against a workbench leg.

* * * *

The sound of thunderclaps roused Avy awake. She got to her feet. Sebastian fell in close to her side saying, “Sonic boom?” She had no idea.

The noise came again, this time louder.

The rear theater door buckled with an impact. Chubby ran from around the wing, brandishing a baton.

Sebastian backed Avy away from the door. “They’re coming in,” he said. “Don’t go near it!”

The steel door took a final blow that burst it open, tripping a laser across the room. Two men appeared, dropping an iron battering ram on the floor. The screecher alarm went off. The two men stepped in, looked around. A laser beam attached to the wall activated, shooting a stream at them. One of them threw his hands up to his face, screaming, “My eyes!” He ducked. The pinpoint laser hit the other in the face, throwing him backward out of the doorway where he sprawled on the pavement.

Sebastian and Avy grabbed two open pails of paint. They hurried outside, heaving the contents onto the two intruders. The men thrashed in the thick liquid, attempting to stand up, but they slipped, losing their footing.

Another crash came from inside the main theater auditorium. Sebastian yelled, “They’re coming in the other doors!” The threesome rushed through the wing, arriving at the north exit door. They watched the door take repeated blows.

Chubby passed out two more batons with the instructions, “Knees or collar bones.”

Avy reared her baton upward in a striking position, the alarm piercing her ears. She saw the door give way with a final blow, then swing open on bent hinges. Two men rushed in, crouching low. Their feet tangled in the piano wire strung from the doorway posts. They tumbled face down

onto the carpet. Avy jumped at one, raining blows on his shoulders. Sebastian and Chubby placed well-aimed swats on the other, smacking his knees. Some of Avy's strikes went wild, hitting the man over the head. He scrambled across the carpet, yelping. She gave him a hard kick in the rear, forcing him to crawl out of the door and into the alley. Chubby took the other by the collar, then flung him outside. "And stay out!"

They heard another crash coming from the front of the theater. They ran down the aisle toward the main entrance doors, just when they were beginning to buckle. They could see three men on the other side putting their shoulders against the frames. Two panels of glass popped from the doorframes to shatter on the floor. The men scrambled on their knees to crawl through the openings.

Sebastian stood by a cord on the wall that led to a large package hoisted up to the ceiling. Before he yanked the cord, he waited until the intruders got to their feet. The huge carpet roll sitting atop the makeshift frame broke from its mooring, tumbling down. The men went to their bellies, disappearing under five hundred pounds of musty cinema carpet. Like pigs in a blanket, they thrashed under the suffocating load.

Chubby leapt in the air, coming down with all his weight on a struggling form. A gush of air along with a muffled cry for help escaped from underneath.

Avy picked out what looked like a head and gave it a sound crack with the baton. Sebastian pounded his fists on one man who seemed to be upside down flailing his legs. A leg popped up, tearing through the rotted pile. Sebastian twisted the ankle, tearing a shoe off, which he then began to use as a weapon.

Avy threw a bear hug on a shapeless form near the floor that rose up tent-like—the squirming mass pitched her backward. A knife drove up through the fabric, making frantic sawing motions. A slit appeared, then a gun thrust out from the opening. The barrel flashed several times. One bullet went through a display case. Another ricocheted off the floor and struck a wall poster. She swung the baton at the gun-wielding hand but missed. The barrel panned around in front of her face. She ducked just before another shot zinged by her ear.

Chubby jumped on the upright mass, knocking it over. He wrestled the gun hand, prying the fingers back. Something snapped, followed by a howl of pain. Chubby wrenched the gun loose and pitched it against a wall. "I'll cap your ass if you try that again!" said the guard.

A voice answered, "Okay—I give up!"

The three stepped off the carpet. Sebastian threw a heavy flap back, ordering the intruders out. He held his gun on the men while they crawled on their knees from under the carpet. Out in the open, the sweaty men backed up against the lobby wall with their hands up, breathing hard, staring down the barrel of Sebastian's pistol.

"I've already called the cops," Sebastian lied. "You've really dug yourself a hole this time!"

The men looked at each other dumfounded. One peeled off, running for the door. The others lingered for a moment before they broke into a run. The sounds of their footsteps faded down the sidewalk.

Avy rubbed a carpet burn on her elbow. "That was close. I think he parted my hair."

Sebastian checked her scalp, running his fingers over it. "Thank God," he said. "I didn't expect gunfire. I almost let loose with some lead myself."

"Sebastian, you're not a killer. You're not like them. They—" Something tweaked her nose. A heady, burning scent wafted in the air. It smelled like burnt toast. She turned around, aghast. Smoke billowed from both theater wings.

Chubby pointed to the back of the theater. "We're on fire!"

Clouds of black soot frothed out of the theater wings in tornado-like swirls. An orange glare backlit the walls, evidence that the storeroom had caught. The decorative auditorium drapes were scant yards from the source of the fire. The animal cages sat next to them. They would catch any minute.

"Chubby and I will get the animals off the stage, then take them through the front," said Sebastian. "Avy, you get out to the street."

Before she could object, the two were running down the aisle. She had no intention of standing around just watching them. She remembered Gretchen in the backroom.

Avy squeezed through the broken front doors and turned around to face the entrance. She took two steps to get through it. She counted the Gates, ending at the rear exit door. Crouching low, she entered the backroom.

The top of the workbench was ablaze. A bright orange wall of flame had climbed up into the joist beams. Acrid smoke lay like a blanket just above eyelevel. She duck-walked across the floor, stepping over the mattress until she came to the cardboard box. The radiant heat broiled the side of her face and forearms. When she leaned down to get the dog by the scruff of the neck, a paint can exploded, showering a lava-like spray across the room. Falling to her knees, she screamed, feeling certain she was on fire. Avy brought the dog up under her jacket, pulling it tight to her breasts. She crawled over the mattress, noticed her purse on the floor and managed to hook her fingers in the strap.

Once outside, another explosion sent a heat wave up against her back. She started the Jeep, pulled away from the building, not stopping until she was a safe distance from the inferno. The dog cowered on her lap. Avy's hair was singed, giving off a putrid odor. Though she'd received some hot spots on her arms and back, she had no serious burns.

From the safety of the vehicle, she saw a backdraft twister roiling out of the rear theater door, curling up the back wall toward the roof. A small window exploded, showering the parking lot with shards. Above the roar of the fire, she could hear combustibles popping inside. A shaft of flames shot straight up from the top of the building, turning the roof hatch into a missile. Sirens wailed in the distance. She backed her Jeep even further, reaching the far end of the parking lot, making room for any emergency vehicles that would need access.

And they would definitely need access to this, she thought. There couldn't have been a more dismal scene.

A fire engine pulled into the rear parking lot, and a squad of firefighters jumped from the vehicle. They threw levers and unraveled hoses. One of the firefighters rushed to Avy's side, asking her if she needed assistance. She shook her head, hypnotized by the flames, watching the paint peel and blacken on the walls—the walls they had just painted the other day. She couldn't hear anything over the roar in her ears, but now that internal roar was one of rage. Everything in the world Sebastian owned was turning into flaming slag and cinders. It was an incalculable loss that could never be replaced. She hoped the two men stood safe on the other side of the building.

"I'm okay, I'm fine," she kept telling the attending firefighter. She gazed at the Stadium Theater. Every inch of the building was engulfed in flames now, an orange mushroom climbed heavenward.

It seemed like hell on earth had arrived.

Chapter 17

There were no serious injuries other than a few first-degree flash burns. The Raleigh fire department had extinguished the inferno in less than two hours. Sebastian had to fill out a report and make a statement about the fire's suspected cause. He had not revealed the entire truth about the incident. The animals were safe. The interior of the theater had been gutted. Most of the building façade had crumbled into piles of scorched bricks. Many of the stage props were unique, one-of-a-kind, and irreplaceable. A few of them were antiques or custom-made mechanisms.

They packed their cars up that morning with what little belongings they had, then drove off the property. Sebastian had to load all his animal cages into his car, tethering some to the roof. Chubby had called a friend who agreed to house the animals for a short time, and then the guard offered to let the couple stay in his small trailer. Avy declined the offer. She had no wish to bring any negative forces down on Chubby's household. For all she knew, Drake had identified the guard as their accomplice. Which meant he would find out where Chubby lived.

They found a small motel on the west side of Raleigh called Lazy Acres. The rooms came equipped with an adjoining door. Chubby moved his gear into his side, having rescued all of it from the fire. Sebastian left to shop for personal hygiene items, necessities that would tide them over for their motel stay. He also had to arrange a meeting with his insurance agent to put in a claim. Avy shared donuts and coffee with Chubby while she waited for Sebastian to return.

Chubby gave the small dog gentle pats and bits of donut while he sat on the large bed, watching Avy prepare more motel instant coffee. "I can't thank you enough for saving Gretchen, Avy. She wouldn't have made it if you hadn't rescued her. I don't know how you got to the back of the theater so fast, but I'm sure glad you did."

"You would have done the same for me," she said, extending a cup to him. "You had your hands full with the animals. Will they be okay out there with your friend?"

"Sure, Henry has plenty of room. He'll take care of the critters until Sebastian gets another place. That is, I hope he gets another place. He lost a lot. Well, you both did."

Avy had to admit that the last curtain call on their act had dropped with a sickening thud. She could overcome the inconvenience of losing a job. However, Sebastian's life centered on everything having to do with magic, his props, and performing in front of a live audience. She couldn't see him doing anything else. Now that she thought about it, it had been her first exposure to a legitimate stage act. She couldn't imagine working any other job, now that she'd had a taste of the limelight. She hoped they would have the opportunity to start the business up again in the future, even if it required a large investment.

The other side of her thoughts filled her with the most dread. If she had never met Sebastian, none of this would have happened. There would have been no attacks on the theater, causing the demise of his animals or the ruination of his business. He wouldn't be in grave danger now if he hadn't made a vow to protect her. It all came back to her like a big accusing finger. She'd ruined his life. All because of some insane quest to prove her mother's innocence.

Chubby glanced at her. "There wasn't anything we could have done to stop it. Don't feel so bad. I'm not about to let that happen again. They'll have to go through me to get to you."

Chubby had a penchant for devout loyalty. Coupled with his honesty, it gave her a terrible guilt complex. She hadn't been truthful with him, and owed him a straight explanation of the facts. Now was the time.

"I have something to confess to you," she said.

"Huh?"

She began to tell him about her meeting with Janus, including his association with her mother's past. The more she talked the more he nodded. It seemed like he had expected it, waiting all along for verification of what he knew to be true. It fit right into his analogy like a perfect puzzle piece. When he heard about her interpretation of how the time dilation worked in Gate-Walking, he perked up with a heightened interest. He had some revelations of his own to express.

"It all makes sense now," he said. "She did see a Catholic priest named Janus. They called him the 'ghost lover.' I knew your mother wasn't crazy or delusional. At first, I thought she was losing her mind. Then later, I listened real careful to what she was saying. She never changed her story. She told me that this man interacted with *me* at the prison, but I don't remember any of it. There was nothing I could do about it anyway. My superiors told me I was making all of it up, and if I wanted to keep my job I had to shut up—wipe all those rumors out of my head. I had to obey. Deep down, though, I knew there had to be some truth to the intruder theory."

Avy sipped from her cup, considering what he'd just told her. "I have to admit that you are more accepting than I was in the beginning. It was hard for me to get a grip on any of it."

He looked reflective for a long time before he answered. "Don't blame yourself. I had a long time to consider all of the facts. I also had your mother's sworn testimony, which was firsthand. In fact, I was the one person in the world she trusted." He looked at her with those steel eyes again. "Now isn't the time to break that bond of trust. There is something else I have to confess to you."

She wouldn't have thought he had held anything back concerning her mother. If her mother had been an open book to Chubby, then he was the sole translator, having already explained everything that he knew.

She waited for him to reveal what more he'd held back on the subject.

"She told me once about an unexpected guest," he began, "but it wasn't the angel kind. She had a visitation during regular hours. It was a young woman, who Avalon claimed she'd never met before. This woman asked a lot personal questions. The questions dealt with a lot of

emotional things. None of it seemed unusual because she thought this visitor might be interviewing her for a book or a magazine. But she felt she knew the woman somehow, or had seen her before somewhere.”

“What did she look like?”

“Avalon described her as a mirror reflection of herself—but much younger. Curious, I checked the surveillance tapes for that day. I saw you, Avy. Just like I’m seeing you right now.”

“It had to be a coincidence.”

“Just for my records, I recorded a still shot. I have it with me. It’s a three-quarter profile, but it’s got me convinced. It really hit home when I first saw you here in Raleigh.” He dug into his wallet to remove a small square of worn paper. He unfolded it and held it out to her. She looked at it. It was a photo reproduction taken from an overhead camera depicting the visiting area in a prison. In it, a barrier of shockproof glass separated two females. They were leaning forward toward each other, speaking through courtesy phones. The profile of the visitor looked like a dead ringer of her mother, even down to the color and style of the hair. The difference seemed to be in the lines of the face and the weight of the individuals. The mother was older, carrying an extra thirty pounds. Yet there was something in the appearance of the visitor that gave Avy’s heart a sound knocking. The hairstyle and earrings were close enough, but it seemed impossible that someone else would be wearing a custom-made bracelet on her wrist like the one Avy owned.

Avy pushed the old photo away from her. “I would have never done anything like that. It’s too dangerous. I wouldn’t have risked it.”

Chubby pocketed the photo. “You went back, Avy. You traveled in time to meet your mother. I know it’s hard to believe. Sure, you haven’t done it yet. If you had, you would have a memory of it.”

“I can’t do something like that,” she said, rejecting the idea. “It’s beyond my skill. I almost got lost last time out. It’s not like taking a stroll in the park or trying to find your way back home when you get lost. There are no roadmaps for this. The whole realm is laced with webs, mazes, dead ends—dirt roads to nowhere. Janus is the master traveler. He’s the only one who knows how to navigate the system.”

“Maybe one day you’ll learn how to master them,” Chubby suggested.

She heard similar words echo in her head. “Until that day comes I’ll have to crawl before I can walk.” She meant that. Maybe she would do such a thing one day. Right now, she had no desire to anger the gods or test the fates.

* * * *

Three hours later, Sebastian walked into the theater, winded, his eyes glassy. He hefted several bags of groceries through the door, then slammed them on the table. “I dropped the animals off, then delivered my insurance papers. Sorry I’m late, but I had another errand to run.”

Avy said, “It’s okay. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Sebastian poured himself a cup of coffee. He drank it down fast, spilling half of it on the carpet. No one had to tell Avy that something was not right with her boyfriend. His demeanor made that evident a moment later when he pulled a knife from his boot and threw it at the wall where it stuck quivering.

Sebastian glared at the two with wild eyes. “Be advised that there are no inflated tires left in Cyberflow’s executive parking lot. I would have hung around longer to get the general motor pool but a lot camera picked me up. Security came after me. I lost them after a three-mile chase.”

Avy clenched a fist. “Gee, that’s nice, sweetie.” She didn’t know what else to say. Sebastian didn’t seem to be in the best of moods, having just gone off on a rampage. No one could fault Sebastian for his feelings after losing everything. But he was straddling a dangerous edge at the moment.

Chubby spoke up. “Serves them right for what they did. It still doesn’t make up for burning down a theater to ruin a person’s livelihood.”

“I’m not finished with them either,” Sebastian swore. “They will rue the day they torched me. I can guarantee it’s going to get a whole lot worse for them from here on out.”

Avy sat him down on the bed, taking his hand in a fierce grip. “I know this is hard to take. We all feel the same about it. But this tit for tat is going to get worse until somebody gets killed.”

“Yeah, it’ll be one of them that gets killed!” Sebastian snapped.

Avy shook her head. “That’s not what is supposed to happen. You know that, Sebastian. We’re playing their game right now. It’s a stupid, reckless game of violence. Drake’s got his security people thinking this is a company problem. He’s using them as muscle. They’re just ignorant thugs. We need to isolate him—concentrate on bringing him down for his crimes. That means we need a plan.”

“How do we avoid his thugs?” asked Sebastian. “He’s hiding behind them.”

“By doing what we’re doing now—staying out of their way. They have no idea where we’re at.”

“They know our vehicles. Especially mine, now that it’s scorched on one side.”

“They don’t know Chubby’s car,” she reminded him. “We can keep our cars parked in the back. That’s if Chubby doesn’t mind.” She looked at him.

“No skin off me. I don’t think they linked me to my car. They saw me, but I’m just another fat face in the crowd. Besides, that clash we had was a real Heckle and Jeckle moment, so I doubt if anyone could put the make on me.”

Sebastian didn’t look pleased. He tapped his foot, clenched his fists. Avy knew he had his mind set on exacting revenge. Although she couldn’t talk him out of it altogether, she felt she could soothe his anger or at least appeal to his reason.

“I thought we were doing the right thing,” said Avy. “I’m not so sure anymore. We’re using his tactics by fighting back. The whole thing is escalating, playing right into his hands. It’s out of control. All we have to do is outthink him—that’s not asking a lot from us.”

They sat in a brooding silence. It wasn't clear that her plea got through to Sebastian until he spoke again.

"Well, I suppose that mustard-gassing Cyberflow is out of the question then."

Avy looked at him. He gave her the slightest wink. The three erupted in laughter.

* * * *

Drake stopped pacing when Auggie entered his office. He led his security chief to the window where he jabbed a finger down at the parking lot. Three wreckers were parked there, their drivers busy jacking up cars, changing out tires.

"Right under our noses," said Drake, "the guy knifes dozens of tires on Cyberflow property. Not one alarm is sounded, nor does anybody see anything until it's too late. Tell me, how does that happen on company property that is known for high-tech surveillance software? I'll tell you how it happens—complacency. That's how!"

Auggie swallowed. "You're right, boss. It was a damn unfortunate oversight. There is no excuse for it. I've punished the guards responsible. Beggin' your pardon, but I need to bring you up to speed about another important matter." Auggie glanced at Linda Wu.

The secretary put her pocket mirror down. "Don't tell me. Go to lunch, right?"

Drake loosened his tie with an angry tug. "No, I'm going to lunch. Just take calls. When the guys from the tow service are sent up here, sign the check, then file the receipt." He stepped out of his office and started down the hallway. Auggie broke into a trot to catch up.

"What about this important matter?" Drake asked.

"Our package is about to arrive."

"Lunch first. Then we'll open up packages. Right now I need a bar with the strongest drinks available. Any ideas?"

"Boss, wait." He lowered his voice. "This is a different type of package. It's the one we've been waiting for. The one from New York."

"Good, we'll take him out to lunch with us. Think of a good restaurant."

"I don't know how to tell you this, but I don't figure our friend has lunch on his mind. I don't think he's appropriate for any outside venues."

"What do you mean?"

"He's not the type that would fit into a social setting. Also, I think you better wait on lunch until after the meeting."

Drake halted in mid-step. "I told you no obvious gangster types, roughnecks, or idiots who would draw attention. He was supposed to be of subtle character. Someone that would pass without suspicion." He continued on, picking up his stride.

"Oh, I guarantee he's the best where it counts. A real tag 'em and bag 'em kind of guy."

"It's not the day for riddles, Augustus."

"You'll just have to see him for yourself. He should be pulling in at loading dock number six. I've had the area cleared—the delivery trucks have been rerouted to the overflow parking area."

They walked to the loading dock at the back of the plant. The area was devoid of employee traffic. Drake looked around, throwing up his hands in disgust. "I give up, Auggie. Do you want to tell me where you've hidden him?"

"He should be along any minute now." Auggie reached into his pocket, removing a white surgical mask and a pair of latex gloves. "You better put these on, Mr. Labrador."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Auggie produced another set from his coat pocket. He pulled the mask on, then snapped the gloves tight. He spoke through the filter. "It's no joke, boss. It's to keep things sterile."

Drake ignored the advice. He watched a large truck pull around the corner, then back up and park against the dock. A side panel of the truck read *ICE KING REFRIGERATED MEATS*. Two men wearing masks stepped from the cab. They stationed themselves near the rear door of the truck. One of the men spoke into a walkie-talkie. Auggie answered through his two-way, then turned to Drake. "Sir, he's concerned that you're not wearing your—"

"Just get on with it. There's no reason for all this cloak and dagger shit."

Auggie waved his arm, signaling to open it up. One of the men keyed a lock open, then swung the large loading door upward.

Drake saw a shadow move across the inner wall of the truck. It was followed by the figure of a human dressed in very dingy clothing. Drake walked closer to get a better look. The figure wore an olive green rain slicker, a filthy orange hat, and what looked like snow boots. The face resembled a smear, still undistinguishable from the distance.

Drake moved closer, stopping within fifteen feet. He could smell something like a wet dog—the odor wafting from the confines of the truck interior. Another odor assaulted him, the cheesy putridness of decay. Closer now, the face within the truck looked wet, so did his hands, the only parts of his flesh that were visible. The lips of the man were gray, cracked in a slight grin that showed teeth that looked like broken cashews. The eyes were either gray, or spoiled with cataracts, it was hard to tell. Drake put the appliances on, since he had no idea what kind of human stood in his presence. This had to be the Wax Man, whom Auggie had referred to earlier.

"This is Mr. Drake Labrador," said Auggie aloud, serving as liaison between the two.

"Uh." Drake extended a hand but made no move to close the distance. He watched the Wax Man take a few steps toward him, the rain slicker waltzing in sway.

Drake got a good look at the face. The cheeks were drawn, the eyes were white voids. Numerous inflamed ulcerations, some of them leaking puss, pockmarked the man's face. A perceptible heat radiated outward from the body, and with it, Drake could detect more of the strong fetid smell through the mask. Indeed, the face looked like it was made of wax, changing form when the light shifted upon it.

Drake had never seen such a disgusting transient in all his life. He didn't know whether to call an ambulance or animal control. There had to be a mistake in soliciting this individual for anything or for any reason.

The Wax Man drew an asthmatic breath. “A little warmer here than New York.” The words were a gargle. “Don’t come any closer. You’ll thank me later.” The man turned his hand over in the sunlight, giving the appearance he was bathing it in the heat—testing it. Something resembling yellow varnish hung thread-like from his fingertips. Several drops of the goop plopped to the asphalt to sizzle in the hot sun.

Drake withdrew his hand but continued to stare in morbid fascination. He spoke through the mask, trying to enunciate the words. “Ah, are you feeling all right? Do you need to get cleaned up or something?” What else could he say to this monstrosity?

The Wax Man cocked his head, his chin dribbling a line of spittle. “I always feel the same—no highs, no lows. Cleaned up for what? You mean ruin my image? I reside in this, my status quo. Don’t make any special demands of me and we’ll get along fine.”

Whatever he wished, thought Drake. He did not want this introductory meeting to stray into some other area. He would confine it to the present requirements of the job. Drake tried, “I’ve come to understand that you are for hire. Would that be correct?”

“I need to know the target, the stakes,” he rasped. “We can start from there. You can call me Harry. I don’t like the other moniker.” The Wax Man walked under the building overhang where the shade fell upon him. Something moved under his rain slicker in the chest area—a squirm. A moment later, it ceased.

“Harry it is then,” said Drake. “The target is my eighteen-year-old daughter, Avy Labrador. She has a magician boyfriend who is called Sebastian. They’re traveling with a fat, older fellow, who we haven’t identified yet. They are endangering my life and harassing my company employees. They have also been responsible for the destruction of private property, hacking into the company computer files, burglary, and theft. God knows what else they’re capable of.”

The Wax Man cocked his head. “That’s a veritable typhoon of destruction coming from a teenager who has a small entourage. Why don’t you have the local authorities take care of it?”

“Let’s just say the issues are sensitive with far reaching implications,” said Drake. “Even if they were prosecuted, the chances are good that they would make bail, and then we’d be right back in the same situation.”

“You’re thinking more of a permanent solution to end this?”

The Wax Man was not the incompetent sluggard he looked. He read into the innuendo. Drake had to consider that there were three witnesses present who would absorb everything said between the two. Those discussions could be used against him if things went south. How did one translate vagueness into clarity?

“Deal with them in whatever means necessary to stop their activities,” said Drake. “That means discouraging them in a physical sense, if needed. The end justifies the means. Whatever you use to accomplish that goal will work for me. I have no idea how prepared you are for the task. The first question I would like to ask is how traceable are you? You don’t appear to be low key. Sorry.”

“I have no port of call if that’s what you mean. I’ve lived where the wind has taken me—Detroit, Los Angeles, Portland, Denver, El Paso, Reno, Seattle, Bangor, any other small or major city you can think of. You can’t hit a moving target. I’ve never been hit—not even on the outside ring. This is my first visit to this sweet little segment of the southeast. In answer to your question, I don’t stay in one place long enough to bring any baggage, which means I don’t intend to remain here any longer than the job requires. I don’t believe I have a profile that would attract any serious investigation or attention. Society is a fickle bedfellow that suffers me not.” His laugh rattled like broken pistons in an engine.

Drake agreed that the man was not the type of person someone would approach for anything, other than to shoo him away or walk the long way around him. He wondered if the unkempt appearance had been deliberate, or was simply an unfortunate byproduct of the man’s lifestyle. The fruits of the Wax Man’s labor did not show on his exterior unless he was some kind of an eccentric millionaire incognito.

“Is there any place that we can put you up?” Drake tried to sound accommodating but felt hesitant about letting this man stay on Cyberflow property.

The Wax Man tilted his head. “There’s no need for accommodations. My abode is wherever I happen to be. The less our paths cross the better. I don’t sleep well anyway. To business, I’ll need a clear photo of the young woman. Get me a hairbrush or a used toothbrush of hers. Underwear will work—even a used sanitary napkin, provided you have one that is recent.”

Drake looked at Auggie, who also blinked. “That’s a bit overboard, isn’t it? I mean—”

“Visual acuity isn’t one of my strong suits.” The Wax Man reached into the inside flap of his rain slicker and pulled out a mottled creature. He held it by the scruff of its neck, showing that it was a mange-stricken opossum with a broken tail. He explained, “Judas and I are interactive teammates. All I have to do is be in the general area—my little friend will catch her scent. Can you get those items or not?”

Drake knew that Avy hadn’t removed all of her belongings from the house. He could find something on that menu.

“I can get the items.”

There was nothing in the back of the refrigerator truck that resembled a piece of luggage or tote bag. Not even a paper sack. Drake’s next question concerned practical matters. “I can’t tell if you’re packing or not. Are you carrying, or do I need to provide you with something?”

“Carrying?” The Wax Man’s smile broke open like a blister. “I’m carrying just about everything I need, a little bubonic plague, typhoid, rheumatic fever, influenza, tuberculosis, cholera, rabbis, even some hoop without the cough.” He laughed but it tuned into a gag, prompting him to spit.

Drake took a few steps back, staring at the vile discharge on the pavement that resembled a large maggot. Auggie stared wide-eyed over his mask.

The Wax Man held out a trembling hand. “I’m a repository for just about everything that’s wiped out mankind from the dawn of time. Any respiratory or blood borne pathogen has found a comfortable little home right here in this vessel. The Center for Disease Control calls us healthy carriers, but the debate goes on about the ‘healthy’ part in my prognosis. Suffice it to say, I’m toxic to the touch, dangerous to inhalation.” He smoothed the fur of the opossum with a finger. “Judas is the only contact I’ve had with a living organism. He’s immune. Nothing else is exempt. Would that answer your question?”

“Jesus Christ, man,” said Drake, his breath puffy in the mask. “How long have you had this affliction? Are we safe standing here?”

The Wax Man tucked the opossum back under his coat. “I’m from a long line of carriers. They say it started with Mary’s lineage. Bullshit. That was just an excuse to gloss over the real facts. My bloodline has been infected for centuries. Since then every new generation has picked up a new pox to add to the soup. I’m guessing it started with leprosy around twelve hundred BC.” He looked at each of the Cyberflow men in turn. “You asked about the risk factor. Always remain at least three meters distant from me. Don’t ever touch me. Always wear protection. Keep your breaths shallow in my presence if you’re not wearing a mask. That’s enough to avoid transference.”

“Are there more like you running around?” Auggie asked.

“I have a wife in Tucson. Or was it Phoenix? Never mind. She isn’t much to look at—qualifies for a bag over the head, if you get me.” The Wax Man laughed at his own joke, but bent over like he had a gut cramp. When he straightened he said, “She robbed the cradle when she landed me. I’m twenty-one years old. She’s five years my senior, just about ready to cash in her chips.”

Drake found it astonishing that the man who stood on his loading dock wrapped in rags with patches of hair falling out could be any younger than sixty. The man reeked of sickness and disease. The abomination even admitted having a wife! But that had nothing to do with the purpose of their meeting. Drake could care less if the Wax Man had a grandmother who wore paisley shawls or tied ribbons in her hair.

“I take it that contact with you has a certain finality to it,” said Drake.

“Gestation is pretty quick. A total cellular collapse within a minute. I haven’t left many witnesses behind. For what it’s worth, it is not a good idea to push my buttons or flip my toggles the wrong way. I have a twisted sense of justice. We’ll remain on the same page throughout this association.”

“You won’t have problems from this end,” said Drake, his voice urgent. “I guess the last thing I need to know is what kind of compensation are you expecting? Would company stocks, securities, or cash be acceptable?”

The Wax Man hacked up a wad of phlegm, then spat. “No, they wouldn’t. I cannot pass bills or paperwork. Cars, yachts, planes have no use for someone who cannot enjoy them. I’m a liability to women, so that’s out. Fine dining is reserved for people who can share it with company.”

“Then what could you possibly need?”

“I need a cure. That’s the price you’ll pay. I am not talking about some bimbo from Hopkins, Harvard, or Mayo. I need the top epidemiologist or virologist from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. I want Ignatius Struthers, the director. You’ll arrange a private meeting for the purpose of consultation. I’ll take it from there.”

Drake gave Auggie a perturbed glance. “Don’t just stand there! Take this down so you can make the arrangements.”

Auggie scribbled on a pad.

“I’m in agreement with that,” said Drake. “I don’t know if you should get your hopes up. I have no knowledge about your disease or if a cure is possible, but if there is any way to help you, I’ll keep my end of the bargain. To be honest, I expected some other type of payment.”

The Wax Man shuffled backward toward the refrigerator truck. “Do you know what it’s like to walk unimpeded over a park hillside with the sun on your face and the wind in a full head of hair? Do you know what it’s like to feel the embrace or kiss of another, the weight of a child on your lap, a puppy’s tongue on your cheek, the nudge of a kitten against your leg? I have done all of those things many more times than you have—in dreams—visions. I can describe each of those sensations better than you ever could. It’s because you take them for granted. Me, I’ll take them any way I can get them. I’m not alive. Not yet. Maybe one day I will be. The one prayer I have forever asked for is a release from this damnation. Funny, it was never answered.”

“Uh,” Drake stammered. “Where can we get a hold of you?”

The figure backed into the truck until he became a shadow and the whisper of a disembodied voice. “I’ll be right here. Keep the door down, but leave it unlocked. I need the freedom of movement at night. In the meantime, bring me those things I asked for.”

Drake motioned for the two security men to drop the loading door, with the order to leave it unlatched. On the fringe of an emotional tantrum, he turned to Auggie. “What are you, nuts? Where in the flying fuck did you dig that thing up? Do you realize you’ve put Cyberflow in jeopardy by welcoming him onto the property?”

“Boss, I admit he isn’t pretty. But he sure is lethal. I mean, the man has got the touch of you know what.”

“Yeah, but what kind of a mess could he make of the plan?” Drake asked, not trusting this new ally, let alone understanding him. The Wax Man, Harry, appeared more than unconventional. He could turn into a liability, fast, attracting more heat than a blast furnace if he drew the wrong attention.

Drake made a mental note that he would toss this person back into the hellhole he came from the minute—no, the second things started to unravel.

In disgust, Drake tossed the surgical mask at Auggie. He never felt more like punching his sack-of-lard chief of security in his fat jowls. “Park that truck on the extreme edge of the property. Debrief those men. Get Mack’s steam cleaner back here to sterilize this goddamn place!”

“I’m on it, boss.”

“Get me a level one Hazmat suit from somewhere!”

Chapter 18

Avy had no concrete reason why she stood outside the gated entrance to her mother's house. It could have been the loyalty she had shared with Elizabeth Labrador for eighteen years. It could have been the maternal attraction that held them together in the traditional mother-daughter bond. It might have been empathy for an older woman who had no control over her life, having spent most of it in a marriage that should never have been. There were memories, comforting times when her mother had held Avy tight during thunderstorms, or checked under the bed for the illusive bogeyman. There were days at the circus, Sunday matinees at the IMAX Theater, the times when they both became thrilled with the prospect of designing Avy's costumes for her stage plays.

Lizzy had been the consummate stand-in mom when she'd had no choice in the matter. She'd married a monster, a rich monster, and been subjected to his abuse for over twenty years. Her only fault was that she had been attracted to the good life, but having found it, she'd ended up losing all of the love, sentiment, and companionship that accompanied a happy marriage. Avy had watched her adoptive mother wear the happy face for her husband for so long it had become an expression she could turn on like a switch. It took another female to understand how a woman could live out a lie, then bury all of the heartache to mask the pain. Her mother had become adept at hiding her denial.

"You're not going to stand there all day, are you?" Sebastian asked, sitting next to Chubby in the man's car. "You look like you don't want to go through with this. What makes you think she's going to listen? I'll bet he's got her bamboozled, too."

Avy wished Sebastian would tone down the harshness, but she could understand his resentment. She wanted to tell him "everybody is entitled to a fair trial before they're convicted," but instead she said, "I'll be right back." Avy keyed herself through the security gate. She stepped up the walkway and rang the doorbell.

After a long wait, her mother appeared at the door in a bathrobe, her hair tousled. She rubbed her eyes, clearing the sleep from them. "Oh, dear. Avy. What are you doing here?"

"I thought I would stop by to pick up some of my old things," Avy stammered, aware that the meeting was well on its awkward way. She forgot that Drake might have left strict instructions to disallow Avy entry into the house. She could see the hesitation in her the other woman's eyes. Her expression told Avy that she was not prepared for this.

"Well, I'm not supposed to, but who cares what Drake wants." Her mother made feeble attempts to primp her hair, then stepped to the side. "Come in, Avy. The place is a mess. The maid is on vacation."

Avy suspected that the house cleaner was on permanent leave, having been fired to salvage some of Drake Labrador's bank account.

They settled in the kitchen. Her mother loaded the espresso machine, then opened a can of tuna fish. She spoke over her shoulder while she prepared the small lunch.

"I wondered why you hadn't come by earlier, Avy. I know it was a bit awkward when you left, but I thought you would at least call or visit. Things haven't been the same here without you. I never got the chance to tell you that. I'm sorry for the way things turned out."

"It was pretty harsh," admitted Avy. "I had to spend my time getting settled. I found a job and a boyfriend."

Her mother swung around, clapping breadcrumbs from her hands. "That's a surprise! Is he a good boy? Forgive me. Is he a good man?"

"He's perfect for me. He's my little magic man. How are you doing? I mean, are things okay around here?"

"I'm just the ball and chain," she said amused. "Things haven't changed much. I know Drake is having trouble meeting company finances. It wears on him. Of course, I get a fair amount of dissension from all of it." She served the sandwiches and espresso.

Avy took a few small bites, wondering how she would broach the subject of her suspicions regarding Drake. It would have to be a fine balancing act, something that wouldn't insult or demoralize. But she to out the subject.

"I was wondering if you ever suspected Drake of having a violent past," Avy began. "I worry about you. Has he ever hit you or threatened you?"

Her mother stopped the sandwich halfway to her mouth. "Why would you ask such a question, dear? I find it odd you would even think such a thing."

"I guess I'm asking how well you know your husband. Do you think he could commit an act of violence against another human being?"

Her mother pulled back in her seat, looking surprised. "I think the only person Drake has ever assaulted is himself. I've never seen him raise a hand to anyone. That includes you, while you were growing up. I wouldn't have such a thing in my home."

The grandparent's ill-fated flight that never happened came to mind, but Avy had to keep herself in check. "Mom," said Avy, "did you ever think that Drake was mixed up at all in Tom's death? Did you ever consider that he had something to do with it?"

"Avy, what a thing to say! I remember the night of the incident. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend the dinner party due to the stomach flu. I can tell you that my husband came home tired. He was eager to go to bed. There was nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary in his appearance or emotional state. In the following days, he passed three polygraph exams, which I might add, showed zero points of deception. All I could do was stand by his side during that terrible juncture in his life. No, Drake might be many things, one of which is an unfaithful lout, but he doesn't have the genes of a killer running through him."

“What if there was evidence that said something different?” Avy proposed. “Suppose there was evidence that could prove he was very capable of performing the murder. Can’t you even believe the possibility exists?”

“That’s nonsense. All of the evidence was clear. Your mother was hopped up on enough drugs to dope a mule. They said it was a contraband subscription. She had the victim’s blood on her, the knife at her side, the trace evidence in her vehicle. She was the one found at the death scene. The trial is over, Avy. You have to understand that—accept the facts. Avalon Labrador, your birth mother, committed a very heinous act. She was arrested, tried, then sentenced for that crime. You would do well to forget any other rumor you’ve heard. You’ll find the truth to your questions in the original arrest report, in addition to all the testimony that followed.”

Either Lizzy would continue to deny his guilt out of some perverse loyalty, or she had no clue what kind of a monster shared her sheets with her at night. How could the woman be that naïve? Avy considered another possibility—Lizzy, the woman she had called mother for all these years, had possessed full knowledge of his guilt all along and had covered for him out of the threat of reprisal.

Avy took a sip from her cup. “I’m just asking that you think about the real person who is Drake Labrador. I worry about you, Mom. I don’t trust him. There is no love lost between us. I want you to guard yourself against being taken advantage of or harmed. You need to see a clear-cut picture of who you are living with. I don’t think you understand what this man is capable of. I don’t want to hear that you’ve slept with him for twenty years, so you should know what he’s like.”

“Avy, he’s just not the type.”

“There is no type. Some of the worst serial killers in history came from ordinary families, Christian upbringing, fine schools, and loving families. I want you to promise me that you’ll leave or get help if anything becomes dangerous in your relationship. I might never see you again after this conversation, but at least I will have followed through on my duty to warn you. Now, you can throw me out of your house for saying such things. It won’t change my opinion of that man. I’m sorry I had to talk to you about all of this. But I’ve never been one to keep my mouth shut.”

Her mother took a bite of her sandwich, then pushed out a long, agitated sigh. The silence grew thick between them. At last, her mother said, “I can’t fault you for speaking your mind. I never expected you to see a halo over Drake’s head. I know it’s been difficult for you, all of the friction with these years that seem like they’ve been lost to neglect. I don’t think you will ever believe me when I tell you that he loved you in his own special way. I’m sorry you’re so hurt, that you feel the way you do about everything. I wish that I could make it—”

“This is not about me, Mom,” Avy cut her off. “It never was. I’m a survivor. There isn’t anything I regret about my upbringing, because you were always there for me. This is about him, make no mistake about that. I’m warning you—there’s a storm coming on the horizon, and I don’t want to see you caught up in the hurricane.”

“I appreciate your concern, Avy, but this ol’ bird can take care of herself.” Her eyes shown with an intensity that Avy had not seen before. “He wouldn’t dare do anything to me! I would have his head!” She broke the steel-hard look for a moment to laugh.

Avy sighed, it was senseless to pursue it. Trying to convince her would be like asking the sun not to rise. It wasn’t going to happen. Elizabeth couldn’t see what was hidden just under the surface because she was wearing blinders. She had done what she’d set out to do. There was nothing left.

Avy took her dishes to the sink. She checked inside a cupboard for garbage bags, hoping to pack up the last of her belongings. She felt a gentle palm on her shoulder, then heard her mother’s soft words.

“I’m sorry, Avy, but Drake removed most of your items after you left. He cleaned out your bathroom just the other day.”

Avy felt no resentment when she turned around to face her mother. She took the woman’s extended hand, gave it a gentle squeeze. “I guess I’m not surprised, Mom. You say that he always loved me in his own special way. But I wonder if that includes wiping me out of existence like he did. Now do you see why I question his behavior or motives? Honest to God, he doesn’t even qualify for the human race.” For a moment, something cried out from inside her, a yearning for a decent, loving father. But that part of her life was gone—feelings she would never experience or recapture. Those pent up emotions now came around full circle to haunt her.

She allowed one tear to drop from her cheek, having never cried about it before. There would be no more.

Avy hugged her mom one last time, then walked to the front door. She could feel her mother’s stare on her back, but not another word was offered when she stepped out the door.

She said nothing in the car when they drove away. She only thought about banishing demons, trying to forget that she ever had parents.

“How’d it work out?” Sebastian asked.

“It didn’t. She doesn’t think there’s any danger.”

“Did you tell her everything? You should have laid the whole rotten thing down on her!”

“I left out the doomed flight—I didn’t get to first base with the other.” She felt a hair’s breath away from snapping at Sebastian. His cynicism didn’t help matters.

“Some people just aren’t ready for the truth,” said Chubby, driving the speed limit while casually looking out the window. “Every day I deal with people who are in denial of the same crimes that this man committed. It’s a defense mechanism. You can corner a stray dog in an alley, but don’t expect him to lie down helpless. He’s going to fake a charge just to get around you, then run for the hills, hoping to never see you again. Sounds like Drake’s wife is in the same type of denial. You might never get her to see the light. You don’t mess with the gang leader. That’s what Drake is—he’s the Nazi Low-riders, MS-thirteen, and the Aryan Brotherhood all rolled into one.”

They stopped by the grocery store for a few things. Chubby served as lookout while Avy and Sebastian made the purchases. They were soon on the road again, taking votes for what they would do next. They agreed that returning to the motel held no great joy. The last thing they needed was for their residence to become a claustrophobic fortress, a place that would hem them in without the freedom of escape. They arrived at the decision to act out their lives with some kind of normalcy, given the circumstances. Fear was their worst enemy. They could not allow Drake to play that hand.

"I vote for entertainment," said Avy. "Let's get out in public where we can do something."

Since Chubby had discount coupons, they decided on a movie. They dropped off the groceries and drove to the local theater. They took in two showings. One was a romantic comedy while the other ran the espionage-thriller gamut. After four hours, they exited the theater. They traded barbed commentary about both features, picking apart the obvious flaws. But they decided they hadn't wasted their time, expressing joy for the reprieve. It had been a great stress reliever. They hopped in the car just when the sun dipped in the west.

"What's next?" asked Avy. "What else can we do that's cheap?"

"I wouldn't mind showing you something of interest," said Chubby. "It won't cost anything. It could even come in handy."

"Lead the way," the two chorused.

Chubby drove them to the outskirts of town, where the hills rolled away under the canopy of giant walnut trees. The dark of night squeezed in around them while they went off-road up a gorge. Chubby hit the high beams, illuminating an old fire road. They rolled past a broken gate of barbed wire, entering an open area. Chubby pulled his car up a slight rise, then parked in a clearing. He left the engine running.

The headlights shown on a decrepit water tower sitting on a small hillock surrounded by sage. The massive framework of support timbers held the metal tank fifty feet off the ground.

"It must be at least a hundred years old," said Chubby, exiting the car. "She's a relic for sure. Not many people know about her except the four-wheelers and hikers."

Avy got out to stand at the side of the car. She gazed up, seeing faded red lettering across the side of the tank. *No Trespassing*. She said, "It's ancient. Why did you bring us here?"

Chubby retrieved a flashlight from his glove compartment and aimed it at the base of the wooden ladder. "Because it's the perfect hideaway," he said. "It's also a fortress with a great view. I used to come here when I was a kid. There were times when I felt the need to get away from the people at school." He looked sad for a beat. "But it was also the best hideaway to relax. I used to camp out with my Coleman gear. Can't say that I didn't catch it when I got home." He stifled a laugh.

Avy looked around. "Where did you camp?"

"In the round house. Up there." He swept the flashlight up to show a ragged opening at the base of the tank.

Avy said, "Oh."

Chubby mounted the first rung, glancing over his shoulder. “What are you waiting for?” He began a steady climb up the ladder. The structure moaned like an old woman. Avy could swear that the whole tower structure was leaning about ten degrees off center. She had her doubts about its safety. In spite of the danger, she put her feet on the ladder, beginning the precarious climb up. After all, if it held Chubby, it could hold anyone.

“You’re both nuts,” said Sebastian.

“Scaredy cat,” said Avy.

“Oh, all right.”

Avy scaled the ladder using precise steps while watching Chubby’s progress above her. When he made it to the tank ledge, he pulled her up the last few feet. Sebastian followed, and then the three ducked through an opening that had been cut out of the metal. The interior of the tank might have spanned forty feet in diameter with a height of thirty feet. The heavily planked floor harbored a variety of trash—old mattresses, beer cans, twigs, girlie magazines, cigarette butts, and candy wrappers. The inside walls displayed a mosaic of graffiti, spray-painted or rendered in felt pen. One autograph declared, *Peter busted my cherry here, August 4TH, 1989*. Another proclaimed, *Grunge Rules!*

“Here’s my writing,” Chubby announced, panning the light so Avy could read the inscriptions on the metal wall.

Raymond Hammersmith found this place August 1959

The Land That Time Forgot

Virgin Planet

Have Space Suit—Will Travel

The Time Machine

Journey To The Center Of The Earth

Tarzan Of The Apes

From The Earth To The Moon

“I was just a kid then,” Chubby admitted. “That’s a list of the books that I tried to read while I spent time here. It was fun until the teenagers started raiding the place, using it for a drug den. I was about eighteen or so last time I visited here. Brings back some neat memories.”

“Kind of like your own little hideaway,” said Avy. “I can identify. There were times when I wanted to slip under my bed and fall through the magic hole that led to Candy Land. Not too much different. But your place was real enough.”

"I have to admit, it's got atmosphere." Sebastian's voice rang hollow in the expanse. "All except for this bat shit. It wouldn't be a bad place to stash our asses if things got crazy."

"I'm glad you like it." Chubby grinned in the refracted light. "I always carry a bunch of camping gear in my trunk just in case I get the urge to spend the night out."

Sebastian scribbled some notes in a small notebook. "Think I'll record the directions to this place," he said. He drew the small picture of a water tower in the margin, then closed the book. "I hope you guys are ready to leave, 'cause it's getting just a wee nippy out."

On the way back to the motel, Avy glanced out the window, thinking about Chubby's place of sanctuary. She could understand his reasons for wanting to kiss the world off, to find a quiet hovel of his own. He was the type that withdrew within himself until he was almost inside out—hiding away from those who disapproved of him. Avy felt the same type of kinship toward him that her mother had. Chubby hadn't changed much from his youth. He was unassuming in his adulthood. His compassion for others had never wavered. Even in the position of prison guard, subjected to violence every day, the man had managed to keep his sense of decency. Raymond Hammersmith, though he had been scorned most of his life, had risen above it to abide by the most reverent of human traits—love, generosity, understanding.

Arriving at the motel, they unpacked their gear then settled in. Avy passed around refreshments. They turned on the wall-mounted TV to watch the news. They had no idea what they expected to hear, but nothing earth shattering or even topical came through the newscast. Chubby decided to retire to his room. Avy and Sebastian stretched out on the bed, holding each other until they started to fondle. They made love, but it was rushed, almost reckless. It had little to do with passion or the intense feelings they had for each other. They were on guard, cognizant of the same feeling coursing through them—an unmistakable sense that something was not quite right. They donned their clothes then sat against the headboard.

"Do you feel it?" Sebastian wondered.

"Yeah." She yawned. "They're thinking about us—plotting, hatching plans. I feel it in the pit of my stomach."

They drifted off after awhile. She hadn't been asleep long before awakening to an annoying scratching sound above her head. She sensed it was still deep in the morning hours. The irritating nails on the chalkboard noise reached her ears again. She cringed, then spoke with a voice thick with sleep. "Gaaah, please get off the headboard, Sebastian."

"Glug-guh."

She shoved him. He flipped the covers over his head, then kicked his feet tantrum-like. She heard the noise repeat. How could the bed be squeaking when they weren't moving? A tap-squeak-tap interrupted her peace again. She sat up in bed, massaging her temples. Gretchen started yapping from the adjoining room. The hoarse barks escalated into a pitiful whine.

"Shaddap," mumbled Sebastian.

Avy whipped the covers off and threw her legs over the bed. A pall of gray light filled the room. When she heard the noise again, she jerked her head around to stare at the back wall window. She could see the silhouette of a creature standing up on hind legs. It was on the outside window ledge. Its paws made little digging motions, scratching the pane. It was the largest rat she had ever seen.

Avy jumped to the foot of the bed. She slapped Sebastian's feet. "For gawd's sakes, get up," she screamed. "There's a monster at the window!"

Gretchen pawed at the door, ramming her head against it.

Sebastian pitched the covers back. "Whass up? Dang it, Avy, why'd you hit me?"

She stabbed a finger at the window. "Look at that!"

Sebastian got up, leaned toward the window. He rubbed his eyes, looked again at the thing outside. "Shit, Avy, it's just an opossum. He's just looking for something to eat. Can't we get some sleep?"

"No! Chase it away. It's disgusting."

Chubby's voice came from the other room. "Knock it off, Gretchen! Are you okay in there? I repeat, are you—"

"We're fine," said Sebastian. "We've got an opossum at the window."

"Want me to get him?"

"That won't be necessary." Sebastian knelt on the bed. He yanked the window open on its slider. "Shoo!" he told the menace. "Go away—git!"

The opossum reared back with a hiss, snapping little needle-sharp teeth.

"You lil bastard." Sebastian gave the creature a swat on its nose with a rolled-up newspaper. He swung at it again. The opossum tore a ragged corner from the end of the paper roll with a lunging snap. Sebastian swung down hard, smacking it in the face. It tumbled off the ledge, then skittered across the parking lot, disappearing into the foliage. He slammed the window shut. "There. You happy?"

She fisted her hips. "Don't start in with me. That was not my fault. Now it stinks in here."

Sebastian flopped back down on the bed. "You should know that wildlife comes with the territory. They charge extra for it on the rent receipt."

"Don't try to be funny. I didn't expect polecats to come busting into the room."

"Polecats are skunks. That was an opossum. They're always harmless. It's gone now."

"Want me to make sure he's off the property?" Chubby asked through the door.

"Please go to sleep, Chubs," said Sebastian. "It won't be back."

Avy managed to lie down, but sleep didn't come right away. She expected the creature to return to terrorize them again. After a half hour, she surrendered to exhaustion, falling into a deep slumber.

Her dreams filled with images of scurrying rats with bulbous eyes and yellow teeth. They hissed at her, jumping for her face, getting tangled in her hair. Every time she slapped one away, another one would appear to take its place. They stank enough to make her dry heave. They all seemed drawn to her, with the intent to torture. She tried to fend them off with slaps but they bit her fingers, stripping the flesh off the bones, leaving her hands in bloodied tatters. "I'll never have a manicure again!" she cried out in her dream.

She rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with a thump. Shaking her head, she reached up, feeling someone clasp her wrist.

"Avy, get up." Sebastian pulled her to her feet, steadied her. "Sweetheart, you fell off the bed."

She looked around. The morning sun streamed through the window. Motel room, she thought. Nightmare, she concluded. "Whoa. I just had a nasty dream," she said. "I was surrounded by rats. They were eating me." She slumped in his embrace, finding it hard to stop the quaking in her limbs.

"I'm sorry I was short with you last night," he said into her ear. "We're under a lot of stress. It isn't easy to cope with. We have to stay busy. Maybe formulate a plan or something. Meanwhile, I'm going to find some type of income for us. My insurance claim is not expected to pay off any time soon."

Of course, he was right. If they spent more time concentrating on pertinent issues instead of reacting to fear, they would be a lot better off. Normal routine. Easier said than done. But they had to start somewhere.

Chubby knocked on the door before he called through it with an offer to make breakfast. Sebastian admitted him. Avy volunteered to do laundry, so she rallied the men to collect their things. She bagged the items, then headed out the door. She found the small motel laundry room by the registration office. She put her loads into the machines, counting just enough change for the drying cycle without having to go to the front desk for more. She sat on a Rattan bench that overlooked the front parking lot. A few cars passed by on the frontage road. The sun already had a blaze on the leaves of the largest walnut trees that sat in neat brick planters on the property. Tall weeds swayed with a slight breeze in an empty lot across from the hotel.

Something rose out of the weeds across the street. Avy propped her palms under her chin. She watched a misshapen figure rise straight up out of the foliage, then begin to move. It took her a minute to determine that the shape was human, bent over somewhat, wearing what looked like a blanket over his shoulders. She felt certain this was a male transient who'd slept overnight in the field.

The man wore a greasy hat, something that looked like a golf cap pulled tight over his head. He made awkward, drunken steps, flattening the shrubbery. He emerged onto the sidewalk, pausing to look in both directions. Funny, but she could have sworn he wore ski boots with metal buckles. She found that very odd. With no clear view of his face, she could not determine the age of the

person. She assumed he was older with a possible alcohol or drug-related problem. It was hard to imagine anyone in that condition leading a sober life. Still, she found it difficult to hold judgment over such a person. His situation was not hopeless. Professional counseling, income opportunities, and decent housing were the proper remedies for such a condition. Yet, she knew that some of the homeless were self-inflicted castoffs, unwilling to change their lifestyles and outlook.

The homeless man stepped off the curb, again glancing in both directions. He took labored steps across the street. For a brief moment, she felt afraid that a vehicle might strike him down. When he made it to the other side of the street, she let out a pent up breath, her eyes glued to the poor man. He seemed perplexed about his next move. She lost sight of him for an instant behind a large tree trunk. He emerged, but somehow had walked toward her during that time. He shuffled across the motel parking lot, his head held down.

She knew where this encounter was headed—it was almost expected. She moved her purse onto her lap in case she had to dig into it for a handout. She couldn't help but think that he was circling her like a shark, walking in one direction to put up a ruse, but having her under surveillance the whole time. Why make panhandling so complicated? She had no problem contributing a few bucks to ease his plight.

When he got close enough for her to discern the features on his face, she recoiled. His eyes were white blanks. The face, glistening of sweat in the sun, bore a roadmap of purple lines surrounded by open sores. She wondered if he was a burn victim. That face. She felt a terrible ache in her soul for this unfortunate being. His stench reached her on a slight breeze, causing her to put a palm to her mouth. For a moment, she thought she might gag.

The man stopped twenty feet from her, then angled his face to look up at the sun. Something hung from his jutting chin that looked like a streamer of discolored phlegm.

"It's a grand day, eh?" he said, but his eyes did not meet hers. "The sun gives life to us all, lass. It does not care who or what stands underneath it."

Avy gulped, shifting her buttocks. "I suppose so," she answered. "It's a pretty warm start this morning." The words belied an awkward attempt at conversation. She looked at the tattered wool blanket that was festooned with foxtails, leaves, and twigs.

"Sol really doesn't care who is down here," he went on, "just that things are alive because of it. We are all alive, moving in the same circles on top of the same dirt. That's what my pappy used to tell me. All creatures great and small."

He waxed philosophic, she thought. *James Harriot*. It had to be part of his repertoire. He looked sick, smelled to high heavens, wore clothes worth no more than a few dollars. But he had the mind of a diplomat and the tongue of a poet—a true grifter setting up his mark. Two could play at this mental shell game.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," she said.

"I help myself every chance I get, lass."

"Not to take advantage, but to better your condition, I hope."

“Who has taken advantage here? You cut a fine figure who displays the profile of one who has taken their share of advantage. I sit away from the table uninvited, waiting for scraps because you are the owner of the banquet. Are you not first, always?”

She found it astonishing that he could see her. Perhaps his blindness was not total. Nevertheless, she could trade barbs if that was his intention. “I didn’t need to be whipped from the starting gate—I took off on my own. I didn’t scratch because I refused to run the race.”

“Ah, then you owe your success not to you but to your trainers. Advantage before the starting gate. Good feed, grooming with plenty of care—that is the difference you see.”

“What is your name?”

“I’ve been called so many that I forget. Oh, wait. Harry works.” He hacked back something in his throat, then spat. A gray piece of flesh landed on the pavement, wiggling like larvae.

God, he had a gut full of pinworms, she decided. She began to feel the bile rise in her throat, bringing on a nauseous discomfort. She noticed something moving under his plastic coat. It was not clear if it was an arm or some other part of his anatomy. She stood up from her bench seat, prepared to enter the small laundry room. She hesitated, wondering if this man would follow and box her in.

A door slammed in the distance. She turned to see Sebastian walking toward her. When he reached her, he handed her a paper plate laden with pastry and orange slices. “I thought you would like to eat out here in the—” The words cut off when he caught sight of the man standing several yards away. Sebastian furrowed his brows, giving the man the once over. “Avy,” he said, “let’s go.”

She was morbidly transfixed, unable to budge.

“Now!”

He hurried her down the walkway. She looked over her shoulder, watching the transient cock his head puppy fashion.

The motel manager appeared a second later, jabbing a broom at the man. “No, you don’t!” said the woman. “Not today. No trespassing allowed. We’ll have none of this around here!” She beat the man off the property until he had backed up to the edge of the street.

Sebastian pushed Avy into the room before she could see anything more.

“What’s the matter with you, Avy?” Sebastian demanded. “Have you lost it or what? I can’t believe you were talking to that, that whatever it was!”

Chubby looked up from his plate, frozen in mid-bite. Gretchen scratched at the front door, then unleashed a mournful whine.

“I was just talking to that man, Harry,” she said. “I don’t know why. Maybe it was because he looked like he was dying or something.”

The stench of the man seemed to have followed them into the room. She looked at the food on her plate. Her eyes rolled in her head. In the next minute, she bent over and vomited on the carpet.

Chubby dropped his plate on the floor.

Gretchen tilted her head back. The howl that escaped her was ear splitting.

Chapter 19

They clustered around the microfiche, reading the last of the newspaper archives on the Tom Labrador homicide case. For the last six hours, Avy had read the articles aloud for the benefit of the two, although Chubby knew most of it by heart. This time she recited the entire court transcript, the same transcript that Chubby had saved in his album that Avy never took the time to read.

Sebastian said, “We need to find a chink in the physical evidence. That’s not going to be easy to do.”

Avy pulled back from the screen. “What about Drake’s motivation for wanting the company? He knew he was first up in the will after my mother. With Tom and Mom out of his way, he would inherit everything, including any bank savings. By law, he was entitled to everything. No disagreement there. But listen, my mother was drugged—that’s what the BAC from the drug test results showed after she was taken into custody. From all witness testimony, my mother didn’t use prescription drugs or contraband substances. But they found Nembutal in her blood. Drake said he brought two bottles of champagne for the celebration dinner. I think he brought more than champagne.”

“What were they celebrating?” asked Chubby.

“Drake said it was something about Tom landing a huge foreign contract. It was brought out in the trial, but never discussed in detail.” She stared at Sebastian. “I think Drake might have gone to the kitchen to open the bottles himself. He laced Mom’s drink, but left Tom’s glass pure. It would look too suspicious if both had drugs in their system. Could we agree on that?”

Sebastian nodded. “That’s possible. More than possible. Your mom starts feeling woozy so her husband calls it a night. But Drake doesn’t leave the premises. Or he waits outside for a few hours, then re-enters the house. Go on, Avy.”

“He re-enters the house later, then creeps upstairs with a kitchen knife. Tom’s asleep. Mom’s drugged, out of it. The first knife wound is straight to Tom’s heart—the autopsy confirms that. The first thrust kills him. He rolls Tom off the bed, then inflicts multiple stab wounds while the corpse is on the floor. The extra injuries make it look like a rampage killing. There would be very little noise or movement to wake mom. He wipes the knife down, places my mother’s fingers against the handle, then lays it by her side. He smears my mother with blood splashes and castoff, making it look like she committed the crime up close.

“He drags the body downstairs, loads it up in my mother’s SUV. After getting the key from her purse, he drives off to dump the corpse across the state line. In an adrenalin-induced panic, he hits the jogging judge on the return trip. He makes it back to the house, parks the SUV, which now contains hair, fiber and blood evidence. He places the keys next to her on the bed, and slips out

the front door, locking it behind him. Then he splits for home. All of this is done within a planned timeframe. Lizzy is asleep because she can't remember the exact time he arrives home. She even testifies to this. So there we have it. The million dollar question is, where has Drake slipped up?"

Chubby bit his lip. "He would be covered with the victim's blood. But we have a problem. Somebody would have to have seen him like that—a witness. Then there's the question of what he did with the blood-covered clothes. There were no eyewitnesses. Every security camera tape in the area was ordered into evidence, but none of them had an image of that SUV anywhere. They found one eyewitness to the vehicle on the road, but he couldn't identify the driver of your mom's SUV. No help."

"Why wouldn't Drake have left a bloody footprint?" asked Sebastian. "There must have been blood on his shoes."

"Not if he dragged the body backward down the stairs," said Chubby. "It was downhill most of the way until he had to load it. If he was careful he could have done it."

"Was Drake a pill-popper back then?" asked Sebastian.

Avy shook her head. "No, never. His wife has several prescriptions. I don't know if she took prescription drugs back then—not sure about Nembutal. It's worth a look for pharmaceutical records or receipts. Drake could have pilfered half a dozen pills from his wife's personal stock." She flipped her hair back. "I can't believe this is all we have! Is it that bulletproof? Are we wasting our time?"

"What about Lizzy?" asked Sebastian. "Maybe she's covering up something."

"My mother is spineless. She's always been preoccupied with her social status. That's all she's ever cared about. Even if she did know something, she wouldn't jeopardize that loyalty with her husband. Besides, a wife can't be forced to testify against her husband, even if he is brought up on the charges."

"Maybe if we leaned on her," suggested Chubby, "so she gave up the information under pressure." He blinked. "I can't believe I said that."

Sebastian frowned. "That's a long shot. We're aiming with a short barrel. There's too much against it. She could tip her husband off, blowing the thing wide open."

Chubby moved his chair closer, keeping his voice down. "Avy, I know you don't like it, but what if you were to, say, take a trip back to watch the murder? You could look for something at the crime scene that might help convict Drake."

Sebastian balled a fist. "You told him that much, Avy?"

She nodded. "He deserved the truth, so I told him everything."

Sebastian slapped the tabletop. "I'd love to see you try explaining that to a jury! Sure, you saw him do it because you Gate Walked back to the actual scene! That'll hold up in a court of law. Not!"

"I never said that I would try such a thing," said Avy. "It's too dangerous. I wouldn't even know how to do it. I couldn't bear to watch such a thing anyway. Janus wouldn't approve."

Chubby looked at her with those steel eyes again. "Then why did he give you the gift in the first place? There must be a reason for it. Maybe you could find what we're missing here. Isn't it worth a try?"

No one spoke for a tense moment. The conversation had reached an accusatory level. Some of the patrons in the small archives room showed signs of discomfort, having heard the raised voices.

Sebastian sighed. "He does have a point. We need one of Janus's guidance seminars right now. He has a cosmic playbook that he goes by. He could tell us what's allowed in a situation like this."

"What if I go poof?" Avy looked at Sebastian, her brows raised. "I could screw things up by getting caught in a loop or something. Is that where you want me to end up, Sebastian?"

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean it that way. Of course I'd want it to be safe for you. Jesus, I couldn't bear the thought of losing you."

"You have to admit it's the best tool you have in your arsenal to get to the truth," said Chubby.

She pushed back from the table. With a look that told them they were finished, she gathered up her notes and tucked them in her purse. They walked out together. When they passed the front desk, Abigail Folger averted her eyes from the three.

"I need a place where I can think," said Avy. "Can we go to the park?"

Chubby agreed to take them.

Avy looked out the window on the way, mired in a thick fog of confusion. It seemed she could see everything yet saw nothing. Enjoying a normal ride down the street seemed impossible. There were no sights, sounds, or colors due to a mind reeling from one conundrum to another. It was going to take a miracle to fit all the puzzle pieces together!

She had no permanent residence or job. Her uncle, she felt certain, was a cold-blooded murderer. Her mother couldn't understand that her life might be in danger. Drake's security force would stop at nothing until they destroyed her life or killed her outright. Sebastian had lost everything dear to him. If things got any worse, she felt certain he would be dragged down along with her. Chubby would follow, hanging onto Sebastian's cuffs, taking the same trip. To hell.

After arriving at the park, they strolled over a long grassy hill toward the lake. It was already uncomfortably warm from the noonday sun. A crowd had gathered by the water's edge. Several people tossed breadcrumbs to the ducks and geese that jockeyed to get into position for the offerings. Several children tried to play keep away with a dog that insisted on stealing their Frisbee.

Avy sat on a patch of thick grass. For a minute, it all seemed so normal, a reprieve from the cave of her dark thoughts. It would be nice to relax for a while without a care in the world. Not that she could be that lucky. She thought about what Chubby had suggested about going back. Back to another time and place where nightmares were real. To relive it in the flesh. To do so would require watching the events unfold minute by horrible minute. Avy shivered. She would have to witness a murder, all the while keeping her eyes peeled for evidence. If she did know how to get to

that place, maybe it could be stopped. Would that mean stopping her own birth? If there had been no crime there would have been no Janus to set things right. Avy would not have been fathered. It was all so damn confusing!

She gazed up at a puffy cloud that looked like a bearded old man. “Why can’t you ever make things simple?” she asked the face. She looked to either side of her, embarrassed by her outburst. Both men were flat on their backs, eyes closed. Chubby already had a snore in full swing. She lay back, cocked her arms under her head. “Oh, why not?”

* * * *

She yawned. Her face felt tight with an irritable burning sensation. Wincing, she realized she had been asleep. Checking her watch, she found that six hours had passed. The sun was an orange ember in the west—the same sun that had given her a nice little burn. Both men beside her were still asleep, their faces blotchy pink. She had an impulse to wake them but decided against it. “Let ’em rest,” she muttered.

She walked to the water’s edge. There were a few families left in the park. Some couples strolled hand in hand on the lakefront path. The waterfowl had retreated to the center of the lake. She put a hand in the water, bringing a cool palm to her face, making small pats to bring some relief to her burnt skin. It felt good.

Then her nose wrinkled.

A pervasive stench hung heavy in the air. The odor tweaked something in her memory. Sure enough, when she turned around, she saw the transient standing on the lake’s edge not twenty feet from her. He did not wear his blanket over his shoulders like he had before, but stood cloaked in a filthy raincoat that reached to his knees. It appeared more than a coincidence that this man would be in close proximity to her again in such a short amount of time. He looked ridiculous in a family park setting.

He turned his head toward her with a spastic jerk. “Ah, it is the lass again. You should refrain from following me, you know.” His chuckle sounded like a death rattle.

She didn’t get the joke, nor did she want to. “What do you want?”

“I want for nothing except another beautiful day like today. I want it tomorrow, too. I want to have many more beautiful visions, including someone like you gracing that panorama.” He raised a hand in the air for dramatic effect. A sparrow flew by him, nicking his finger. The bird somersaulted into the water, where it floated on the surface for a moment before it tipped on its side and sank.

She took a few steps back. “I haven’t got time to discuss psychology or sociology with you. Nobody understands your stupid doubletalk. I don’t like you including me as a character in your little fantasies either. Your Thespian delivery went out with W.C. Fields. Goodbye.”

Avy walked away with hurried steps in the direction of the reclining men. Sebastian had just sat up when she reached him. He rubbed his face, then gave Chubby’s foot a shake. The other man awoke.

Avy glanced over her shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

Sebastian yawned. "Gah, how long have I been asleep?"

"Hours," Avy said. "Can we just go?"

She did not want a confrontation that might result in an out-of-control scene. The point was moot when both men got to their feet and Sebastian looked past her toward the lake. He stepped around Avy, then scowled. "You again! What the hell are you doing here?"

The decrepit man cranked his head in several directions. "Ah, hell has nothing to do with this place. I thought I was a free man in paradise."

"I think you stalk pretty women," said Sebastian. "Your motives don't have anything to do with walking around in paradise. I asked you what you were doing here."

"Why, I am a resident of this fine city. Have been all my life. This is one of my favorite haunts."

Chubby stared at the man, uncertainty washing across his face. "I've been a resident in Raleigh all my life. I sure as heck don't ever remember seeing you. Nobody could miss someone like you in lockup, and you look like the type that would have been there at least once. You don't even ring a small bell."

"Is that another of the Praetorian Guard who harkens? Greetings. I am like Quasimodo, the one who rang the big bell. I am never seen but often heard. Who might you be, you voluminous mass of preponderancy?"

"I think he just insulted me," said Chubby.

"This isn't worth it," said Avy, clutching Sebastian by the forearm.

"You must tell me," said the man, "if both of you are entitled to the delights of yon damsel, or if you are permitted to accost her at the same time."

Sebastian made swift strides across the grass, his fist cocked for a punch. Avy caught up with him, attempting to halt him with an arm lock. He drug her a short distance across the grass.

"Stop it!" she yelled. "Can't you see what he's doing? This is what he wants—he's baiting you!"

Sebastian pulled back, fuming. His face had transformed to a mask of rage. Avy could see the pulse pound in his neck. He made a move to throw her off, but then relaxed.

Chubby arrived at his side. "She's right. He's looking for a lawsuit. I know the kind. Let him go. He'll try it with somebody else."

"Please, honey!"

Sebastian turned around, unclenching his fists. He took Avy's hand, then escorted her toward the car. They could hear the transient's voice rise up from the knoll.

"What's the matter, magic man? Afraid of a little competition?"

Sebastian broke his stride but kept walking. Avy found the accusation stunning. The "magic" moniker referred to Sebastian's vocation. It meant the transient knew at least that much about them.

They drove back to the motel in silence. Gretchen met them at the door. Chubby threw the deadbolt after they were inside, then picked up his dog.

"I've never seen that person," said Chubby. "It doesn't mean he hasn't been living in some back alley somewhere. I'm wondering if he is just another one of Drake's men hired to harass us. You've already spotted him once near the motel and now he shows up in the park. I'm not saying he's dangerous or anything. Maybe he is meant to throw us off our routine while they have something else up their sleeve. At least Gretchen seems to us alert when he is around. She can be our warning alarm." With more conviction he said, "But it isn't safe anymore."

"What are you saying, Chubby?" asked Avy, although she knew the answer.

"I say we pack up, change locations. That will rule out coincidence. If he finds us again, we'll know he's involved."

"Then what?" Sebastian asked. "We can't touch this guy—you said it yourself. He's trying to provoke us into a confrontation. It's pretty clever, if you ask me. If we raise a hand to him we'll find ourselves slapped with charges of assault on a homeless person—a hate crime."

"We call the cops the next time he shows up," said Chubby. "At least they'll run a field report on him, then check him for outstanding warrants. We can claim harassment or public nuisance. In the meantime, I say we move out to be on the safe side."

"We can go back to my old motel across town," suggested Avy. "That's a long trek for him, even if he does want to chase us down again."

That settled it. They packed up their belongings in Chubby and Avy's vehicles, then checked out. They drove the backstreets to the Flat On Your Back Motel and rented the same room Avy had occupied before. They stashed the vehicles in the back lot. There were no adjoining rooms, so Chubby had to settle for a neighboring unit.

They gathered in Avy's room where they watched TV for a few hours, mostly the news, but took in a half-hour sitcom, which afforded them a laughter break. Chubby broke out a deck of cards near midnight. They played poker with a fierce intensity that kept them riveted to the game. After Sebastian won twelve straight hands in a row, Avy looked at Chubby, which caused both them to burst into laughter. The magician had palmed so many cards from the deck that a poker champion could not have beaten him.

Sebastian raised his brows in mock surprise, giving them a look that said he never cheated.

"Here I thought he was just getting lucky," said Avy.

Chubby slapped his thigh. "He doesn't have to turn his back on us. He does it straight to our faces!"

It was the perfect tension breaker. Sebastian did a few more sleight of hand tricks for their amusement, switching cards, transforming the suits. For a finale, he made the deck vanish into thin air via the wave of a hand. Chubby found the missing deck stuck under his left buttock. The room erupted in laughter again.

It was late when they decided to turn in. Chubby offered a "Goodnight," beginning to push himself up out of his chair. He made it to a crouched position before he stopped cold.

Gretchen's ears perked up. She blew out a hissing whine. The dog approached the door on unsteady feet. Avy looked at her watch, it read ten after two in the morning. Rising, the three adults looked at the dog. Gretchen pawed the carpet at the door's base. She let out a squeak. Chubby crept toward the door. Avy swung her hand in a chopping motion. "I can look through the curtains," she whispered. "Don't open it."

Too late. Chubby swung the door open. An opossum reared up on its hind legs. It gave out a hiss, before it bolted across the parking lot. Gretchen scrambled after it, her tiny nails clicking on the pavement.

"Gretchen!" Chubby squealed. He rushed through the door and out across the lot, disappearing into a mat of scrub-like weeds beyond the yellow haze of the parking lot lamps.

Sebastian upended a pack on the bed and grabbed a flashlight. Avy followed him out into the parking lot at a swift trot while he shined the light toward the field. The heavy thuds of Chubby's steps along with the snaps of twigs could be heard in the distance. Avy called out. Gretchen's hoarse barks faded in the distance. Stopping at the end of the parking lot, the couple looked for a way into the tangled briar. Sebastian stepped onto a narrow path. Avy followed, catching her ankles on sharp thorns. She could see nothing save the weak flashlight beam panning side to side, illuminating the tops of the brittle foliage. They stopped to listen.

"Do you hear anything?" Sebastian tried.

"Not anymore."

They called out, melding their voices into a loud hail. No answer. Avy found it amazing that anyone could have rushed off in the dead of night into the thick scrub and been able to see where they were going without a light source. Unless Chubby was functioning on sonar, she couldn't understand how he'd gotten away so fast.

"Why does every opossum in the county have to show up at my motel room?" she wondered aloud.

"I'm telling you they're after food," Sebastian shot back.

She smelt something on the wind, but it wasn't food. A brief gust brought it to her. One second she had inhaled crisp air, while the next moment brought a putrid skunk smell. In a few moments, it dissipated. It brought back a nasty premonition. She wanted to get out of the field, retreat back into the light. Back to the parking lot where it was safe.

"I think I see something," said Sebastian, aiming his light.

Avy saw it too. It looked like a small penlight beam darting around amongst the thick brush. A keychain light. Avy called out. Chubby answered in a faint voice, telling her he was on his way back. When he reached them, he asked for Sebastian's flashlight, then headed back out. He spoke over his shoulder. "You two get back to the motel. I'll find her. She's out here somewhere."

Avy felt terrible having to abandon the quest to find the dog. Yet logic won out. It was better to get back to the room where the dog might show up.

One motel resident had his door open, squinting into the night. He asked about the disturbance. Avy explained the situation away, not wishing to raise a panic. A few other curtains swung closed.

Back in the room, Sebastian busied himself preparing a quick breakfast. He fried some bread in a pan, then melted some cheese over some scrambled eggs. Avy paced from the open door to the kitchenette. She couldn't see how anybody could eat at a time like this.

"You're going to wear the carpet out if you don't slow down," said Sebastian. "Why don't you have something to eat?"

"Did you smell something awful?"

"I'm not that bad of a cook."

"I didn't mean that. I meant out there. It seems that for a moment I could—" She let it drop. Women had better noses than men. He hadn't picked up on the odor. Then again, her mind might have been playing tricks on her.

She accepted the breakfast plate. She took small bites while watching the doorway for any sign of Chubby. After she finished, she sat on the edge of the bed with Sebastian, holding hands. It wasn't long before the sound of Chubby's footsteps approached. When the large man appeared at the doorway, he held a lifeless mop of hair in his arms. His cheeks were wet with tears. Several thorns protruded from his pants, and his shoes were covered in a thick layer of dust.

Avy and Sebastian stared at the bedraggled figure. Neither of them spoke.

Chubby gulped hard, forcing his words out. "Her little heart gave out, I guess. Too much excitement. She thought she was protecting us. The spirit was willing, but the rest of her didn't hold up. I have a spade in the trunk. I'll be back when I finish."

"God, I'm so sorry," said Avy, meaning it with all her heart. She watched Chubby disappear around the corner, then she collapsed flat out on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling. "I don't believe this is happening!"

Sebastian rubbed his face hard, then sat on the end of the bed next to her. "Oh, it's happening all right. Jesus, he really loved that little mutt."

Chubby came back to the room after twenty minutes, wearing an expression of weary defeat. He sat down, but refused to eat the offered plate of scrambled eggs and fried bread. Brooding, the heavyset man stared at the floor without a word.

Avy walked to the door. She took a quick peek outside, preparing to lock it. Her nose crinkled. There it was again, more pervasive than ever. She couldn't mistake that foul stench for anything else. She fanned the door several times.

"There, do you smell that?" she asked. "It's him. He's out there."

Sebastian walked to the door and thrust his head out. "I do now." He pulled his pistol from the backpack. Chubby tossed his plate in the sink and retrieved his sidearm. They filed out of the door, Sebastian in the lead with his flashlight. Avy brought up the rear. During their trek across the parking lot, Avy could smell the full intensity of the odor, causing her to stifle a gag. Chubby

peeled off to disappear around the corner of the motel. Moments later, an engine started. Chubby pulled around the side of the motel and parked his car, aiming the high beams into the scrub field. He left the engine running.

They couldn't see much past the shafts of the headlights at the edge of the field, but the beams lit up the foliage for a good fifty yards. Nothing moved or made a sound.

Avy cupped a hand over her mouth. This was so creepy it was off the scale. She didn't know why, but she felt uncomfortable with both men brandishing weapons in front of the small roadside motel. She didn't know if the situation warranted the use of deadly force against a transient who had been guilty of nothing more than stalking them. Then again, she couldn't think of an alternative that would afford them protection.

Sebastian stepped through the weeds. Avy fell in behind him, resting a hand on his shoulder. Her boyfriend moved with deliberate cat-like steps, trying to keep the noise down. The smell intensified. Avy knew that the vile man was out in the thicket somewhere. She had the unmistakable feeling they were being watched. She could almost feel the hot stink of his breath on her neck. The peculiar sense made her hair stand on end.

There seemed something more to this homeless vagabond. She likened the feeling to icy fingers of thought that reached out to her, promising havoc and destruction. He came from another place, a residence that bespoke of evil. The vision of him conjured up terrible images, like the nightmares she often had after eating too much lasagna laced with garlic. She sensed he was a spawn from the pit of hell—a very ancient resident. She had no way of knowing this other than an inner voice that cried out in warning.

Sebastian stopped for a moment, holding his breath. Avy followed suit. Chubby, yards to their right, also ceased movement. A twig cracked in the distance beyond the flood of light.

Avy's voice was urgent. "Let's go back. It is not safe here at all. He wants us in the dark where he can have control. I can feel it!"

"He's toast," Sebastian cursed. "We have to end this bullshit now."

"You don't understand. He's something else, something that we have no control over. I think he's more than dangerous."

"So am I." Sebastian crouched, peering into the darkness.

Something arose out of the weeds like a specter, a shadow in human form. It raised its arms in a crucifix pose, presenting a full frontal profile. He looked like a scarecrow staked to a pole, or maybe a filthy Jesus. But they all knew who this was.

"Squeeze one off, you'll set me free," taunted the voice from the weeds.

Sebastian turned his head with a slight movement. "Chubby, you seeing this?"

"Yeah, I got a bead on him."

Something was on the man's shoulder, an indistinct lump. The lump moved. Every so often two small points of light reflected back from the headlight beams. Animal eyes.

“Now I know where the opossum came from,” said Sebastian. “He’s wearing one like a piece of costume jewelry.”

The man made a few steps toward them, arms still extended. “Go ahead—shoot. Remove this pitiful piece of trash from society. I can hear the accolades now—do what has to be done.”

Chubby raised his weapon in full combat stance, but his arms were shaking. “Don’t take another step,” he warned. “Or I’ll take you out like a cheap date. Your damn pet killed my Gretchen.”

“Always promises,” said the man, pushing through the weeds toward them. “It’s three against one. Pointing guns, too. For your information that mutt was beyond its prime. You should thank me. It was painless.”

Chubby tensed up, drawn like a tight wire. A hammer cocked.

“Don’t do it, Chubby!” Avy screamed. “He’s rousing you to anger on purpose.”

Sebastian slapped some sweat from his forehead, then blinked several times. “What the hell do you want with us, man? We haven’t done anything to you. You’ve been stalking us. There’s no reason for it. Just leave and there won’t be any trouble.”

Avy stepped backward, pulling on Sebastian’s shoulder. “Don’t do this,” she pleaded. “Can’t you see this is what he wants? He’s orchestrating the whole thing, making us fall right into his trap. Let’s call the police. Please, please, let them take care of it!”

Sebastian mumbled, “He wants us to drop him. Assisted suicide. That’s *got* to be the reason.”

Avy watched terrified while the figure approached to close the distance. She couldn’t be sure what the man’s motives were. Assisted suicide might have been the reason for his persistence, but she felt that something else lay behind the true meaning for his appearance. It still didn’t matter.

Sebastian dropped his weapon. “Okay,” he called out. “Have it your way. We’ll see how you like it in jail.”

“Go ahead, call the cops,” the man dared. “You should see how I clear out a cell.” He let out a ghoulish laugh, continuing to move closer with each step.

The three of them broke off in a dead run for the parking lot. They retreated to the side of the running car. Chubby shut off the engine, locking the door, but he left the headlights on. They made a quick dash for the motel room and bolted themselves inside. Sebastian called the Raleigh Police Department, explaining the situation. Avy kept a watch through the curtains. She could see the man standing in the weeds. He had dropped his arms down, but remained in a defiant stance in the glare of the headlights, oblivious to whomever might see him.

Ten minutes later, a police cruiser pulled into the motel parking lot. Avy watched the haunting figure fade into the dark. The patrolman exited his vehicle and shined a light on Chubby’s car.

Avy summoned the officer with a frantic wave. He met her at the door after a brisk walk.

“Are you the party that reported the disturbance?” asked the tall cop.

Sebastian served as the spokesman. “We did.” He explained the reason for the call. He left out the part about the suicide wish, not wanting to complicate things or come off like some half-assed psychologist. He did mention that Chubby’s dog had been frightened to death in a confrontation with the mysterious man. The officer recorded each of their names on a field report. He thanked them before he walked across the parking lot and out into the weeds.

The threesome waited in a nervous vigil in front of the motel. They watched the outline of the blue uniform disappear past the end of the headlights. They heard nothing that resembled raised voices or a scuffle. Tense seconds rolled into minutes. Still, the officer did not reappear with the suspect in custody. A half hour passed, a very long time to apprehend a suspect.

“He’s got him cuffed up by now,” explained Chubby. “Maybe he’s giving him a good cussin’ out, too.”

“This long?” Sebastian asked, doubt evident in his voice.

The patrol cruiser door had been left open. The radio squawked out call letters. The message repeated. “Baker three-five, what’s your twenty and status?”

They waited a quarter of an hour before they decided to creep across the parking lot. Sebastian aimed his light into the tall weeds. Chubby took the light from him and said, “Wait here.” He walked into the tangled shrubbery, vanishing in a thick curtain of darkness.

In the next moment, a shriek cut through the night air, followed by the sound of thumping footsteps. Chubby burst from the weeds, running with all his might. He passed by the couple, headed for the police cruiser. Once inside the car, Chubby spoke into the dash mic with frantic words.

“Officer down, officer down! I repeat, Baker three-five is down. Request immediate assistance at—” Chubby gave the address of the motel then acknowledged the callback, verifying what had happened.

Avy ran up to Chubby, smashing into the open door. “Dear God, what’s going on?”

Chubby slid out of the cruiser, holding onto the doorframe for support. His breath came in rasps, while his eyes would not center in their sockets.

“He doesn’t have a pulse!” Chubby coughed. “He’s just lying there face down, holding on to his handcuffs. I think he’s dead.”

Chapter 20

The interrogation room in the Raleigh Police Department claimed no more space than a large walk-in closet. The detective sitting across from them seemed oblivious to the tight quarters. He had one thing on his mind—the facts. They had not been brought in because they were suspects. They had volunteered to have their statements recorded regarding the “officer fatality.”

The detective, a large man, had a scar on his baldpate that resembled a worn groove in an old piece of luggage. He seemed calm, but concerned while he filled in the boxes on the report form. The first few questions he’d asked were very soft-spoken. His aftershave might have been the harshest thing about him. He hadn’t looked up for the last five minutes. An ID card hung from his neck on a lanyard: Detective Tony Bulmer. Two other uniformed officers stood against the wall, very still and quiet.

At last, the detective looked up, glancing at the three, but his eyes settled on Chubby. Avy could tell that the detective appeared more comfortable in his affiliation with another law enforcement person. Chubby had also been the one to discover the body.

“Now, this was a prowler call that resulted in the death of a peace officer. According to your previous statement, you didn’t see what happened to the officer other than that he disappeared beyond your line-of-sight. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” said Chubby. “We told him about the transient who had been harassing us. We directed him out into the field. That’s where we last saw him. The officer didn’t return for nearly an hour, which concerned us. I decided to investigate because the officer didn’t have any backup. Just like I told you before, I found him face down, non-responsive. I checked for a pulse, but didn’t find any sign of life. That’s when I ran back to his unit to call it in.”

“This prowler, you described him as disheveled, wearing a raincoat, snow boots, and an orange cap. Is that correct?”

“Yeah,” said Chubby. “A typical homeless person. He stank up a storm. He showed some fifty-one-fifty characteristics—kind of crazy.”

“You believed him to be unstable then? Okay. Did you see the unknown in contact with the officer?”

“No, I saw no contact.”

“The man slipped down in the weeds when the officer pulled up,” Avy offered. “The police officer went into the lot to find him.”

“Uh huh. You’re sure you didn’t see any weapons on the unknown?”

“We didn’t see any,” said Chubby. “He just carried around an opossum. I know that sounds weird, but he did have one perched on his shoulder.”

“This is the same opossum that your pet dog chased?”

“Yes, Gretchen chased that opossum out into the field. That’s where I found her dead. I buried her on the motel property.”

“We might have to exhume the carcass,” said Bulmer. “It’s standard procedure in an investigation like this, with two suspicious fatalities in the same area. I hope you understand.”

“Anyway that I can help. I just want her to have a proper burial afterward.”

“That can be arranged. Now, do you have any idea what this man’s motives were for enticing you out into the open? Had you insulted him or begrudged him something to make him angry with you?”

“We’ve never done anything to him,” said Avy. The others agreed with nods. “He just wanted to harass us. To tell you the truth, I wasn’t afraid of him until he began to talk to me. He was very sarcastic, in a threatening kind of way. I was shocked when I first saw him. I’ve never seen someone in such bad shape before. The smell, the fluids—he spit worms. God forgive me, but he’s the most disgusting human I’ve ever seen.”

“You said fluids,” said the detective, raising a questioning brow. “What do you mean by fluids? Something that you could come in contact with?”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” she said. “It seemed to come out of his skin—this kind of substance that looked like yellow motor oil. He had it on his face too. I thought it was sweat at first, until I saw some of it fall from his fingers.”

“STP,” said Sebastian. “It was thick, runny-stringy like STP oil additive. I saw it. He gave off a real powerful stench. Crossing a corpse with a skunk, would be the best description.”

The detective perked up, scribbling faster. He read over his last notes before he slapped the notebook shut. He looked at each one of them again, then lowered his voice.

“I know that you have some questions. I can answer a few. You’ve been very cooperative. This is a serious matter. I would advise you not to discuss this with anyone outside of your sphere. This is an ongoing investigation, so we don’t need to complicate matters. Anything?”

Avy cleared her throat. “How could the officer die so fast like that?”

“By preliminary accounts, it appears to have been a heart attack. We won’t know until an autopsy is performed. We cannot rule out homicide yet. Some transients have been known to carry hypodermic needles on their person. They’ve been known to use them as a weapon. Such a scenario cannot be ruled out as a cause for the officer’s death. We’ll know for certain after a full blood workup.”

“What are you going to do about this man?” Avy asked. “He calls himself Harry if that’s any help.”

“They’re still sweeping the area where you last saw him—we’ve already had some sightings. They’ll widen the search after they’ve covered their grids. You gave us a good description of him. We have an APB out to the surrounding jurisdictions. For now, he is a witness or person of interest. I’m sure we’ll run a background check on him when we make contact. Then interrogation will follow.”

“What if he comes around again?” Sebastian asked. “Can we protect ourselves?”

“No deadly force,” said the detective. “I know you both have registered firearms, but I’m warning you that any discharge of a weapon in this city will force me to put out an APB on you. Do you hear me? I want you to get to a phone if this man shows up again. Keep your distance from him, but keep him in sight. We’ll dispatch units to your location faster than you can recite the alphabet. Do you understand that part of it? At least you can appreciate what I’m saying, Raymond.”

“Yes, sir. Understood about the weapons.”

Sebastian’s lips drew tight. “What are we supposed to do if he attacks us? Use harsh language?”

“Make no contact with this individual. Observe and report. If he forces the issue, run. If he corners you, throw rocks, wood, anything you can use for a missile. Distract him. I’m sorry, but we don’t know what we’re up against. Like I said, we’ll run a quick interference. If you remember anything else about this case, don’t hesitate to call me.” He dealt out a business card to each of them, but included a piece of paper that had his home phone number, then stood up. It was a dismissal. They exchanged handshakes. The detective escorted them to the exit.

Once outside, Avy sucked in a deep breath of fresh air, glad to be free from the confines of the interrogation room. They piled into the car and headed back to the motel. Avy glanced at the two men, knowing they were also lost in thought. She sensed a shared responsibility for the death of the officer. He had lost his life in the performance of his duty—that duty had been a direct result of their call. Chubby’s frantic “Officer down, officer down” would forever remain burned in Avy’s consciousness.

Sebastian looked at Chubby. “Why is it that I know what you are about to say? Is ‘you can’t hit a moving target’ close?”

Chubby gave him a curt nod. “We have to move again if we want to avoid contact with that man.”

Sebastian shook his head. “No, what we need is to draw him to us again so we can tag him. All we have to do is call the authorities if he shows up.”

Avy didn’t think Sebastian’s solution was the correct one. “What if he decides to come at night? What if another officer or two ends up out in the field again, then—”

“Then that’s the chance we have to take!” Sebastian snapped.

Avy stiffened in her seat. “That’s a bait situation. You want to make us the bait. All I’m saying is that we could use a better vantage point—maybe a gated community or a second story unit so we could see him coming. If it’s a matter of expenses, I’ll spring for it.”

She found Sebastian’s logic incomprehensible, no doubt fired by his emotional state. He hadn’t been the same since the theater had burned down. Revenge was clouding his judgment. She knew that next he would start snapping at her or disagreeing out of spite. He was pained to the max—inconsolable. It was a wonder he wasn’t headed for a full nervous breakdown. He was showing all the warning signs.

“Okay, fine,” Sebastian relented. “Maybe we need something with tighter security. We all know that damn opossum is serving as his bloodhound. He sniffs us out for his master. That’ll be our warning detector. I still wouldn’t mind putting a bullet smack between the eyes of that little rat bastard.”

“No gunfire,” Chubby said. “We have to obey the law even if the enemy is a law-breaker.”

“Don’t remind me of it right now, Chubs,” Sebastian quipped.

* * * *

They packed their belongings, then checked out of the Flat On Your Back. They found a two-story motel on Six Forks Road bordering the North Side, not far from the Cyberflow Corporation. Called the Lazy Daisy, it had a large gated courtyard surrounded by an eight-foot-high wrought iron fence. An empty swimming pool took up the middle ground in the courtyard. Small establishments sat on either side of the motel and across the street. The only dirt field within distance was a half block away, which lay tilled flat, devoid of foliage. Their vantage point offered them a wide panorama of the property. Avy and Sebastian took a second-story unit in the middle of the complex, leaving Chubby renting an adjoining room.

They stood on the landing outside their room, leaning on the railing. It looked like a quiet neighborhood from their vantage point. A boutique, barbershop, Taco Den, grocery, real estate office, mailbox outlet, and a candy store stood opposite them from across the road. Beyond the storefronts lay fenced properties, including several storage yards. Two trees sat in the courtyard, both of them date palms. For now, everything appeared normal. They had no idea how long that normalcy would last.

* * * *

They spent the next few days in the motel, resisting the urge to venture out except for necessities. Board games, books, and TV took up much of their time. Avy checked the want ads, looking for any part-time position that would supplement their income. Sebastian had objected, demanding that she stay out of the public sector for reasons of security. He told her she was now a target, and the safest place for her to be was at his side. It had been their first heated disagreement. She was thankful that it had not degenerated into something more serious. It had still bothered her that the tension had boiled over into a face off between the two.

Sebastian had no qualms about going out alone in Avy’s car. She had thought it unfair to remain behind like some tavern wench, afraid to pop her head out of the door lest the master come back to spank her for disobeying. Sebastian never hinted where he went. She suspected he had been making trips to the local coffee shop to check the job listings. He’d also met with his insurance agent for the purpose of monitoring the claim on his property. She could not slight him for these absences and kept quiet whenever he returned to the room in a fitful mood. But she ached to get out.

Chubby had made a trip to the local police supply to pick up an assortment of self-defense items. Avy and Sebastian had each received a pair of security cuffs, T-shaped batons, and large mace canisters. Chubby ran them through some defensive moves, demonstrating the use of the baton, showing the handholds along with the target areas. He taught them several takedown moves, which included every pressure point known on the human body. The couple liked the instruction, demonstrating a natural ability to perform the moves. Being in peak physical condition helped.

On the third day of their stay at the Lazy Daisy, Avy talked to the men about going out for lunch. They voted her down.

"I'll lose my mind if I have to spend another day locked up in a room that has a broken air conditioner and a leaking faucet," she said. "This isn't normal."

"Forget it," said Sebastian.

"I'm not going to forget it. I need to get out. You can't keep me from leaving." She threw a mini-tantrum.

"All right! But it's going to be something local. No fancy restaurants."

They settled on the Taco Barn across the street. Avy agreed to the selection even though she could have thrown a rock and hit the joint. At least it was off the motel property. They walked across the street and waited in a short line to enter establishment.

The place was crowded with noontime traffic, most of them employees on lunch break. One small postage stamp-sized table sat in the corner unoccupied. Avy waded through the maze of tables to claim it while the men waited in line to place their order. So much chatter filled the small restaurant that the noise resembled a steady hum. Small children played under the tables, clashing action figures together, screaming bloody murder. When a portly child zoomed around a table, mashing one of Avy's toes in her open-topped sandal, she bit her lip, smiling through the pain of it. She was determined to enjoy herself at whatever cost. That little toe smashing would not disrupt this outing. There would be no regrets—it was a blessing just to be outdoors!

Twenty minutes later, the men snaked through the roiling mass with a huge aluminum platter of mini tacos, a Coke, and two pitchers of beer. The assemblage of tacos resembled a small lumber pile. Avy thought about her magic costume that had succumbed to the fire, and how hard it would be to fit into a duplicate after indulging in such a meal. She tapped her foot on the floor, reminding herself again that this was supposed to be fun. All those nasty memories needed to take a hike.

She sampled a taco, then took a sip of soda. The soft shell fairly burst with grease over her lips, but she did not complain. She just gazed out the window, enjoying the sight of the passing traffic.

Chubby pushed two tacos into his mouth, chewed thrice and swallowed. "You guys would make good correctional officers," he said, loading his hand again. "You've got the takedown moves perfected like a couple of ninjas. You could fill out some applications. I could put in a good word for you."

Sebastian wiped beer suds from his mouth. “I don’t think I could handle that, Chubs. The first vanishing act on my watch might be me. No offense. Besides, I don’t think I could wrap my mind around all those cavity searches. These hands are skilled at making things disappear, not reappear.”

Avy dabbed her mouth. The napkin gained an ounce of grease. “I don’t think I would be right for the job either. I can’t keep a straight face for very long. I would end up bursting out with laughter or crying before the day ended. It’s sweet of you to offer though. We still have some savings left.”

Sebastian patted Chubby’s shoulder. “Not to worry. I answered an ad in the paper with a phone call, which gave me the nerve to send in an application. The Purple Diamond Casino in Las Vegas will be opening its doors in two months. They have a full magic show slated for their headline act. I filled out an application I picked up at the stationary store, then sent it off with a kiss. Here’s the great part—all of the machines, tricks, and props are supplied, with custom orders on standby for the expansion of the act. It’s a great gig—a once in a lifetime opportunity. Just keeping my fingers crossed that Lance Burton or Criss Angel don’t beat me to the punch!”

Avy could see that just talking about the job opportunity made Sebastian excited. But she somehow felt consumed by a feeling of emptiness, noticing his elation. Avy was not going to ask him about it. She would not let him see her react. She understood now why he had been so edgy. He had lost his show and theater. What if he was setting her up? Distancing himself from her so that the split would be easier? Avy tried not to let it affect her. But she couldn’t help herself.

“That’s great news,” Avy stammered. “You’re the Amazing Sebastian. How could you miss? I hope you get that show, honey.”

“Why are looking like that?” Sebastian asked. “You should be hoping right along with me. You’re going too. You are my troupe. What did you expect?”

Avy raised her soda glass, hiding behind it. “Well, I didn’t fill out an application,” she said around the glass, watching his expression through it.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you filled out an application. The same one you filled out for me. I just copied your app, then sent it in with mine with everything stapled together. Hope you don’t mind. So, you are on your way with me compliments of Priority First Class Mail. Your handle, should you accept the position, is Lady Labrador.” He coughed out a good-natured laugh.

She set the glass down, then looked at the tabletop. Her face pinked. What a dolt she was. What could she have been thinking? Sebastian was her guy. He didn’t want to break up the act or their relationship. Of course he wanted her to go with him.

“I wish you would tell me these things, Sebastian. You had me worried for a minute.”

“You don’t have to worry about things like that.”

Avy smiled, relieved. She looked out the window again. A roughish looking character caught her eye. She dropped her glass hard on the table and jabbed a finger at the window. “Look at that!”

Harry stood on the other side of the glass panel, his head tilted sideways, yellow threads of spittle hanging from his chin. He tapped a heavy fingernail on the glass and smiled, showing broken teeth. Half of the patrons turned in their chairs and let out gasps. Two children burst into

tears. The patrons closest to the window reacted with more shock, causing them to throw their chairs back, screeching them across the linoleum. A small blue-haired lady clapped a hand over her mouth. Vomit squirted between her fingers onto a neighboring table.

Chubby got to his feet. When he yanked at the phone clipped to his belt with greasy fingers, it flew over his head to land on the floor with a crack. Sebastian bolted to his feet, catching the end of the taco platter under his belt. Mini tacos erupted in the air. The platter upended in Avy's lap along with a beer pitcher.

"Somebody call nine-one-one!" Chubby bellowed. All customer faces had now turned toward the street window, most of them gaping in disbelief.

Harry pulled back from the glass, then threw his head back in a cackle. He stepped away, disappearing beyond the facade. It was a scene straight out of a B horror flick.

"Love, peace, and chicken grease," yelled a drunken patron. "Leave the old bastard alone."

Sebastian found traction on the floor and headed for the exit. "Not on your life!"

Avy followed her boyfriend's reckless weave through the crowd, stumbling past tables, her hips abutting seated patrons. Diners yelled out, "Hey, man, watch that shit," and, "Yo, dude!" Somewhere, Chubby went down in a tangle of bodies, taking a small child with him.

Avy followed Sebastian outside. They ran down the sidewalk, then came to a halt. Chubby caught up with them, heaving for breath. Harry had vanished. Glancing in all directions, they could see nothing but normal pedestrian traffic. They were at a loss not knowing where he'd gone.

Sebastian walked to a nearby alley entrance, sniffing the air. "He must have gone down this way. He didn't vanish into thin air like one of my tricks!"

"I'm going back in to call the police on a landline," said Chubby. "Be careful!" He left to enter the restaurant.

Avy followed Sebastian at a steady trot down the alleyway. Having not anticipated a confrontation, they had left their mace canisters back at the motel room. Unarmed they would be risking physical injury if they made contact. Yet they had been told not to make contact, just observe and report. When in doubt, they were told to run. But Avy wondered why they were running the wrong way, toward the danger?

They reached the end of the alley. It turned right, then continued on, bordering the back of the storefront. Several dumpsters sat against the walls, filled to capacity. They stopped to catch their breath and listened for any sounds. The narrow alley ended in the distance, bisecting a cross street. They both knew their persecutor couldn't have made it that far in such a short time. Even the foul stench of the Taco Barn dumpster failed to mask the smell of the man they were looking for.

"He's here," said Sebastian, "real close."

Avy could also feel the unmistakable presence. They didn't have to wait long. The man who called himself Harry stepped out from the second dumpster down. He had a rotten half-head of cabbage in one hand and a banana peel in the other.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “Care to dine with me?” He held the cabbage up. “I’m sorry I don’t have the proper place setting. The cuisine is also a little on the ripe side. But you can’t beat the price!”

Sebastian stepped forward, eyeing the dumpster to his right. “We want you to keep the hell away from us. We’re fed up with your stalking. Go back to wherever the hell you came from. Leave us the fuck alone.”

“How far would you want me to go back, magic man? Would the north of Jerusalem in the days of old be far enough? Or would you prefer something a bit more contemporary?”

Sebastian inched sideways toward the dumpster. “Stop talking bullshit. Who put you up to this? Drake? Are you out to settle a score for him? I don’t know what he promised you, but you’re going to be left holding the bag. You’re a chump if you think it’s worth it. Why don’t you just crawl back into that hole you slithered out of.”

The front of Harry’s pants bulged for a moment. He said, “Oh, look, you got a rise out of me. Temper, temper, Mr. Illusionist. Does this mean our dinner date is off? That’s a shame. I haven’t dined with anyone for a long time.” He took a savage bite out of the cabbage, then made a step toward them.

The couple backed up a yard. Avy yearned to hear a siren in the distance. Anything that would tell them the police were on their way. Instead, heavy steps slapped down the alley. Chubby appeared behind them, grinding to a halt. “They’re on their way,” he told them.

“Ah, the wanna be cop arrives,” said Harry. “Or should I say the fat gigolo?”

Chubby brushed past the two, cocked his arm, and pitched his broken cellphone. Harry bent down, presenting his head. The phone hit him square on the crown, splintering into pieces.

“You stay away from her!” Chubby demanded. “You’re a sick son-of-a-bitch!”

Harry stepped closer. “What are you going to do, beat me up, Porky?” He curled his fingers in invitation. “Please bring it on so you can put me out of my misery. A little one on one—mono e mono. I can always tie a hand behind my back. Better yet, here is a piece of me.”

Harry cocked his head back, then brought it forward with a hacking spit. A cadaverous piece of flesh landed at their feet with a splat.

Sebastian yanked a soggy garbage bag out of the dumpster and heaved it. The bag broke over Harry’s face. The contents—tortilla shells, hot sauce, tomatoes, and lettuce splattered over his filthy garments. Harry reacted by bowing his legs. A dark spot appeared at his crotch. Urine ran down his leg to puddle on the blacktop.

“I’m sooo scared!” Harry mocked. “Look what you’ve done to me! I’ve whizzed my damn self. You’ll have to pay for my cleaning bill, Mr. Magic Man.” He ran a purple, bloated tongue around the outside of his lips, savoring the spillage on his face. He gave a grunt, clutching his stomach. “It’s worse than I thought. I think I just crapped myself. Oh, the humanity of it!”

Avy swayed, her ankles buckling. Nauseous waves assaulted her, one after another. She felt like she was on the verge of passing out. She'd never seen such a vile human before. This thing had nothing in common with *Homo sapiens*. Sebastian and Chubby also put their hands to their mouths, trying to mask the overpowering stench. The three began a calculated retreat backward. Harry closed the distance with drunken strides.

Chubby stifled a gag. "You foul bastard. Wait until the cops get here—they've been looking for you. I'll be seeing you in the state prison!"

"Bring it on, pork chop. I don't think you'd want me behind your bars. In fact, you would regret it. Now, does all of this mean you're declining my dinner invitation? I so much wanted guests to break bread with me." He let loose with a raucous, gurgling fart. In the next moment, he unzipped to expose himself. He waved the vile appendage at Avy. With a chortle, he slurred, "It's time to braid crotch hairs, lil Missy!"

Deathly ill didn't even begin to describe how Avy felt. Her head spinning, she was on the verge of losing consciousness. She felt Sebastian's strong pull guiding her backward. Then she saw a police cruiser pull in at the opposite end of the alley and speed their way. The cruiser came to a skidding stop. Two uniformed officers exited, pulling their batons.

One of the cops shouted, "Is this the guy you called in about?"

"I called it in," said Chubby. "He's the one wanted for questioning in that officer's death."

Avy almost felt a sense of euphoria while she watched the cops approach the man. If not for her current nausea, she would have danced and screamed for joy.

The cops moved in a flanking maneuver, taking up opposite ends of the alley. One shook out a pair of handcuffs. The other unholstered a taser gun.

Harry turned around to face their general direction, dropping his garbage. Waving his arms in invitation, he said, "Dinner guests. How delightful!"

"Get a load of this one," said the officer who wore the stripes on his shoulder.

"You're telling me, Sarg," said the other, crinkling his nose. Then to the transient standing in the middle of the alley, "Get face down, partner, hands outstretched. Don't even try to resist or this will go bad real fast."

"Why don't you put me down, jockstrap? I don't feel like mussing my attire on this unkempt pavement."

The cops looked at each other, dumbfounded. The sergeant fired the taser gun. The dart struck Harry in the neck. The cop shook the device hard, thumbing it. Nothing. The second cop unholstered his mace and shot a stream, but Harry opened his mouth wide catching most of the discharge there. Befuddled, the cops hesitated for a beat. Then they made diving lunges, knocking the man to the ground. They wrestled Harry's arms behind him, fumbling with the cuffs, yelling for the suspect to stop resisting. Harry was not resisting.

Avy knew there was something very wrong. She could see that the cops were enraged all right, but there was also panic in their faces. They kept fumbling, losing their grip on the suspect, who reeked of trash, urine, and vile body fluids. She couldn't believe this qualified for an ordinary takedown.

Chubby cursed under his breath. "Awe, shit. This ain't happening!"

The sergeant was crouched, trying to secure his handcuffs on the suspect when he keeled backward and fell on his hips. His face contorted, the muscles in his neck bulged like fat rope. He fell flat on his back, gasping for air.

The other cop staggered to his feet, looked at his downed partner. "Sarg! What the fuck?" He wobbled, holding his hands out to steady himself, but in the next moment, he took half a dozen steps toward the store wall. He fell into it, collapsing near the dumpster. He drew his legs up into a fetal position, and vomited a green discharge that splattered on the blacktop.

Both cops twitched for fifteen seconds before they lay still.

Harry pushed himself to his feet, then looked at the one dangling cuff on his wrist. He fastened his gaze on Avy. "Raleigh's finest," he said. "I guess they gave their all for the city, eh?" Harry used one of the cop's cuff keys to free himself. He turned around in a low crouch after throwing the cuffs in the dumpster. In the next minute, he pushed off the pavement, taking great loping strides toward the three. With the raincoat trailing behind him, he looked like some demented superhero.

No one had to tell Avy to run. Gripped by panic, she pumped her legs for all their worth. Chubby and Sebastian caught up with her. The three flew down the alley at breakneck speed, unleashing every gram of adrenalin they had in their bodies. They knew as sure as the sun was hot, if this man caught up to them, their lives were forfeit.

A few people who had left the restaurant out of curiosity and entered the alley had to dive out of the way when the threesome passed. Avy did not look back. She needed every bit of forward speed and momentum. Nothing short of a car striking her could stop her from evading her pursuer. One almost did while they sped across the street.

They reached the motel gate with a mass collision, just getting it open enough to cram themselves through. They reached Avy's room by taking three stairs at a time. Sebastian fumbled with the key, almost breaking it in the lock. Avy looked down from the balcony, scanning the street for the filthy man. Her chest heaved with such force she thought she might crack a rib. A strong arm pulled her backward into the room. The door slammed—latch thrown. She fell into a settee chair.

Chubby stumbled to the window. He yanked back the curtain, tearing it from the rods. He gazed down while trying to contain a terrible coughing fit. "Of all that is righteous and decent," he wheezed, "what in the name of Moses just happened?" After catching his breath he went to the phone on the nightstand and called the police. Having to repeat his harried claim several times,

explaining that he was “calm,” Chubby got out the story of what had happened. He hung up, then cuffed the sweat from his face. “Wait a minute...what if I’m sending more cops into danger? Did you see what that sucker did? I can’t believe it. Those cops dropped like flies!”

“He’s a goddamn Emmaus,” swore Sebastian, while he poured bullets into his front pocket. A pistol protruded from his waistband.

“What do mean by that?” Avy shrieked. “What are you saying, Sebastian?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking at her askance. “Forget it!”

“No! I want to hear what you have to say. What’s an e-mouse?”

He turned on her. “I told you to forget it! I’m just thinking out loud, okay?”

Nothing made sense, Avy decided. Still reeling from the nausea, she got to her feet to confront her boyfriend. “What are going to do with that gun? You heard what the detective said.”

He got in her face, his eyes bulging. “All bets are off! You saw what happened. That thing is a cop-killer. What makes you think we’re safe when he can dust cops out of his way like that? You think they can protect us against him?” He turned away, yanked his pack open and began to throw items in it. “The whole playing field has been changed, none of it in our favor.” He gave her a scathing glance. “Put that phone down! Chubby already called the cops. Detective Bulmer won’t be able to help you. He’ll get killed too.”

Avy cradled the phone receiver, then looked at Chubby with eyes more pleading than inquiring. She had never seen Sebastian in such a fit of rage. She needed a logical confidant right now. Not a raving lunatic. Something had to change.

She held her hands out in a pleading gesture. “Chubby, you’ve got to talk some sense into him!”

Chubby stammered, “I-I don’t know what to think right now. I can’t believe any of this is happening. I just know that we have to—I have to get my sidearm! I’m sorry.” He opened the door, then hurried to his room.

Avy persisted. “What do you expect to do, Sebastian? You know something about this, but you’re not telling.”

“You wouldn’t understand half of it.”

“I get it now. I’m just half of a real soul, so I should expect half of an answer. Is that it?”

He zipped up his small carryall bag, then glared at her. “That was a cheap shot. I love you because you’re special to me. I wouldn’t care if you were half succubus, or I was damned to hell for coupling with you. Right now, we’re in way over our heads on this. There’s just one way to deal with this. My way. Give me your keys. Now!”

Sirens wailed in the distance. Motel doors opened. Feet shuffled on the landing.

Avy handed over her keys. Sebastian told her to pack what belongings she had, because he wasn’t certain if they would be coming back. They met Chubby at the front door when they were ready to leave. The three hurried down to the vehicles behind the motel. Sebastian ordered that all

of Chubby's camping gear be packed in the small Suzuki Jeep, stating that they would not need two vehicles because they were riding together from here on out. Sebastian got behind the wheel, the pistol tucked under his thigh.

They drove to the alley where the officers had pulled in when they had received the call. Yellow barrier tape stretched across the entrance. Three uniformed officers stood guard, keeping spectators back. An ambulance sat further down the alleyway, its doors open. Several paramedics knelt over the two prone officers—one of them was repacking a defibrillator back into its case. One of the prone officers was naked, except for a small towel covering his lower half.

Sebastian pulled up, nosing the front of the Jeep into the barrier tape, almost snapping it. An officer waved him off. "This is a crime scene, clear your vehicle!"

Feigning ignorance, Sebastian said, "Sorry, sir. What happened? Are those police officers?"

Avy looked at Sebastian. She felt like slapping him. What kind of a ruse was he pulling? He knew what had happened here!

"Two officer-related deaths. Move along."

"Why is that one almost naked, sir?"

"He got stripped."

"Who did this? Was there a suspect? Where did he go? Maybe I can help."

"Look, unless you were a witness you have no business here."

"I might have seen something, but I'm not sure."

"A homeless man was seen leaving north up this street. Did you see him?"

"Ah, no. Maybe I was mistaken. Sorry for taking up your time. I'm very sorry about the officers." Sebastian backed the vehicle up, then headed north. Avy watched his jaw cinch, his expression changing. He had gone back to being the angry boyfriend again, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, head swiveling side to side, watching the alleys and sidewalks.

"Keep your nose tweaked," said Sebastian. "I know that son-of-a-bitch is close. He couldn't have gotten too far. He stands out like a neon sign. Somebody must have seen him."

Sebastian pulled over to the side of the street. A half block ahead, a uniformed officer stood on the curb interviewing pedestrians, scribbling notes in his report book. When the officer reentered his cruiser, he pulled ahead to continue down the street. Sebastian followed the cruiser. The cop hung a right at the next intersection. Once again, he pulled over to interview some people who were sitting under an umbrella at a sidewalk café. One of the witnesses pointed to a small alley across the street. The cop waved to the group, then took off in that direction.

Avy's car trailed behind at a comfortable distance. More patrol cars merged into the area, evidence that they were following a "hot" lead.

Avy noted that Sebastian continued to keep from following too closely, apparently not wanting to arouse attention. He was using law enforcement for his own personal radar. She guessed that Sebastian, knowing that the police were closing in on their suspect, intended to be in the area for the final takedown. But then what? She didn't understand why he didn't tell the police what he knew.

"They'll show us the way," said Sebastian. "They can't cover all the ground. Knowing the Wax Man, he'll just give them the slip again. Then we'll be right there, waiting for him."

"Now there you go again!" Avy said, flustered. "Wax Man? What's got into you? If you know something, spill it! If you have personal knowledge about this character you should be blabbing everything you know to the cops."

"Yeah, what gives?" Chubby asked over the engine noise.

Sebastian ignored their questions. His mission was set in stone. He drove on, hiding the Jeep behind corners, slowing down when he had to, then speeding up. Avy could tell he had nothing on his mind but the breadcrumb trail, the maze through the streets and alleys.

* * * *

Evening came with a pinkish sky laced with sheet-like clouds. After hours of driving, Sebastian slowed to park by the side of a street that bordered a large field. A dozen officers occupied the field, beating the weedy bushes with their batons. A few had their weapons drawn. This was where the leads had taken the police, who had now set up a perimeter in a concentrated search area.

"They've run the bastard to ground," said Sebastian. "They think he's in there." He looked to his left toward a small warehouse district surrounded by chain link fences, storage garages, and rental yards. "Nobody is looking over there in that jumble of buildings. He wouldn't be caught out in the open in a field again. He's looking for cover." Sebastian took off his t-shirt and tore it into three large strips. He said the cloth strips would make rudimentary masks. Avy and Chubby donned the makeshift masks, both questioning him about the reason for using them. He refused to answer.

They continued on, driving around the many lots near the unkempt storage buildings. Whenever Sebastian found an unlocked gate, he drove onto the property and checked every square-foot. He left the vehicle several times to search inside suspect buildings. Chubby always stayed in the vehicle with Avy, panning his flashlight between the shadows.

The search lasted late into the night. They were about to call it quits when Chubby reared up from his seat and jumped from the Jeep. The high beams illuminated a scampering figure running the course of a rain gutter on the top of a building. Avy couldn't make out the identity of the creature, but believed it to be nothing more than a stray cat. She changed her mind when she got a better look—it looked like a giant rat.

Chubby ran ahead of the creature, stopped in a combat stance and raised his gun. When the scampering creature passed over his head, he fired three shots. The opossum flipped into the air, then somersaulted onto the oil-soaked ground. Chubby fired two more shots point blank. Blood

splattered the aluminum warehouse wall. "That's for Gretchen!" he told it, picking it up. He swung it by its tail, bashing its head into the wall. Satisfied that it was dead, he dropped the mangled glob of fur on the ground.

Chubby yelled at the top of his lungs, "I just killed your precious little pet! You hear me? Come get me, you filthy bastard. I'm waiting for you!"

At first Avy thought Chubby might have lost his mind to grief, guessing that he had killed just one of the many opossums that might have been in the area. When she went to examine it with Sebastian, she changed her mind. The animal stank like no other. It reeked of that cadaverous, fetid odor. Chubby had indeed snuffed out Harry's little partner in crime.

Sebastian swung a piece of pipe against the warehouse wall sending up a deafening clang. He yelled at the night. "Come out and fight, you coward! I know you're in there. You can have a piece of me now!"

They spent the next hour driving around the property, searching for any conceivable hiding place. They found nothing. The cops had seemingly disappeared from the area, not even alerted by the gunshots. Wherever Harry had gone, he had tucked himself away for good. Avy spoke with the two men, trying to convince them that the enemy had lost his small bloodhound and the probability of finding the three of them again would be impossible. After having run out of rage-induced adrenaline, Sebastian calmed. He allowed Avy to suggest their next move, which seemed to be a form of apology. At last, he would listen to reason.

"We call detective Bulmer," she said. "He can furnish us with a safe house or protective custody. It's the right way to handle this. I think you should tell him all he needs to know about your so-called Wax Man. For God's sake, people are dying. More might end up dead if we don't get this out in the open."

Chubby said, "She's right, man. That's our best option right now."

* * * *

Avy made an urgent call, rousing detective Bulmer from sleep at his residence. He told her he had just arrived home after investigating the two officer homicides but he would meet them at the entrance to Police Headquarters. The man made an appearance at three in the morning, looking disheveled. But his eyes were bright, senses obviously aroused. There was no mistaking his interest in what they had to say.

"Sebastian has some new evidence about who this man is," said Avy while they walked down the hallway.

"I'll take anything I can get," said the detective.

Bulmer sequestered the three in a large conference room, locked the door against entry then started a tape recorder. It soon became evident that a city detective could have a "hell hath no fury" attitude about being left out of the loop concerning a major homicide investigation, when Sebastian began to open up about what he knew.

“Why didn’t you speak up about this before? Two officers died in the line of duty during a time that you had full knowledge about what killed them!”

“I wasn’t certain at first,” said Sebastian. “I didn’t know the identity of the assailant until after I witnessed the deaths. It was the way they were killed that tipped me off. I’m sorry I didn’t know sooner.”

“Just what or who are we dealing with here?” Bulmer pressed.

“According to a story I heard from a friend,” Sebastian began, “there was a race of plague victims in the beginning, lepers that originated out of northern Jerusalem. They were called Emmaus. Which translates to ‘The Despised Ones.’ They were people who carried a variety of diseases that had no known cures at the time. They were rounded up to be quarantined in small isolated villages and outposts. They were shunned by society. All of the afflicted were cloistered together.”

“Didn’t they all die from their diseases?” asked Bulmer.

“Ninety-nine percent of these communities died out never to be seen again. But a few survived. By some biological miracle, the remaining victims developed antibodies against the pathogens. From one generation to another they became immune, even after picking up additional diseases from other sources. They scattered into the population, forming secret communities. They were once known as the ‘shadow people’, sometimes the ‘dispossessed.’ They became common outcasts, synonymous with the homeless, gypsies, vagabonds, transients—call them whatever you like. Their bodies processed all the viral forms into one all-powerful plague—a master plague. But this plague was so lethal it could transfer through the pores or get picked up through the lungs.”

Bulmer sighed. “You’re talking about instantaneous death.”

“Yes. Just being close to the person with the contagion can make you sick as hell. There is no cure for it. Death is certain with direct contact.”

Bulmer looked incensed. “Why don’t they die from their own contagion? I mean, what keeps the line going?”

“Like I said, the few who have survived are immune. They don’t live past their late twenties—in fact, the teenagers of the species, I guess you would call them, are the most active. They breed within their own bloodline.”

“It doesn’t sound plausible. How is it that we’ve never seen them before?”

“They’re masters of stealth,” said Sebastian in a mystic tone. “It’s a small network of individuals who always keep hidden away. Look, you can’t find something that won’t show itself.”

Detective Bulmer appeared woozy for a moment, like he was trying to shake off a bad drunk. “How do they survive? How do they live?”

“They’re dumpster divers—they eat out of the trash. Sometimes they kill livestock or domesticated pets. Some prey on the homeless—robbing or murdering them. They kill our homeless people because they can get away with it. The homeless are never missed. You have to admit, sir, that even prostitute homicides get better investigations than our homeless population.”

Bulmer grunted. "I think I remember something about a Typhoid Mary, but this sounds ten times worse."

"Yeah," said Sebastian. "She was called a 'healthy carrier.' Over time, the Emmaus die from the demands of the disease, but not before birthing a new line."

"Jesus," Bulmer swore. "What do they look like? All the same?"

"They're not pretty, showing all kinds of boils, sores, and rashes. You don't even want to get within a few yards of one without protection. It wouldn't be a bad idea to get some protective suits on your officers. At least the ones who are assigned to the task force."

"I'll get right on that." The detective paused the recorder after a knock sounded at the door. He answered it, receiving a slip of paper from a clerk. He took a seat at the table, then read the document. After he turned the recorder back on he said, "This is a lab report about the autopsy findings on the first officer fatality. The diagnosis for cause of death states that it was a contagious unknown pathogen, which caused a cardiopulmonary arrest. From what you've told me, it looks like your story pans out. Would you have a best guess of where we might find this—"

"Harry," said Avy. "He calls himself Harry. Like in 'Typhoid Harry.' Sick joke."

"He's also been called the Wax Man," said Sebastian. "But rumor says he doesn't like the name."

"Neither do I," said Bulmer. "'Operation Harry' looks better on a taskforce report. Now, is there anything else you can tell me about him? Where can we contact the person who supplied you with this information to begin with?"

Sebastian cleared his throat. "My source moved out of the area. We've lost touch. It was years ago. I don't think you could find him now. I'm afraid I don't have any additional information."

Avy clenched her fist so hard her knuckles crackled. She knew that Sebastian's Wax Man informant had been Janus. She slapped the tabletop. "That's all you have? Great gods in heaven, thanks for letting Chubby and me in on this little tidbit. Don't ever offer to alert me in case of a national disaster. You know, like a hurricane, flood, earthquake or an asteroid?"

Sebastian shoved his palms hard against his temples. "I didn't know what I was dealing with. Stop being sarcastic!"

Detective Bulmer held his hands out. "Please. Misdirected anger doesn't solve anything. I'd like you to write down a small map of this warehouse, the place where you think you encountered the pet of this Harry."

"I know that filthy opossum belonged to him," said Chubby. "I put so much lead into him you could use him for a boat anchor."

Bulmer frowned. "What did I tell you about discharging weapons?"

Chubby's mouth moved, but no words came out. He'd tripped himself up.

Sebastian got busy sketching out a map. When he finished it, he handed to the detective.

Bulmer looked at the rendering. “We’ll check this whole area out. Now, it looks like we might be able to provide you with some relocation. At least somewhere off the beaten path where we can station a couple of units to provide security. It won’t be the Ritz. You’ll have to stay indoors. When we apprehend the suspect we’ll cut you loose. Not a minute before though. Are you in agreement with that?”

Avy nodded. She didn’t want any trouble and would follow his orders by the book. Out of the three, she thought she’d be the one most willing to follow the guidelines. Her male companions were not the ideal vessels of emotional containment. They were more than apt to buck the system.

“Fine then. Oh, there’s one more thing. I want your firearms turned over to our custody for safekeeping. This minute. Check them at the sergeant’s desk. He’ll book them into our property room.”

Sebastian cringed. Chubby just hunched his shoulders.

Bulmer turned the recorder off. “Okay, just a short session with a sketch artist, then we’ll roll.”

Chapter 21

The safe house sat on the west side of Raleigh on a quiet lane. Cracker box size in dimensions, it was an old, one-story clapboard with most of its better days behind it. Bulmer said it had been acquired in a drug seizure, but it served as a good safe house since an additional unit could be stationed in the back alley. A chain link fence separated the alley from the large backyard, providing an unencumbered view of the rear. A swing gate allowed swift access in case the officers had to storm the property. A unit would be stationed out in front to monitor the surroundings from that direction. A high cinderblock wall topped with barbed wire separated the safe house from residences on either side. All windows were equipped with wrought iron security bars. The doors were steel-reinforced.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the house, Avy listened to the instructions of the officer who would be stationed across the street. Chubby and Sebastian seemed indifferent to the spiel, which irritated her to no end.

"I'll be right here," said the officer. "I check in with headquarters every thirty minutes. I also have a direct line to the phone inside. You can call if you need anything. In the event that the phone becomes inoperable, flash the porch light several times to get our attention. We'll have some breakfast for you in the morning. Try to get some sleep. We'll see you in a few hours."

"If you don't mind," Sebastian grumbled, "it's almost morning now. We haven't had any sleep. Bring dinner. We'll be up then. Please keep an eye on the Suzuki behind your unit. It's packed with some expensive gear."

"Dinner it is then. The car will be safe."

Avy watched the plainclothes officer walk across the street, then enter his unmarked vehicle. She noted that the female officer sitting next to him hadn't donned her mask or put gloves on, which went against the direct orders that Bulmer had given them at the station.

With the key provided them, clothes bags in hand, they entered the house. Avy walked across the wooden living room floor, causing it to give an annoying creak. She investigated the kitchen and bathrooms, finding both moderately clean. She went back into the living room and found both men standing just inside the front door. They had moved mere inches. Each eyed their surroundings with what she guessed to be uneasiness.

"It's not going to get any better," said Avy. "It's all we have right now."

The men tossed their small carryall packs on the couch.

Sebastian collapsed in a flower-print easy chair. "They could have at least given us a large guard dog. I feel like I'm shackled now. I've always had to depend on myself. Now I have to trust somebody else."

"I don't feel comfortable without my piece," Chubby remarked. "I'm a better shot than I am a boxer or wrestler."

Sebastian unzipped a side pocket on his pack. He pulled out a double-barreled silver derringer. He brought an eye over the tiny sights. "I had this tucked away just in case. It's chambered for twenty-five. That's enough to do some damage. But I just have two rounds. I forgot to pick up extras."

"Good for you." Chubby perked up. "Now I don't feel so helpless."

Men and their guns, thought Avy. She supposed they were necessary. It gave her a twinge of comfort knowing that Sebastian had hidden one away. She still believed the police would serve the best protective role. Weren't they the professionals? Didn't they have every gadget and tactic known to man designed to handle every emergency? Why the big fuss?

The only thing to do was forget about it. She dialed up the wall thermostat, trying to raise some heat. After a combination thump-hiss, the floor heater started to kick up some stale, warm air. There, that would help ease things a bit. Although it would take more than that to chase the chill out of her bones.

Inspecting the bedrooms, she noticed the beds had linen in all three. After choosing the smallest room, she flopped down on the double bed, staring up at the motionless ceiling fan. She didn't expect Sebastian to join her soon, or at all for that matter. Right now, he was acting like a fussy baby who refused to be picked up—a tiny mind on the verge of a tantrum. She wouldn't refuse his embrace, but she felt certain he would ignore her hugs. It would be the first time she would sleep without him in her arms. Even though they hadn't been together very long, the thought of their disassociation gave her a heartfelt pain.

The stress of the last week had all come to a head. She succumbed to complete exhaustion. There was no easing or drifting off into sleep. She passed out.

* * * *

She awoke to the shake of her foot. Sleepy-eyed, she caught sight of Sebastian's back just as he left the small bedroom. She threw her legs over the bed, then looked at the unruffled pillow beside hers. There was no evidence that her boyfriend had slept in the room. He had either stayed in another bedroom or slept on the living room couch. It hurt to be shunned. She rubbed her temples, trying to ease a throbbing headache.

She went to the kitchen for a drink of water. She found a bottle of aspirin on the counter. It seemed she was not the only one suffering from a headache. Looking through the window, she noticed it was dark. She glanced at her watch. It was eight in the evening, a very long time for her to have slept. She washed down three tablets, then entered the living room.

Chubby had his feet up in a recliner, wearing a smile. "Hi, Avy. Did you sleep okay?"

She glanced at Sebastian, who sat on the couch watching the TV at low volume. "Pretty good, I guess, considering everything. I think that once you get a whiff of the Wax Man he stays in you like some poison."

Chubby nodded. “Yeah, we were both sick. I blew chunks like a baby. Dinner will be here in a minute. Sausage pizza with garlic bread.”

Wonderful, she thought. Nightmare food. She wouldn’t fit into an assistant’s costume anytime in the near future if she kept eating high calorie takeout food. She sat down on the extreme end of the couch, looking at the program that had captured Sebastian’s attention. It was a live breaking newscast. An artist’s sketch took up the upper left-hand corner of the screen. The reporter droned on about the recent officer fatalities along with the search in progress. The sketched figure looked like some troll out of one of Grimm’s fairy tales. Of course it was their fault since it had been their eyewitness description that made the rendering possible.

The doorbell rang. Avy answered it, and she accepted two pizza boxes from a young uniformed officer. He picked up three drink containers from the porch stoop, then followed her to the kitchen. He asked if there would be anything else. Avy said, “No. Thanks for your trouble.”

While the young officer was leaving, he said over his shoulder, “It’s just a matter of time before we get him.”

Avy had to reheat the food. When she finished, she brought it into the living room, wearing oven mitts. They spread the pizzas on the small coffee table, and ate silently as they listened to the news. She would have liked another channel, anything to get away from the subject matter, but the TV set was an old black-and-white model with rabbit ears. She assumed that the other local channels would be running the same news report. From what the reporter said, Raleigh had never experienced anything like this before. She noticed nothing was said about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the officers—no mention of a lethal pathogen. The reporter advised that residents should report the whereabouts of the wanted suspect without approaching him.

“That’s going to raise some eyebrows,” said Sebastian “Nobody is going to be afraid of that character. If anything, it’s going to draw a bunch of vigilantes out looking for him.”

“Morbid curiosity,” Avy said disgusted.

They watched the television reports late into the night, their bellies full of sausage pizza and diet Coke. Avy followed the news of the hunt, taking note that Chubby had fallen asleep in his chair. Sebastian followed ten minutes later, his nasal snores settling into an annoying rhythm. Having slept most of the day, she still had some nervous energy. She changed the channel, finding one that had a late night sitcom. Watching the slapstick antics of the actors allowed a tiny smile to crack her face. It had been such a long time since she’d smiled.

* * * *

The officer had just washed down a donut with a sip of coffee. He had removed his mask to eat and carry on a conversation with his female partner. He looked to his left, checking the front part of the house again, just like he had done dozens of times before. A dingy forty-watt bulb illuminated the small porch.

“All clear,” he muttered to his partner. “Nothing suspicious to report. Again.”

“Tough shift,” she said. “I could think of a thousand assignments I’d rather be on right now other than getting all bleary-eyed on a boring stakeout.”

“There’s nothing to see out there.”

“Tell me about it. I’m sitting here eating maple bars at a thousand calories a pop. I can feel my butt growing by the minute.”

“Wanna fool around?”

“That’s all we need right now. Getting collared for fraternization. Bulmer would bust us down to horse patrol, then have us mucking out stalls.”

“Chances are, we won’t get caught. At least massage the back of my neck.”

She reached over, plied her fingers against the base of his neck, and began to knead the muscles.

The male officer groaned, glanced in his rearview mirror. He saw a human form in the distance. A streetlight twenty yards away backlit the silhouette of a uniformed officer heading in their direction on foot. He blinked. “We’ve got a uniform approaching from behind. Hey. Don’t take your hand away! Chances are it’s a rookie—what’s he going to do? Tattle?”

“Then hide the donuts,” she said in a husky voice. She smoothed her hand over his shoulder.

The male officer gave her a playful moan, turned the key to the “on” position, then rolled down his driver’s window. “I’ll get rid of him.” He could see the lower half of the officer getting closer in his side mirror. He turned his head in anticipation and looked up. The uniformed officer stood there for a while, his upper half obscured past the roofline. A powerful stench entered the car. The male cop made a face. “Jesus Christ, rookie.”

The mystery cop ducked down to look through the window, showing a broken-toothed grin.

The male officer’s voice caught in his throat when he saw the hideous face.

“Tag, you’re it,” said the mystery officer before he thrust his hand through the open window, catching the female’s fingers and the male officer’s neck with the same touch.

The female was the first to die. She fell into the lap of her partner. The male officer threw his head back, his body stiffening. Then the convulsions came. The last thing he saw was the tan headliner of his car. Then he knew no more.

* * * *

The hour-long comedy ended. It had provided a small reprieve. Avy had even laughed out loud a few times. She decided to clear the empty food containers off the coffee table. She picked up the mitts, put them in her teeth, then reached for the boxes.

The doorbell rang, followed by a light knock.

She spit out the gloves, then dropped the boxes. Both men stirred. She crept to the front window and pulled back the curtain. She saw a uniformed officer on the porch, facing away from her, head down. He looked like the same one who had delivered the pizza boxes.

“Who’s at the door?” Sebastian grouched.

“Police,” said Avy. She walked to the front door and unhooked the latch. When she opened the door, a wave of stench rolled over her. The second thing that accosted her was the ghoul-like face sporting a collection of broken teeth in a slobbery maw. She stepped backward holding her breath, too far away from the door to slam it shut.

The Wax Man gave her a mock salute. “I was listening in on this, which clued me in on your whereabouts.” He wiggled a hand held police radio. “Care to dance with the devil?” He held out the other hand in invitation.

Avy backpedaled so fast her sneakers chirped over the varnished floor. She shrieked an alarm. The men reared up from their seats. Sebastian fumbled for his derringer. Chubby stooped, grabbing the oven mitts, then stepped in the middle of the living room, cutting off the Wax Man’s advance. He shoved his hands into the mitts and braced in a boxing stance.

The Wax Man shut the front door with a backward kick. “Fat boy want a little punch fest?” He advanced toward Chubby. “That was a very bad thing you did to Judas.”

Sebastian straight-armed his derringer, cocking the hammer. “Eat this!” He fired. The gun bucked in his hand. The bullet struck the Wax Man dead center in the chest, knocking him backward. He regained his stance, advanced again. Sebastian fired a second time, making what should have been a lethal hit, but the bullet left no more than an oblong smear on the uniform over the stomach area.

“He’s wearing a vest!” Chubby yelled.

Avy ran to the kitchen, grabbed a fistful of knives from the drawer and returned. She pitched them at the intruder, almost hitting the man, save for one that bounced off his shin. Sebastian picked up a sofa cushion to use as a shield.

Chubby lunged, swinging with a powerful uppercut. The Wax Man’s head rocked, spittle flying in ropy strands. Chubby charged him, swinging vicious punches, driving the foe toward the front door. The Wax Man planted a foot backward, kicking off the wall with his hand outstretched. He grazed Chubby across the forehead. The large man staggered backward for a moment, then collapsed to the floor.

“Get out of the house, Sebastian!” Avy screamed, backing toward the kitchen.

The Wax Man glanced at Sebastian, but then trained his colorless eyes on Avy. He stomped across the floor after her. She ran through a small laundry room, slamming the door behind her. She stepped out the back door, then positioned herself facing toward the house. Concentrating, she waited for the laundry door to burst open. When it did, she Walked. She arrived at the front door. She opened it, stepped through and knelt down to check on her fallen friend.

Chubby lay on his side gasping, trying to catch his breath. He choked out words. “Run, Avy, get away. Don’t touch me. It’s over.”

Sebastian ran to their sides. He tried to help Chubby up, but the large man had lost all muscle control and his eyes had rolled back in his head. He had a few last words for them, but they came out with gags. "Gah, go to your mother. Promise me. Tell her I believe—that I loved—" He closed his eyes, his breath leaving him in a shuddering wheeze.

"I promise you!" Avy squealed. "Oh God!"

The Wax Man came through the kitchen doorway, spotting the two kneeling on the floor. "So you're a Walker!" he said. "I should have known this wasn't going to be easy."

There was no time to think about staying behind. Chubby lay lifeless on the floor. The Wax Man stood twenty feet away from them. Avy knew that in the next instant he would charge across the living room.

The couple rose to their feet, then scrambled through the front door. They ran across the lawn toward the parked Jeep.

With a last spark of defiance, Chubby thrust a feeble hand out when the Wax Man leapt over him. Losing his footing, the villain tumbled onto the porch, striking his chin on the concrete.

Sebastian fumbled with the keys, his hands shaking with such tremors he missed the ignition slot. Avy watched the Wax Man pick himself up, then begin to trot across the grass. She grabbed the keys away from Sebastian, stuck them in the ignition, turned it, and started the vehicle.

The Wax Man gained the street then angled off, trying to intercept the moving Jeep. He dove at the rear gate at the precise second Sebastian popped the clutch. The Jeep made a wild lurch. The Wax Man fastened a grip on the loading gate, toes dragging across the asphalt.

"Faster!" Avy yelled. "Weave—throw him off!"

Sebastian punched the accelerator, shifting gears. He yanked the steering wheel, almost colliding with a parked car. He made a sharp left turn, bringing the Jeep up on two wheels, then straightened it out.

They couldn't throw the man off—the grip was tenacious.

Avy pulled a high-top tennis shoe off, then crawled to the back. She slammed it repeatedly on the black fingers with all the strength she could muster. With a final blow, the grip broke. The Wax Man hit the pavement, tumbling into the street end over end. Avy pitched the shoe away. She made her way back to the front passenger seat.

Sebastian looked at her, missed a shift grinding the gears. "I'm sorry, Avy. I couldn't concentrate. I could have saved him. I just couldn't concentrate!"

She wasn't paying attention. Other terrible thoughts consumed her. The sight of Chubby lying on the floor tore unmercifully at her. In a few seconds, the tremors came upon her and she began to cry, her shoulders shaking with great heaving sobs.

"It's okay, Avy, I'll get us out of here. I won't let him hurt you!"

That's what Chubby had told her, she realized with horror. He had vowed to protect her with his life. Now he had honored that promise by paying the ultimate price. She shuddered to think how many more police officers had given up their lives. Even a helpless old dog had perished. It

was fate. Destiny, God, angels—there were no such things that held sway over demons. She hated them all! She raised a fist into the breeze, shaking it like a hammer. “I hate you, Janus!” she called out. “I hate you most of all! Do you hear me? You allowed all of this—all of this because of me!”

The tears flowed until she lay back against the headrest, spent. The stars overhead winked at her, but she saw no beauty in them. She didn’t believe in them anymore, not even wishes upon them. Not now. What’s more, she didn’t believe in herself, convinced that she should never have been born. All of it, everything that had gone wrong, the deaths, misery, loss, had all been her fault.

She slammed her eyes shut, feeling nothing inside. Her only sensations were the swerves of the car. She couldn’t care less where they ended up. Some place far away, she hoped. Away from humanity, away from people that could be hurt. By her.

“No one can protect us now,” said Sebastian over the engine. “We’re on our own. I’ll get us there. I’ll keep us safe. I won’t let you down again!”

* * * *

Avy opened her eyes. The car was no longer moving. She heard two sounds—the chirp of a cricket, mixed with Sebastian’s voice.

“We made it,” he said.

She leaned forward in her seat, squinting to focus in the dark. She could see nothing, save a cloak of black. After her eyes adjusted, she could just make out the gray mass of the water tower, standing like some fat bowlegged giant amongst the trees. Sebastian appeared at her side of the car and scooped her up in strong arms. He carried her to the old wooden ladder, then put her down.

“We’ll be safe here,” he said. “Let me help you, honey.”

She didn’t understand the change in him. She still felt numb—didn’t care much. But she began to pull herself up the rungs in a half-hearted attempt to climb, allowing him to spot her from behind. An incredible weariness came over her, and it took all of her strength just to move up the ladder. It seemed like her spirit had given up. Thoughts of letting go to fall to her death danced in her head like evil little muses, daring her to end all of the madness. Too late. She’d reached the top. He led her inside the tank, sitting her down upon a stale mattress that smelled of urine.

“I’ll be right back, Avy,” he said in the darkness. “I’m just going down to bring some things up, then stash the car. I love you, babe. Hold tight.”

She drew her knees up tight into her chest, indifferent to his sentiment. She listened while Sebastian made several trips up the ladder, hauling up camping gear. The temperature inside the metal hull hovered around fifty degrees. She had no jacket to ward off the chill. She had left all her personal items behind. They had no cellphone to call the authorities. They had no way to report what had happened to Chubby, or what they suspected had happened to the officers who had been guarding them. Of course, they were all dead. How could they not be?

She looked around in the darkness, fighting off a shiver. How long could they last in such a dismal, unforgiving place without going mad? Spurred on by his vendetta, would the Wax Man run them to ground again?

Sebastian returned, draped a comforter over her shoulders, then lit the wick on a small Coleman lantern. He turned it down to a tepid glow that provided enough light to see each other, along with their surroundings. He sat next to her, his arm curled around her waist. She ignored the gesture, her body incapable of feeling anything like comfort.

"I know it looks bad," he tried. "I didn't know where else to go. I wasn't thinking straight. Maybe I should have taken us to the police station. I guess I just panicked."

She didn't speak. She heard his words but didn't want to interpret the meaning. She wondered if he was just trying to make her feel better. Maybe his attempt at reconciliation made him feel better. Right now, she didn't trust anybody. Why should she?

"I've got the car hidden," he said. "We're safe here until I can figure out what to do. If it's any comfort, you chopped off one of his fingers. I found it in the Jeep bed. I flicked it out with a stick, then kicked dirt over it."

She had nothing to say. She fell on her side, drawing the blanket over her shoulders. She could feel him cuddle close. It sent a chill up her spine

* * * *

She had no concept of the passage of time. No clue how many days they had spent inside the water tower. She did nothing more than sleep or take occasional sips of water. In spite of Sebastian's pleas, she refused to eat from the small plates he had offered her, including the MREs he had found in Chubby's camping gear.

"You haven't eaten a thing in two days," she heard him say. It could have been two years for all she cared. She kicked the plate over.

He took hold of her wrist. "Okay, fine. Then we have to leave so we can get you help."

She wrenched her hand away, then fell onto the mattress. She pulled the comforter over her head, clamping off the sound of his voice. He spoke for ten minutes more before giving up.

* * * *

She awoke in the evening, sitting bolt upright, startled by a terrible nightmare. Sweat drenched her jogging suit. Her heart thumped in her chest. Sebastian was gone. For a moment, the loneliness ravaged her. She wondered if that was a good sign, an indication that real feelings were returning. She relaxed somewhat when she heard the scuffing sounds on the ladder outside, sending a tremor through the tower.

Sebastian appeared, ducking under the ragged opening. He carried a gallon can of lantern fuel. When he noticed she was awake, he set the can down.

"Jesus, you're up!" he said. "I was just about to fix dinner. I hope you don't mind, but I found an old pair of Chubby's sneakers in his gear. I put them on you while you were asleep. Can't go traipsing around with one bare foot."

She looked at the shoes and wiggled her toes. How ironic that they were a close fit. Chubby had had small feet. He wouldn't need these anymore. She sniffed. He provided for her even after he was dead. There was still no way to come to terms with his loss. She tried to banish the terrible last images she had of him from her mind. Instead of thinking about it, she watched Sebastian prepare a small meal using a one-burner cooking stove. He set a plate by her side when he finished.

"Avy, I've been worried about you. If you need to blame someone, you can start with me."

She looked at the goulash. A tiny plastic fork stuck up from the sizzling little mound.

"It's hash," he said. "You've got to eat something, Avy. Please, for both of us. We've got so much to live for—we need to keep up our strength. Your health is an issue right now."

She took a few small bites. "Chubby doesn't need his health anymore," she said monotone.

"I know that, sweetheart. I am so sorry about that. He gave his life for us—for you. How do you think he would feel right now if he saw you like this? It would break his heart. You meant so much to him. You mean so much to me."

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean it with all my soul. I've been crazy these past few days, out of my mind with revenge. I apologize for all of it. You're going through something like that now. It's shock. You're here with me, yet you're gone, somewhere far away. I need you to reach back to grab a hold of those feelings. I need you to fight again. I need you to realize that you're alive, blessed with a righteous purpose. Do you know what I'm saying?"

She understood part of it. In regard to her purpose, she had a morbid conclusion about that subject.

"I'm the reason for all of this," she said deadpan. "I am not even a real person. I'm half human mixed with half something else. Even the half human doesn't belong to me. It belongs to my mother. My body is just a container for other souls with their own purpose. Him. He started all of it. If Janus is so high mighty powerful, why didn't he stop any of this from happening? I hate him!"

"He can't interfere with destiny. He uses his influence to bring about the best outcome. Even demigods have limits. We don't even know how many past disasters he's prevented. You think things are tough now? What if Janus hadn't been around at all? We might not be sitting here talking about any of this. I'm telling you, Avy, you're on a path."

"Yeah, right. His path for me is death and destruction. Case closed."

Sebastian raised his voice an octave. "You saved three lives that would have ended up in the bottom of the Atlantic! For your information, one of the greatest figures of history was a mongrel breed like you're calling it. He suffered more trials than you could ever imagine. Hercules overcame the most horrible obstacles to fulfill his destiny."

"He's a fable."

Sebastian stood up, spanking his hands over his pants. "You have no idea, no concept of what you're talking about. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. You would be wise to remember that."

“There you go again. Talking about something that doesn’t make sense. Why can’t you ever say what you mean? You hide everything. I swear to God, I don’t even know you anymore!”

He shook his head in disgust, then marched to the lantern. The floor underneath her wobbled. “You wouldn’t understand,” Sebastian said with more force. “You have the power for a reason. You’ve never understood why it makes you so important to this whole thing. The stage play has been written. You can’t change it, but you’re allowed to improvise some of the lines or change the scenery. The end justifies your means.” Sebastian removed the cap from the fuel can.

“Then I’ve been doing a piss-poor job. I can’t see how it could get any worse.”

Sebastian spoke over his shoulder. “Drake is going to kill again. It’s written in his cards. It’s your job to stop him. You still can’t figure it out, can you? Meeting me was no accident!”

Avy realized they were yelling at each other again. She was sure the next county over could hear them. She sniffed, smelling something foul. “You should have buried that finger deeper. I can smell it from here. Now, talking about accidental meetings.” The next words trailed off. A shadow moved to her left. She shoved up from the floor. “Sebastian!”

He whirled around, spilling fuel.

The Wax Man stood just inside the ragged opening, his face a dim glow in the lantern light. He held a piece of paper in his hand. Avy could see a small sketch of a water tower on it. The paper had come from Sebastian’s personal notebook back at the safe house.

“Nice that you left me a little map to this place,” said the Wax Man. He dropped the paper, then held out a mangled hand. “I’d flip you off, but I’m missing the appropriate digit.” He dropped it. “Now what are you going to do, Gate-Walker? No exit portals here to run through.”

Avy sidestepped to where Sebastian stood. She watched the Wax Man kick trash out of his way while he made determined steps toward them, hands outstretched. She and Sebastian followed the curve of the tank wall, moving with frantic steps to distance themselves. The Wax Man increased his stride. They began to run. They reached the other side, the exit hole, but their foe was too fast, disallowing the escape. They ran two more circuits, following the curve of the tank, staying just out of reach. Avy realized they had agility and speed on their side, but it was just one advantage. She didn’t know how much longer they could keep it up. She already felt dizzy from drafting in the putrid wake.

The Wax Man stood in the middle of the floor, winded. His voice came in a strained wheeze. “We can keep this up all night. Won’t do you any good.”

The Wax Man came on again, slower this time. They made six trips around the tank. On the seventh trip, the couple got away from him, even having time to pick up objects from the floor and hurl them. At one point, they all stopped to ease their burning lungs. The Wax Man looked fatigued, wheezing hard for breath. It didn’t look like he had another charge left in him.

Avy began to feel ill from the air. Her ankles threatened to buckle.

“I can concentrate now, Avy,” Sebastian said in a breathy voice.

She looked at her boyfriend. Sebastian pointed a claw-like hand at the other side of the tank. He closed his eyes. With a grimace, he raised a trembling arm. In the same motion, the fuel can lifted from the floor. It levitated high in the air. Sebastian made a slashing motion with his raised arm. The fuel can sailed through the air, spraying its contents, striking the Wax Man in the face. The blow knocked the man to the trash-laden floor. He sat there with his legs splayed, slapping at his face and spitting Coleman gas. When he looked in Avy's direction, he did so with wide, blank eyes. "A Conjurer!" he cried out. "You filthy cheat!"

Sebastian reached out with the other outstretched hand. The Coleman lantern rose from the floor to hang in the air.

The Wax Man cocked his head back. The noise that escaped his throat resembled a dog's howl. He fought to gain his legs, but slipped in the sopping trash.

Sebastian closed his fist then made a downward chopping motion. The lantern struck the Wax Man in the middle of the forehead. Shards of glass flew. The white-hot wick ignited the fuel. In the space of three seconds, the opposite side of the tank interior erupted into an inferno. The outline of the Wax Man staggered to his feet, engulfed in flames. Black smoke billowed upward. The distraught figure groped for bits of trash, trying to use it to beat out the flames, but the flotsam ignited, adding further to the combustion.

Avy stepped back, crushing up against the wall, the flames climbing to the top of the tank. She did not look away. Instead, she stared mesmerized, almost gleefully, watching the monster fight for his life.

What continued to stand in the midst of the flames no longer resembled a human form. Now it was a charcoal stick figure, making feeble attempts to move. The hands fell off in nubbins of ash. The head tilted, then cracked, spilling to the floor. All at once, what was left of the Wax Man tumbled like a bag of red-hot briquettes onto a flaming pile. The fire crawled in tendrils across the trash-laden timbers, throwing out blast furnace waves.

Sebastian grabbed Avy's wrist and shoved her outside onto the deck. "Down!" he ordered. "Climb for your life!"

She started down. Her feet trembled, missing rungs. Splinters caught in her hands. She could hear mini-explosions in the tank above. The exit hole belched a tornado of smoke and flying cinders, some of which landed in her hair. She jumped the last five rungs to the ground, falling over. Her boyfriend plopped to her side, then pulled her a safe distance away from the falling debris.

Sebastian rushed to the vehicle, tearing the branch cover away from it. "Get in!" he ordered.

A moment later, the Jeep sped down the rocky path toward the city. Avy managed to get her seatbelt buckled during the bumpy ride. She glared at the man sitting next to her, unable to draw her eyes away.

Sebastian glanced at her. "Okay, what?"

She shook her head in disgust. "I don't even know who I'm sitting next to right now."

"It's a long story," he said, whipping the wheel to avoid a pothole.

“A Conjurer, Sebastian? Is that what he called you? Jesus Christ, I cannot believe any of this is happening! Are you a thing or a person?”

He glanced at her. “Hah! You’re one to talk. When I first listened to Janus explain who you were I didn’t want to believe it either.”

“So you two were in on this together from the beginning? That figures! He set me up with you. You guys come from the same fantastical mold.” She slapped the dashboard in anger. “What species are you?”

“I come from a long line of Conjurers. We’ve been traced back to the thirteenth century. It gets passed in the genes. It skipped my parents. Landed on me.”

“Don’t you mean you come from a long line of liars? So much for trust, huh? All this time you could have been upfront with me. No wonder you were so good at what you did. I never saw any hooks, strings or magnets. Even as a professional you’re a cheat.”

“You have every right to feel the way you do. Listen, I fell in love with you. I didn’t want the other part of me to interfere with the relationship. I wanted to be accepted for what I am. Not for what I could do.”

“You led me on all along!” She turned away from him. “I’ve got news for you, there’s one way to end all of this—to stop it from the beginning. That means you and Janus won’t have this little stage play to act out anymore. I’m going to finish it before it ever gets started. Destiny can go straight to hell!”

He pulled the Jeep over to a sliding halt, then fixed his stare on her. “You don’t understand. I know what you’re planning to do. It doesn’t work like that. This is not a parallel universe type of thing. You can’t stop what’s been put in motion. You have to observe, to gather information. If you stop the original homicide you become obsolete. The whole thread unravels from there. You’ll cease to exist the second after you interfere. You’ll lose everything. I’ll lose you forever.”

“You call this existing? I’ve already lost everything. Just for the record, you never lost what you never wanted in the first place. The minute I kill that bastard, the whole space-time thing will shift. I’ll be just a bad memory. End of my story. New storyline for you.”

“Avy.”

“Drop me off in the first residential area you come to. You can keep the car. I won’t need it anymore. If you refuse, I’ll jump out anyway.”

Sebastian drove on, glancing at her in an effort to make eye contact. She kept her gaze focused ahead, her face stern, even though she could see him from the corner of her eye. She had no wish to make that bond with him. His association with her up to this point had been based on lies. There was no one to convince her otherwise. She could admit that she possessed some very strange skills, and he had accepted those traits in her. He had even encouraged her to develop them. Yet he possessed some very strange skills himself, but by his own admission, he chose to keep

those revelations from her on purpose. Oh sure, why wouldn't she want to know that he was a wizard? Not important enough? Wasn't communication the main foundation of their relationship? He'd shown her that honor and trust counted for nothing.

She had one admission to make. It gave her an overwhelming sense of satisfaction to know he had used his abilities to kill the Wax Man. But it didn't change her opinion of him much beyond the deed. Vengeance had been achieved for Chubby and the others. She was grateful for that.

When they arrived at the bottom of the hill, Sebastian pulled the Jeep off the main road into the nearest driveway. A small gas station sat nearby on a hill. The store interior glowed with a weak light. A dog howled somewhere in the distance. In the next moment, the siren of a fire engine broke the still of the night. The vehicle sped by them on the road, the claxon horn fading in the distance up the hill.

Sebastian gripped the sleeve of her top. "I love you, Avy, but you're making a terrible mistake. I can't lose you now. I'll do everything in my power to get you through this. Please stay with me."

She slapped his hand away. "It's too late for those things."

He pulled something out of his pants and stuffed it in her sweatshirt pocket. "Keep that. You might need it. In the meantime, I'll find Janus. When I do, we'll get this straightened out."

She unbuckled her belt, then stepped out. "I don't hate you, Sebastian. None of this was your fault. You did the best you could. Now I have to do the best I can. It's been sweet."

She walked toward the gas station. She did not look back. Had she done so, he would have seen the tears streaming down her face. She prayed for the engine to start. She willed her legs to keep moving. When the motor whirred to life, her heart felt like it had fallen into her stomach. She listened to the engine noise fade, only then did she turn around. Her Jeep's tiny taillights disappeared down the road until they became pinpricks.

She threw her hands to her face and bawled.

"I do love you, Sebastian!" she cried with piteous sobs. Not far away, a dog answered her in a mournful howl. More dogs joined in, making it a macabre choir. It seemed like the whole night had ripped itself to pieces.

Chapter 22

Avy used the collar of her sweatshirt to wipe the tears away, then sucked in a jittery breath. Inside the store, she spied a rack of maps, and reached into a side pocket, pulling out a wad of bills Sebastian had given her. It cost a few dollars for a pencil, a tourist map that displayed the triangle area, and a state map of North Carolina. Once outside, she sat on the pavement, illuminated by a naked overhead bulb. To her surprise, the small compass was still strapped to her wrist. It was easy to align to the map's orientation. Next was calculating the distance to Durham along with the relative compass direction. "Due northwest, about nineteen miles," she said to herself then penciled "19-NW" in the margin of the map. She remembered the street location where her mother had lived in Durham because she had gone with Lizzy a few times to clean it when they'd tried to sell it. The address escaped her, but the house was easy to recognize upon sight.

The target date was February 3, 1977.

The major problem was how to arrive in the general area. It required a trip back in time to the exact instant the crime was committed. Better yet, prior to the incident since she needed to be there before things went lethal. A taxi could get her to the approximate location. But hadn't she been told that Gate-Walking was a skill that she had to master herself? What was the secret of transporting oneself over a long distance? Would it mean passing through thousands of Gates. How did one skip that to get there faster? Skip. Walk. Gate-Walker. Could it be that easy? Walking? In the past, she had never stepped while in transit—just turned her body for direction.

That could be the answer.

But how to calculate the formula. What was the most logical means to measure the distance traveled with a walking step? It was possible that one statute mile for every single step might be the formula. If she hadn't felt so miserable, she would have laughed aloud. She wrote "19S" on the end of her map, then stood up. Problem solved. It was possible to step through any door regardless of the direction it faced, adjust for it with her body position, reach terminal velocity, count the seconds for years then take nineteen steps. Voila! The landing should be somewhere near her intended destination.

Maybe.

She walked around to the rear of the gas station. She faced the women's lavatory door. To travel backward meant using the love emotion. Considering her present state, there wasn't much in her inventory she could use to bring those thoughts to bear. All she had to do was concentrate on the last memories that had uplifted her heart. The letter her mother had written to her. Chubby's wonderful devotion came to mind, along with his tiny dog Gretchen. Those memories were brimming with love and peace.

She let the feelings flush through her body, casting her into a euphoric dream-like state. At the peak of the high, she stepped through the door, clicking the stopwatch function on the watch to begin the countdown.

It was a simple matter to pivot her body until it pointed northwest. The images raced by in mud-like swirls until they began to take on soft pastel shades. In the next moment, she passed through a syrup of bright rainbow colors—the river of terminal velocity. She began to walk in a casual, relaxed manner. The digital seconds on her watch ticked down. When she reached nineteen steps she stopped, but continued the ride back into the past, watching the seconds mark the years. When the proper year mark arrived, she vanquished all loving thoughts from her mind. Her exit came with a loud snap.

Still warm from the friction of travel, she clicked the stopwatch button.

Total darkness.

Right away, a foul odor assaulted her. She flung her hands out and groped for a surface. Her knuckles hit a plastic panel that sounded like the side of a drum. Her hands followed a wall—a flimsy door swung open. Sunlight rushed in. She stepped out of the container, then turned around to look at it.

Portable outhouse.

Well, it was a door. She had landed in the middle of a construction site. A bulldozer kicked up a dust storm a few dozen yards away. Some men acting in chorus lifted up on a modular building frame. A foreman shouted orders in the distance.

She walked off the construction site until she came to a street. The next trick was to find anything that gave her a timeframe reference. Everything looked normal—the earth, the sky, the streets, houses, and trees. Except for one thing—the cars.

The automobiles were much older, looking like they came straight out of the seventies. Yet they all shined with flawless perfection. There was no way to guess the exact year since she had no concept of what the newest model looked like. More confirmation came when she watched a longhaired boy shoving his way down the sidewalk on a skateboard. Not so unusual in itself until one spotted the striped bellbottoms.

This was a tract home division. She made her way along the streets, watching where the traffic appeared to be heaviest. She turned onto a larger avenue and followed it to the end. At a major intersection, she recognized the name of the street when she glanced at the sign. The location was familiar. It was about one mile from ground zero. Not bad. Judging by the sun overhead, she guessed it was sometime in the afternoon. Her watch read eleven thirty at night, the old time she had left in the future.

She headed north on Vesper Avenue, taking long strides. She found a donut shop, gas station, and a variety store sitting on a small dusty lot. She knew the intersection well enough, but did not remember the micro businesses. A postage stamp square of white was just visible in the distance. It was a familiar drive-in theater that had been shut down ten years ago. There was little doubt that some things would be familiar, while other physical markers might have changed or disappeared.

She passed by the gas station placard that announced gas at seventy-nine cents a gallon. A very long line of parked cars ran down the street. Some of the drivers had exited their vehicles to sit on the hoods. Once inside, she went to the magazine rack to read the headlines of the local paper: *King of Rock and Roll, Dead at 42*. The date on the paper read August 17, 1977. She had overshot her target location by almost six months. She scribbled some calculations on her map, then headed out the door.

A few pre-teen girls stopped in front of her and giggled. One of the girls used her finger to make an exaggerated slash in the air. "I check you off!" she said. Both girls burst into uproarious laughter then ran off to the line of cars.

Avy wondered what the fuss was about. Ah, the Nike swoosh emblem on the jacket breast. That had to be it.

The gas station restrooms were crowded with a line of people waiting to get in. She walked to the donut shop. Once inside, she found just one restroom door. It stood in plain sight of the seated patrons, which meant that a time step would have to be from the inside. She entered the small stall, then gave her map a quick study. Without locking the door, Avy prepared, then made the step. She took one normal stride before she exited just after peak velocity.

She emerged outside of a stockroom door inside a large supermarket. A warehouse employee seated on a stack of freight boxes glared at her. A wedge of egg salad sandwich hung from his open mouth.

Realizing it was the first time she had been caught popping out of a Gate, she said, "Sorry, wrong turn," then hurried down the aisle. She jumped off the loading dock and circled around to the front of the store. After reading the date from a paper rack, she discovered she had landed a week off.

Miffed, she went in search of another doorway to try again.

It took three more jumps before she arrived on the second day of February at four o'clock in the afternoon. She gave herself a mental high-five, satisfied that it wasn't possible to get any closer without overshooting her mark. According to the records, dinner at the Labrador residence would start at around six o'clock in the evening.

She called a cab from a small gas station, expecting to get to her location within the next ten minutes. It wasn't easy to relax waiting for the driver to show up. It would still take a lot of preparation. Everything depended upon timing. But the odds of pulling it off were good.

When the taxi arrived, she settled back in the seat. The cabby spoke over his shoulder. "Where to, Miss?"

"I don't have the proper address, but I'll recognize the house I'm sure. I need to go to East Remington Drive."

"Name of the resident, Miss?"

"Will that help?"

"Won't hurt—I know 'em all."

"Tom Labrador."

"Know it. That's fourteen forty-five East Remington. He's the guy who owns Cyberflow. Way too easy."

"You sure know your population."

"Have to, ma'am. That's what drivin' a cab is all about."

They arrived at the house in seven minutes. The cabby pulled over to the curb in front of the gated residence. The huge Tudor looked just as elegant as ever, only better. In this time, different varieties of exotic trees festooned the front yard. A blaze of colorful flowers sprang up from window boxes. A small fountain fed a rock pond in the middle of the yard. She could only guess that her mother had something to do with the festive landscaping.

She handed the driver a ten dollar bill over the seat. "Thanks, keep the change."

"What kind of funny cabbage are you trying to slip me, Miss?"

She realized with some shock that she had handed him a modern bill, printed much differently. She scrambled for some singles then exchanged it. "Oh, forgive me! That was a commemorative sample from my collection. Sorry for the mix-up." She exited the cab, making sure he was well down the street before she moved.

She peeked through the wrought iron driveway gate. There were no security cameras mounted anywhere on the Labrador property, which was odd. The gate was locked. The tall retaining wall that circled the property had a ruddy surface, good for a foothold. She stepped up to it, looked both ways, grabbed the top, then kicked herself up. She made a smooth drop to the other side. A large raspberry bush in the corner of the yard provided her the best hiding place.

Obscured from view, she had a good line of sight on the house front. She prayed that a dog would not bound across the lawn to attack her in the bushes. Neglecting the variables in this timeframe could result in dire circumstances. Precaution and intelligence were on her side. Chaos theory would be responsible for the rest.

She crawled on her knees to peer around the bush. The drapes were drawn against the windows, offering no view of the interior. It would be wonderful to see her mother, even for the briefest of moments. Avy had a deep-seated curiosity about their true resemblance. Of course, she had seen old photos of her. To see her in the flesh, though, would satiate the questions that had nagged her for so long. She owed her beauty to her mother—grace and talent, too. She was a culmination of all the good parts of Avalon Labrador.

Fearful of being observed, she crawled back behind the bush. Something nudged against her backside. Startled, she expelled a great whoosh of air, then spun around.

Janus sat on the grass, his legs folded Indian style. He gazed at her, twisting little dandelion stalks between his fingers.

“Holiest God almighty,” she said, drawing back. “You almost stopped my heart!”

“You should keep it down,” he warned, “if you plan to go in there. You wouldn’t want anything to go wrong.”

“I swore that I’d never talk to you again.”

“Then all you have to do is listen, daughter.”

The long hair, smug, handsome face, and priest’s garb was all there—nothing had changed. Still the same old Janus. “What are you doing here? Why do you even bother interfering?”

“World affairs are in need of a ‘bother’ when thousands of lives are at stake. This is just one of the many War Gates that have been opened. A tumultuous humanity is in constant struggle with itself. This time, this place is a seed from a melon that belongs to a very large patch. Though a smaller struggle abides here, it is no less significant.”

“You know you can’t stop me from what I plan to do. You’re too late to put things on the path you want.”

“You are correct that I cannot stop you, but I thought it would be fair to warn you that this will play out again, but worse than before. You might be able to stop this death and rewrite the time path. But the path will double back to where it all started. You will erase your existence, which means you will not be here to stop it.”

“Who cares? I’m expendable.”

His voice softened. “I’ve never had a child who was willing to give up so much for the sake of others. It is the noblest attribute known to humanity when one is willing to lay down their life for their fellow man. It would mean so much, accomplish such great things, if not for the fact that the act would be such a terrible waste. You feel that you are responsible for everything that has happened. You are not the cause, dear daughter. You are the solution. You are the cleansing force, the righteous judge who imposes the verdict.”

“Look into your little crystal ball, then tell me that all of these deaths haven’t affected hundreds of lives. There won’t be an end to the pain. How could it be any worse than it is now?”

“I’ve seen the outcome in all its variations. You can trust me when I say that stopping this murder will fortify the perpetrator into committing the act again. The consequences will be more devastating than before. The string that you wish to snap will set another scenario into motion, escalating to another, then another until it is out of control. There will be no stoppage to the roll call of death or misery.”

“How can you see what it will be like when—” She paused. “Are you saying we’ve gone through this before? You know every outcome?” The answer was obvious. He could slice through space-time like a steak knife. That brought up another nagging question. “Why don’t you stop all of this right now?”

"I cannot change the path. I am resigned to follow the one with the least resistance. I do not rule the destinies of humankind. That is reserved for the cosmic creator. I can lessen the negative forces by serving as the guide for those who can influence the outcome. I am the director, in concert with the producer. You are my actor. I can prod you into a great performance. It is up to you to believe in me, delivering those lines while acting in the play. I cannot stop you from adlibbing—that is your prerogative. A wise director needs to convince from a perspective of respect."

"Yeah, well, what if the actor doesn't like the play or the direction? What if they don't want any part of it?"

"If you do not have ears to hear, I must try again. I have to widen that opening in your heart. Even I am not perfect and get it wrong sometimes. In answer to your other question, yes, we have been here before many times. Right here, this time, this place, sitting together upon this grass. I am appealing to you again like I have done before. I seek to show you the path of least resistance, hoping that you will find it."

She looked dubious. "If I'm still here in this now, what did I do before?"

"You left without interacting."

"You mean I chickened out?"

"You lost your confidence."

"Why me?" she begged. "How could you put me through this knowing everything that you do?"

"Because you are my most wonderful creation. There have been other candidates, but none have been so divine or touched so many lives. You are the correct pathfinder, the one who can bring this story to an end. It will not end here either. Your strength will live on in your tomorrow. Your love for others will pour from you, affecting countless numbers. All of those whom you touch with your essence will be the better for it. The string that you travel from here on out is the string that belongs to infinity."

"Then what am I supposed to do? I'm not making any guarantees either."

"You're here to serve as a witness. You must assimilate everything you see, then devise a solution. None of it will make sense at first. It will not be as you thought."

"You mean I have to witness a murder—the death of my mother's husband—while doing nothing to stop it?"

"That part is written in your lifeline. You will reach for the courage when the time comes."

"Why can't you just tell me what happens? How could you put me through this, expecting me to come out of it unaffected?"

"I cannot order you to walk the path, nor reveal its turns. I can point out the direction. I can subject you to this because I love you. To answer your next question—you are Avalon-Avy Labrador. You are not half of anything—you are more than the whole."

Avy blinked. She had no idea he could read her mind like a comic book.

She sat in silence, trying to put it all together. The worst-case scenario was that he was using her, lying to her in an attempt to correct some cosmic wreck he had created. She wondered if she was sitting next to the greatest “congod” that ever existed. Or by using all of his charm, had he enlisted her into some evil cult bent on changing human history? The other side of the equation bespoke of a heroic task reserved specifically for her. The requirement demanded that she witness something terrible then put it back on the best possible path. Was she really some kind of half-assed angel? Avy would bet he heard that because he was smiling.

Janus stood up, whisking grass from his pants. She feared that he would be seen, but he didn’t seem concerned. Of course. What an idiot she was. Janus had been here before.

He put a gentle hand on the side of her cheek, looking at her with consoling eyes. “The time draws near, daughter. Your first words to me were about your heart almost stopping when I frightened you. You would be wise to remember that thirty-two years from now you almost stopped the heart of someone else. Someone who loves you beyond measure. I expect you will do the right thing.”

“Are you talking about Sebastian, Father?”

Janus smiled, turned around, then walked through the wall, leaving her staring at a patch of stucco that had turned to a shimmering liquid. Next she heard the sound of an engine, then a driveway gate opening. She peered around the bush.

A black Mercedes rolled down the driveway and pulled up in front of the house. Drake Labrador emerged from it. A very young, longhaired, hippy-looking Drake. He bent over for something in the back seat, then straightened, holding a large cardboard box. He rang the bell at the front door. A tall, blond woman answered. Avalon Labrador. They disappeared inside. A female squeal of delight came from behind the closed door. Avy supposed it was the champagne being presented to her mother that caused the happy outburst—the same champagne that would be laced with drugs, destined to course through her veins later.

Avy moved along the outer wall in the fading light, finding a path to the side of the house. She came to a small side door that held a single pane of glass. She looked inside, knowing it was the pantry that led off from the kitchen. It was the perfect location from which to listen to conversation in the kitchen area.

She summoned the emotion, then stepped through to the other side.

The pantry had a small walk-in closet. It was the ideal place to hide in or step through to a different room if someone approached in her direction. Cooking smells were already wafting through the air. Drake’s voice boomed a moment later.

“Hey! What say I put these babies on to chill?”

“By all means,” said Avalon. “Roederer Cristal deserves to be kept refrigerated. What a wonderful gift. You shouldn’t have.”

“Nonsense, it’s a special occasion.”

Yeah, it was a special occasion, thought Avy. The occasion when Drake would stab his loving brother through the heart! Trying to wrest hold of her anger seemed almost impossible, knowing that if she stepped through a door right now with such raging thoughts she would fly like a missile into the future. She had to study this scene with analytical precision, making note of everything said while watching it all unfold. All the events that would happen in this house up until the time the police arrived had to be witnessed—catalogued. It could take several jumps back to repeat the visit in case she fouled up.

The pantry shelves contained a variety of canned goods, including a stainless steel one gallon can that sat at the perfect angle to reflect anyone in the kitchen. Though the image was somewhat blurred, she could see her mother at the sink shaking out a strainer. Drake stood a few feet away, watching her mother. There would be ample warning if someone approached the pantry.

“If you would just point me to the champagne glasses,” said Drake. “At least we can set them out.”

“I’ve got them,” said Avalon, reaching for a cupboard.

Tom was expected to be sitting at the dining room table. After a moment, she heard him announce something topical having to do with politics. He had to be reading the newspaper. The casual chat continued between the three. Soon the oven door creaked open, followed by the clatter of dinnerware. The reflections on the can disappeared. The next voice was that of her mother proclaiming that one of the candles wouldn’t light. Forks scraped on china. The first interesting topic of conversation concerned the recent construction of a new Japanese electronics facility headed by Cyberflow—the reason for the celebration.

An hour passed before the plates were pushed back. Compliments about the cuisine rang out from the men. Drake offered to clear the table, insisting that Avalon remain seated. He announced that the time for a toast had arrived. Avy picked up Drake’s reflection when he entered the kitchen, stacked the dinner plates, then opened the refrigerator to retrieve the champagne. He called out, telling the others not to move since he had a surprise for them.

It happened fast. Drake produced something from his pocket that he added to one of the glasses. The motion confirmed what Avy already knew. One of the drinks would be spiked—her mother’s.

When Drake returned to the table, he made an elaborate presentation of the first toast. More toasts followed. An hour of business-related talk passed before they had consumed both bottles.

Avy felt her legs going numb, having had to stand in one position without making a sound. She massaged her legs, waiting for what she knew would happen next. A short time later, her mother’s speech grew thick, almost slurred. She complained of a “fatigue headache.” The drug-laced champagne had done its work. The socializing lasted for another ten minutes before Tom excused himself, explaining that he would see his wife to bed. He told Drake he could stick around

if he wanted. Avy heard two bodies plodding up the carpeted staircase to the second-story bedroom, where Avalon was reportedly found that night. What Avy expected to happen next, did not—the front door opened, then closed. A moment later, a car in the driveway started.

Avy trotted to the living room window, peeked through a slit in the curtain. Drake pulled up to the security gate, activated the button, then drove off into the night. On his way out, he had turned the porch light off.

That was not supposed to happen. Unless he had to pick something up then come back? She waited at the window for any sign of the returning black Mercedes. It was a long wait. Forty-five minutes later, it drove back through the gate and parked in front of the house. The outline of a small figure dressed in a dark jogging suit and wearing a woolen cap emerged from the vehicle. Avy held her breath while she tried to identify the person. She stiffened in shock when she saw who it was.

Elizabeth Labrador.

Lizzy crept across the driveway toward the front porch. In a state of panic, Avy leapt from the window and ran to the pantry just as the front door opened. In quick succession, the living room light went out, followed by the dining room light. Soft footsteps entered the kitchen. A drawer slid open, a utensil pinged. Lizzy flicked the kitchen light off when she left.

Avy made silent steps across the kitchen floor, waited a beat, then watched the shadowy figure pad up the staircase. Avy followed in a low crouch, making sure to keep her distance from the other woman who might turn around at any moment.

Trying to keep the outrage from boiling to the surface seemed impossible. To think that she had been wrong all along about the true culprit threatened to addle her senses. For some incomprehensible reason, the woman whom she had called “mom” for eighteen years had taken her husband’s place to perform the deed. The reason for it was so elusive that, at first, Avy refused to believe it. Yet she watched Lizzy make a trip to the hallway bathroom, then exit with a washcloth to stand in front of the master bedroom door.

What was amazing was how fit her mother looked, even with most of her features covered up. Lizzy had always portrayed a docile, even meek exterior. When in reality she had been a chameleon, very capable of cold-blooded murder. She’d also had the perfect alibi—she’d been home, nowhere near Tom’s property. The real actress in the Labrador household had been the matriarch, Elizabeth Labrador!

Avy resisted the overwhelming urge to jump the woman right then, but something told her that Lizzy might win in a physical confrontation. The woman looked pumped up like a wild animal, ready to tangle with anyone. Avy remembered what Janus had told her to do—observe and catalogue the events, which meant watching this horrendous play unfold. It was necessary to dissect each inflection, every movement. Although she could not believe any merciful God could ask her to do such a thing, she knew she had to see this to the end.

Using great stealth, Lizzy stepped into the bedroom. When Avy snuck up to the doorframe, she found Lizzy already standing at the side of the large queen-sized bed. The couple lay sprawled on their backs, illuminated by a dim table lamp. Avy kept just a slice of her face exposed, with the rest of her body well behind the wall. She watched with trepidation, her heart thrumming in her chest. The temptation to look away was overpowering—to tear her eyes from the scene that was certain to come.

Lizzy cocked the knife overhead, then struck hard. Tom's eyes flicked open, his body convulsing with the shock. His mouth twisted once. One of his hands went up in a reflexive spasm for a moment, clawed at the air, then fell to his side. Tom died in an instant, his eyes wide open, mouth agape. The bed had rocked once. Avalon slept on in the drug-induced coma.

Avy caught a sob in her throat, forced it down. She began to tremble with violent shudders. A few seconds passed before she realized she had bitten through her lip, drawing blood. She had never witnessed anything so terrible in all her life. It was all she could do to keep from crying out in pain—crying out for Tom.

Lizzy rolled the body to the edge of the bed, then slid it to the floor. She used vicious overhand strokes to plunge the knife into the upper part of the body. She hissed with each downward swing. One violent downward thrust knocked the wool cap from her head, but she continued making savage strokes, the knife catching in her hair. Senseless overkill. But it was designed to appear like an act of murderous passion.

During one swift backstroke, a gleaming object flew up into the air from Lizzy's wrist. It landed on top of the ceiling fan casing. The woman, so engrossed in the butchering frenzy, hadn't noticed she had lost something from her person.

After seventeen stab wounds, Lizzy was finished. She used the washcloth to mop the blood from the body, then moved to the opposite side of the bed. She flipped the washcloth several times, splattering Avalon's face then her nightgown. Using the cloth as a blotter, she smudged the drugged woman's neck, shoulders, and legs with blood. After wiping the knife, Lizzy pressed it into the other's limp hand, making sure the prints transferred.

Certain that Lizzy would be exiting, Avy hurried down the hallway and into a spare bedroom. When she heard thumping sounds, Avy chanced a look around the corner. The top of Tom's head disappeared down the staircase, striking each landing, evidence of the body being pulled. Avy followed, watching the horrid event unfold. Once outside, Lizzy lifted the body into the trunk space of the Chevy Suburban. Having taken the keys from Avalon's purse on the dining room table, Lizzy started the vehicle, then drove off the property.

Avy watched the taillights disappear from the front window. She used her sleeve to cuff the tears from her face. The scene she had just witnessed would sear her memory like a branding iron. She wondered how anyone could be expected to live a normal, well-adjusted life after seeing such a thing. This had to be what war was like. Death, heaped upon mountains of heartache—it was the absolute worst that life had to offer.

Avy staggered upstairs in a daze, averting her eyes from the blood-smeared carpet. When she reached the side of her mother's bed, she watched her for a long time, the slow rhythmic rise of her breasts. Her mother looked so beautiful, so serene, but so blissful and unaware of how her life would change in the coming hours. She wanted to kiss her mother's sweet face. To hold her in her arms, but she knew that it might be tampering somehow, contaminating the scene. Her imprint was not allowed in this timeframe.

Avy picked up a pocket mirror from her mother's dresser, then stepped up on a chair. She held the mirror over the top of the ceiling fan, angling it for the proper vision. Amazed, she saw a gold bracelet sitting on top of the case. Tiny inscriptions could be seen on the piece, even through the blood spatter. There was also a shock of torn red hair caught in the clamshell links. Lizzy's hair.

This was it. This was the evidence.

She reached for it, then stayed her hand. The evidence could not be fresh. This had happened over three decades ago. The DNA traces would have to be that old. She stepped off the stool, wiped her prints from the mirror, then replaced it where she had found it.

When she returned to the living room, she sat on the couch. She propped the curtain open. It would be sometime later before Lizzy returned, tossed the keys on the bed, and swapped out vehicles. Then she would drive home, leaving no trace that she had ever been on the property. Except one. Before the break of dawn, Avalon Labrador would be arrested on suspicion of homicide and taken into custody. The innocent woman, still suffering from the effects of the drug, would have no idea what had happened. The perfect crime had been committed, or so it seemed. End of story.

Avy had seen enough, having learned everything she needed. There was no reason to stay in the house another minute, let alone for the time it would take Lizzy to finish the task. She paid a visit to her mother one last time, blowing her a kiss, telling her how much she loved her. She walked out into the hallway, consulted her notes, then stepped through the first door she came to.

She had no trouble traveling in the reverse timeline. She seethed with anger now. She seemed to fly with unchecked speed through the Gates, eating up the years. At one point, the blurry image of a small girl appeared at her side. The girl looked at Avy with sad, frightened eyes. After a few moments, the girl veered off the timeline to disappear through another string of Gates. Avy wondered what horror the child had witnessed—the nature of her mission. Without doubt, Janus had commissioned the small girl to use the Gates. Just another wrong that had to be set right, Avy thought. She expected to see other persons in the Gate strings. Most of those travelers had to be tortured souls. Avy was living proof of that.

* * * *

It took her six harried jumps to find her way back to her own time-place. She attributed the miscalculations to her emotional state, which stemmed from witnessing a horrendous murder. She ended up on a small street in downtown Raleigh. She made her way to the first available public telephone. She called Cyberflow and asked to be connected to Drake Labrador. After several transfers, Drake's secretary, Linda Wu, answered the phone.

Avy had no intention of speaking to Drake Labrador. Her target audience was Lind Wu.

Chapter 23

“Hello, this is Maria Ramirez of Sunshine Maids,” said Avy in her best Spanish accent. “We are offering the grand spectacle of a complete housecleaning visit for this limited one-time trial offer. No house too large or messy for us! Satisfaction guaranteed or we will pay you for a re-cleaning!” There was a long pause. Gum snapped.

“When does this offer expire?” asked Linda Wu.

“Tomorrow, Senora. We are dispatching the last of our teams.”

“This better not be a whack job.”

“Sunshine Maids has the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. We guarantee our—”

“Chill out for a minute.”

There came a long wait before the secretary came back on the line. “How can we trust your credentials? How do we get a key to you? This is a business. We’re working nine-to-fives here.”

“We have a referral list for inspection. You can leave the key hidden on the premises. We will lock up, then replace the key. Total security. To be honest with you, Senora, we love the windows.”

“Yeah, well, all right. We’ve got three houses for you. I’ll drop the keys off on my noon lunch break. But you had better deliver what you promise. Just so you get it straight, we want all of the windows done. The big vacant house has a broken-ass security gate—you can just slide it open. Hold the line for the addresses.”

“We are happy to please.” Avy listened to Linda’s address first, followed by Drake’s personal residence, ending with the Remington Avenue house. She wrote all of the addresses down with precise care for her records, including a notation on where to find the keys.

Avy ended the conversation with, “Tomorrow is the big day. Super clean package for you!” She hung up the phone. They went for it. She knew Drake had the Remington house up for sale, so he fell right into the free cleaning offer. Linda Wu added her home just to take advantage. Avy wrote down the time of the call, place, and person contacted. Under that, she wrote Sunshine Maids Housecleaning—verbal agreement.

Leaving nothing to chance, she took a cab ride out to the Remington house just to make sure the evidence was still there. Since she had authorized permission, with key access, there would be no ramifications if she were caught on the property. It was no surprise when she found the bracelet untouched and exactly where she had seen it last. The house had never sold due to Drake’s exorbitant asking price. The fact that a murder had been committed in it had also never endeared it to potential buyers. No cleaner had ever thought to inspect the top of the ceiling fan. She was home free.

Arriving back in the city, she found a cheap motel room to settle in for the night. From here on out everything had to go like clockwork. The first meeting she would have in the morning would be with Detective Bulmer. She needed all the help she could get to pull this off. No mistakes, no loopholes, or legal issues. It had to be by the book to make the charges stick. Fate would take care of the rest.

* * * *

She paid the cabdriver with a ten dollar bill when they arrived at the Remington Avenue house. The old cabby had been watching her through the rearview mirror for the last two miles. He looked at the bill, then at her again. He started to say something, then shook his head. By sheer coincidence, she'd taken the ride with the same man who had ferried her to this exact spot over three decades ago. He mumbled something before driving off.

Avy met two people standing next to a white van at the broken security gate. Her heart leapt for joy when she noticed the badges pinned to their belts. They wasted no time introducing themselves.

"Donovan Post, crime scene investigation," said the slender, bespeckled man.

"I'm Joyce Hart, crime scene investigation," said the pert blond. "You must be Avy Labrador."

"Yes, I am, and it's a pleasure to meet you." She shook their hands. "I hope it wasn't too much trouble. Detective Bulmer told me there weren't any guarantees about securing a warrant. It took me three hours to tell him the whole story."

Joyce smiled. "You're lucky it was Bulmer, who doesn't go after a probable cause warrant for just anybody or for any reason. It doesn't hurt that the judge's son is engaged to Bulmer's daughter. Still, you must be one special case to get priority treatment."

"I'm not special, just lucky he listened to me. He also knows me from another investigation, and warned me that I might have opened up a can of worms and to be prepared to explain myself all over again to a lot more people."

Donovan nodded. "Well, that's why we're here—to see if you have something that's viable, as far as evidence. Drake Labrador was served this morning, so there's a good possibility he could show up to inventory any property seizure—that's his constitutional right, just so you know. You're at no risk, since we'll have a uniformed officer on the premises."

"That's good to know," said Avy, relieved. "I'm sure I'm in good hands."

A police cruiser pulled up flush with the gate. The officer inside waved to them. Joyce Hart pulled the gate back manually, allowing the car to pass through.

"We'll bring the van in," said Joyce to Avy. "Would you like a lift in?"

"I'll just walk and meet you at the front door."

Avy walked down the driveway. Though she hadn't paid attention to it before, the front yard lay stripped bare, the grass scorched brown from dehydration. Gone were the flower-laden window boxes. Even the giant raspberry bush had withered into a pile of broken sticks.

Donovan was already taking pictures of the house, including the address numerals, when Avy arrived at the front door, which was open. A uniformed officer, told Avy to lead them to the area that held the evidence. The investigators followed behind, carrying two large plastic cases.

Arriving in the master bedroom, Avy stepped to the middle of the room and pointed up to the ceiling fan. "It's up on top of the fan case. I used a lamp table to reach it."

Donovan retrieved a stepladder from the van and set it up. Mounting the ladder, Joyce took several photos of the bracelet from different angles before she picked it up with a pair of tweezers. Once down, she allowed Avy and Donovan to look at it. It was caked with a black substance, along with small bits of dried matter. Strands of faded, reddish hair still clung to it. Something else caught Avy's eye. Barely discernable, the engraved inscription on the tiny placard read, *To My Wonderful Wife Elizabeth—Love—Drake*. Avy allowed herself a sadistic smile while she watched Joyce place the bracelet carefully in a plastic bag, then mark it with a felt pen.

A personalized piece of jewelry found on the premises containing trace evidence that led right to Elizabeth Labrador just happened to be the major part of the slam-dunk she needed. The irony of it was that Avy's wrist bore a bracelet similar in style. It was Lizzy's gift to her on her eighteenth birthday. *To My Beautiful Daughter Avy—Love—Mom*. Elizabeth, the woman she'd called mother for eighteen years, what a joke, wore another identical bracelet—a replacement for the one she had lost.

"Is there anything else you can think of?" asked Joyce. "We intend to perform a complete sweep of the premises. It's standard procedure. You're free to remain if you wish."

"No, that was it. I think I'll be leaving." She hugged her shoulders. "I feel uncomfortable here."

"We can understand that," said Donovan. "I think it's important that you contact Detective Bulmer as soon as possible to set up a meeting. This is only the start of an investigation that will take a lot of time and effort, involving numerous law enforcement personnel. For now, I'll call you a cab. Thanks for your assistance."

"I'm glad I could help."

Avy knew she had started something that she had little control over now. Because of her, a massive investigation would be launched, involving time, money, and the talents of many professionals. She hoped, prayed, that the evidence they had would be enough for a conviction. Justice was owed to Tom and Avalon Labrador, and Avy would do everything in her power to see that goal accomplished.

* * * *

Avy sat on one side of the long conference table at Police Headquarters. A captain, Detective Bulmer, a forensic pathologist, and a criminal profiler sat on the other side facing her. The two crime scene investigators who had accompanied her to the Remington house, were standing off to the side, ready to comment. Everyone waited for the detective to hit the record button after introducing Avy to the experts. She felt a little nervous, not because of the evidence that

sat on the table in front of her, but because her statements would have to be worded with great care. A successful outcome hinged on her theories, which might later be used as testimony. It had to be credible with enough accurate information to convince these professionals. This was a collaboration of decision makers—a preliminary jury.

Detective Bulmer began, “Avy, just for the record, I’d like you to tell this panel everything that you revealed to me during our previous meeting. Be honest and leave nothing out. Answer all questions to the best of your ability.”

“Before I begin,” she said, “I would like to apologize for not alerting the authorities to an important matter. The fire at the old water tower—that was us. We killed the Wax Man. I suppose you know about what happened at the safe house. We panicked. We ran away to escape the danger. I’m afraid we weren’t in the right frame of mind to act like responsible adults.”

Detective Bulmer nodded. “We know what happened there. Your story checks out. They found bone remnants in the ashes inside the cistern. I can’t say that a nine-eleven call would have helped at the safe house. It was a devastating scene. I’m just glad you made it out alive.”

Avy’s voice cracked. “Did you take care of Chubby? I mean, Raymond Hammersmith.”

Bulmer nodded again. “He was transported to the county coroner’s office.”

“I just want it known that he gave his life to protect us. He’s a hero—a very brave man.”

“We’re well aware of that,” said Bulmer. “We’ll take your statements concerning the full account of what happened there. I won’t lie—we’re most concerned about the officer fatalities, but your findings seem to tie-in with those incidents. So we’ll hear the entire account. Don’t be nervous, Avy. These experts are willing to listen to anything you have to say. We’re here to help.”

Avy cleared her throat, poising her hand over the table. “This is evidence that I discovered at what I believed to be a crime scene.”

Joyce Hart spoke up. “Let it be known that the evidence was retrieved and inventoried by myself, Joyce Hart, and Donovan Post of CSI. Our full report is available for inspection.”

Avy went on. “The evidence came from Drake Labrador’s inheritance estate that he acquired in a will from Tom Labrador. I’m convinced that Elizabeth Labrador is guilty of homicide while her husband Drake was an accessory to the crime.”

“Are you talking about that seventies case?” asked the captain.

“Yes, I am.”

“Avy, you weren’t even born then,” said the captain. “That case was before my time. We know who you are because we ran a check on you. You’re Avalon Labrador’s daughter. Your mother was convicted and sentenced by a jury of her peers. Isn’t that correct?”

“I believe I can prove that she was innocent. Drake knew that he was second in line in his brother’s will. He had always been a loser, never attaining the success of his brother. He knew that with his brother out of the way, and his wife framed for murder, he would inherit all of Tom’s

property, including Cyberflow. That was the motivation. Greed. What I don't know is who laid out the plot, either Drake, Elizabeth or both. The fact is they wanted the company. They took it by eliminating the true owners."

"The motivation is reasonable, but not damning," said the profiler. "Why do you think the bracelet is relevant?"

She pointed to the table. "If you run it through your lab to test it for DNA, I think you'll find the blood type belongs to Tom Labrador. I think those small knobs of dried material are parts of his flesh. The hair, if it shows anything, will belong to Elizabeth Labrador. I know the bracelet belongs to her because of the personal inscription on the back. She wears a duplicate of that piece on her wrist today. Anyway, I pretended to be a house cleaner to gain entry. I found it on top of the ceiling fan case, right where it had been lost during the commission of the crime."

The forensic pathologist leaned forward to study the bracelet. "You're saying you alone found this evidence?"

"Yes. I entered the house with permission. I posed as a housecleaner since I knew it would be impossible for me to get the key. I wanted it to be an authorized entry. This paper records the verbal agreement, time-date, and the person I talked to, Linda Wu, Drake's secretary."

"We'll have to check on the legality of your entry onto the premises," said the captain. "But I don't think that'll be an issue with the ruling, since this more than qualifies for a special circumstances case. So far we have the district attorney on our side—the warrant proves that much."

No one disagreed with the captain's assessment, which added a somber moment to the proceedings.

Bulmer broke the silence. "Avy, you told me that the drug used to incapacitate your mother was Nembutal. Why do you think that?"

"That fact was listed in the trial documents. I remembered that my adoptive mother, Elizabeth Labrador, had a prescription for that drug. I suspect that she had pills of the same type during the time of the crime, and that Drake used them to spike the champagne my birth mother drank that night. Hard copy pharmacy records would prove this if they still exist. At least some doctor had to write out that prescription, so it might be traceable. She also might have those medications listed as write-offs in her past tax records."

"Circumstantial," said the captain. "You need hard evidence, which gets right back to the bracelet." He looked at the forensic pathologist. "Is it possible that DNA could survive this long to be matched to an individual?"

The young woman lifted the bracelet with a pen, examining it from different angles. "It looks like organic matter. It's possible. These hair follicles have what appear to be roots. We might pick up two donors here." She brought it closer to her face to scrutinize the fine details. "Well, she's right in that it does have the owner's name. That much of it checks out. A search might produce the prescription receipts, which would contribute to the circumstantial side of the case. However, the irrefutable evidence would have to be on this little bauble in the form of biological trace evidence."

Bulmer raised a brow at the profiler. "What do you think?"

"I'm not sure," said the middle-aged man. "It was before my time, too. That was Bennett back then. He's retired, fly-fishing his butt off some place in Colorado. If the DA brings this to trial again they'll have to subpoena all of the old witnesses. If they're still alive, of course. I couldn't tell you if the city could bear up to this type of a reinvestigation. The implications are staggering! The little lady also has the prerogative to pursue a wrongful death suit in a civil capacity, or she could go to the media if we refuse to act. All of this could make national headlines with the North Carolina judicial system taking the full brunt of the negative publicity. At the ground level, I guess this is the captain's call first."

All eyes went to the balding African-American. The man ran a hand over his scalp, then stared at the tape recorder. "Bulmer, I'm laying this in your lap," he said. "If the results come back positive for a new trial, I think you're the proper lead investigator for the case. If, I repeat *if* there is enough to go on, you'll have to present the evidence to the district attorney's office. God knows how they'll react to this bit of news."

"I'm just asking for justice," said Avy. "Even if this didn't involve my mother, I would fight to clear the name of any other person. Mistakes are made. Sometimes the justice system makes a wrong turn. The real crime is when we look the other way or refuse to pursue the truth. I believe with all of my heart that the evidence will stand up in a court of law."

Bulmer locked eyes with Avy. "We're all for the truth, dear. Sometimes we have to crash through impossible barriers to get to it. I have to attend some officers' funerals, but I'll proceed with the investigation of this case. I'll see if we can't get the lab to do a priority analysis on the samples, then have written evidence transferred to a report file."

"I'm afraid there's more," said Avy.

Bulmer looked at the others. "Now this is where it gets good."

Avy gulped. "Drake arranged to murder his own parents, and my grandmother, Emily Chambers, aboard a flight he arranged to Bermuda. The pilot was instructed to leave the plane using a parachute in mid-flight. The action would have caused the loss of the plane and occupants over the Atlantic. The grandparents are major stockholders in Cyberflow. Combined they own thirty percent of the company. Drake wanted to ditch the expense of paying their rightful profits. He would also assume full ownership of the company in the case of their deaths."

"Do you have any names of those involved?" asked the captain.

"The pilot's name is Buck Reynolds. He's been a company pilot at Cyberflow for ten years. He's willing to testify against his employer. I wrote down the flight number, date, time, and other information concerning the incident on that piece of paper. So you can add attempted murder to his list."

"Incredible," said the profiler. "How was this catastrophe averted?"

Avy squirmed in her chair. “I posed as an FAA inspector to sneak aboard the plane. I was forced to pull a gun on the pilot. Sebastian Norman can back up my testimony. He helped with the investigation. Uh, I’m sorry about impersonating a federal officer—we did steal the identification.”

The experts sitting across from Avy held their collective breaths in stupefied silence. She didn’t know whether they were impressed or horrified. The captain pinched his nose, then stared at the overhead lights, his face taking on a high sheen under the reflection. Ending the palpable silence, he spoke.

“I couldn’t have read something like this in an Agatha Christie novel. Either it’s the most preposterous story ever concocted, or you, Miss Labrador, should be indoctrinated into the FBI Academy. Or given your own detective agency. Hell, maybe both! If this couple is guilty, we owe it to the state of North Carolina to prosecute them. They have the potential to surpass the Wax Man as a serial killer if they’re the ones who started all of this.”

“Tell them about the tie-in, Avy,” said Bulmer.

Avy looked at the concerned faces, her expression grave. “I’m certain Drake hired the Wax Man to kill us.”

“Dear God, she’s just getting warmed up,” exclaimed the profiler. “Please tell us everything now, Miss Labrador. Start at the beginning.”

She supplied them with all of the information she had committed to memory, including the investigation from the library computer, the meeting with Chubby, along with her eighteen years of turmoil with Drake. After her testimony, she passed two polygraph examinations, and a barrage of new questions designed to trip her up. She never wavered from the truth as she knew it. When she finished the exhaustive session, the captain stood up, leveling a finger at one individual.

“Bulmer, I want you to start on this as soon as you can. Draw up the paperwork. If we have the goods on them and can make it stick, I want these people indicted within seventy-two hours. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

* * * *

They kept her at the precinct, furnishing her with a cell that had most of the comforts of home. That meant a mattress, television, wall-mounted toilet, magazines, and three squares a day. One of the female officers gave her a vase of fresh flowers to brighten her surroundings. She had a new name now. They called her “Numero Uno Material Witness.” She didn’t mind the confinement much. It saved on her motel bill, and it more than fit the definition of protective custody. Every police officer from all shifts came by to visit so she was never wanting for any item or privilege. They routed inmates around her cell, not wishing to expose her to the more seedy side of the station. They fast-tracked duplicates of her identification documents, explaining that she would need them for legal purposes. She was content. But not happy in the true sense.

On the third day of her stay, Detective Bulmer brought her a hot lunch. He sat with her on the bunk, holding another package in his hand. It was a large paper bag. When he opened it, she found a bushel of red roses with a small card attached. The roses were on the wilted side, appearing to be several days old.

"I'm so sorry about this," said Bulmer. "Sebastian brought them here a week ago. He asked that they be given to you if you ever showed up. With everything that has happened, I forgot about it. I had them stored in the evidence refrigerator. I deserve a good smack."

Avy thanked him, then laid the flowers on the bunk, along with the small card. She laughed when she saw the print on the takeout bag. *Burgersaurus*.

"Something wrong?"

"No, it just seems that everybody wants to fatten me up. It's nothing—kind of an inside joke. I had a date there once." She remembered something about onions.

They talked about her accommodations while they ate. She expressed her gratitude about the treatment, even admitting to guilt from all the attention she had received. He gave her accolades for her courageous efforts to help in the investigation, explaining that they couldn't have progressed with such speed without her. When the meal ended, the bald-headed detective stood up to leave. But he lingered at the open cell door. She saw a light in his eyes that hadn't been there a moment ago. His next words had a serious edge to them.

"We're going in with SWAT in a few minutes. We're taking him down, Avy. Then we're going over to his house to pick up Elizabeth. Everything is in place." He paused for a beat but allowed a wide smile to split his face. "It defies regs, but I'm calling the shots. I thought you'd like to be there. I'm afraid you'll be confined to the vehicle some distance away because of the safety factor, but at least you'll see the end result."

She rose to her feet. "Oh, oh yes. I would." Tears threatened to spill. She fought them off. This was the time to stay strong. The endgame was in sight. "I need to go!"

He dressed her in a Kevlar jacket once they were outside the cell. Ten minutes later, she was sitting in the cab of a SWAT van, seated next to Detective Bulmer.

The driver tipped his hat to her. "Congratulations, ma'am. Your first arrest?"

"Uh, yes it is," she said in a shy voice. "I just hope you will all be careful."

"I won't be in on the arrests. I've been assigned as your bodyguard."

The van lurched. They headed out of the driveway onto the street. "No fear," said Bulmer. "We have a layout of the plant and know that he has an armed security force. We're going straight to his office. No fuss, no muss. I'll be the arresting officer."

Avy lost a few fingernails by the time they arrived. The van pulled up in the decorative flower garden next to the front door of Cyberflow Electronics and Software, mashing down a row of marigolds. Avy watched from the confines of the van as several officers dressed like storm troopers rushed the entrance. The detective was right behind them, taking swift strides.

* * * *

Bulmer felt a surge of adrenaline course through him when they ran past the wide-eyed information clerk in the lobby. They took the stairs two at a time until they reached the executive floor. Once in front of Drake's office, Bulmer yelled out, "Raleigh Police Department—open up!" He tried the door, finding it locked. He waved his hand. "Hit it."

Two cops wielding a battering ram, knocked it off its hinges. Six uniforms rushed in, M-16s raised.

Drake bolted upright in his chair, pitching a magazine over his shoulder. A loud thump came from underneath his desk.

"Get out from behind that desk with your hands up!" a cop bellowed.

"What the hell is it about?" Drake demanded.

Detective Bulmer flashed his badge. "It's about thirty years, give or take. Drake Labrador, you are under arrest for accessory to murder, attempted murder, murder for hire, obstruction of justice, tampering with evidence, and arson."

"Get those hands out where we can see them," ordered another cop.

Drake waddled around the desk. He emerged, tripping over his pants, which were wrapped around his ankles. "Don't shoot," Drake pleaded. "I'm not packing."

A female SWAT officer looked at his naked groin. "You can say that again. Now hit the floor."

A cop rapped his gun butt on the desktop. "You! Get out here and assume the position."

Linda Wu crawled out from under the desk into the open to splay herself out. "Awe, shit," she said. "They were going to get divorced anyway. He made me do it."

Someone said, "Clear."

Infidelity on top of it, thought Bulmer. He read Drake his Miranda rights twice just so he understood them.

Drake looked up from the floor, straining his neck. "You have the wrong man. It's Lizzy! She put me up to it." He began to whine. "She orchestrated the whole thing! You don't understand what it's like living with her. I never went through with it—I just couldn't. She's a demon—a witch, I tell ya! That ball an' chain is some nasty-ass juju."

Now Bulmer could understand how everything Avy had told him about Drake made sense. It was a typical scenario—the browbeating wife in control of the submissive husband. No doubt, Lizzy had been running Cyberflow ever since Drake had inherited it. The neurotic decision making of a pill-popping, menopausal, hedonist bitch had, over the years, sapped the company of any success it might have had.

Bulmer ordered two officers to break from the main assault team, canvas the property, and then "roust" all the security guards for weapon's permits. Two other officers were told to search the plant for employees who could serve as potential witnesses against their employer. Bulmer also gave them specific orders to arrest the security chief, Augustus Hollywood, for his willing involvement in the crimes.

One down, one to go, thought Bulmer.

* * * *

Avy rolled her window down when she spotted the suspect in custody being frog-marched through the lobby. By the time Drake exited the front entrance door, he was spilling more beans than Juan Valdez, hollering about turning state's evidence because he refused to take the fall.

Bulmer's voice boomed, "This isn't let's make deal, Labrador. When we tie you in with the Wax Man murder for hire plot, you'll go down for the deaths of seven officers, one civilian, and one small dog."

Upon that news, Drake Labrador began to cry piteous tears. "But people get the needle for that!" He tripped, nearly going down, and that's when he caught sight of Avy. "You!" he accused. "I knew it had to be you. Oh, I knew it all along!"

The officers escorted Drake to an unmarked vehicle, where he was shoved in the back seat and belted in. The unit pulled a swift U-turn and sped away. Avy let out the breath she had been holding, allowing just the slightest grin on her face to show.

The ride to Durham was long, filled with nervous anticipation. Along the way, an additional van merged with traffic, accompanying the first vehicle to serve as backup. Another empty unmarked cruiser joined the convoy. When they reached Drake's mansion, a tactical officer jumped out and short-wired the entry gate, opening it. The vans and cruiser rushed across the property, skidding to a halt near the front entrance. Once again, Detective Bulmer led the main assault force. He hammered on the door, announcing his presence several times. No answer. Two officers made quick work of the double French doors with a battering ram.

* * * *

Bulmer formed teams to search the mansion. Even though Elizabeth's vehicle sat in plain sight on the property, indicating her presence, the cops reported to him that they couldn't find her in the house. Then Bulmer remembered what Avy had told him about Lizzy's favorite hangout—the backyard pool area.

The detective found the suspect lying nude upon a lounge chair near the far end of the pool. She appeared to be asleep. Pill bottles, tanning lotion, and a daiquiri sat on an umbrella table next to her. The officers surrounded the woman, cutting off any means of escape. Lizzy snored boozy breaths, her tan glistening in the sun.

Detective Bulmer nudged the sleeping woman's foot.

Lizzy put a shading hand over her eyes. When she saw the uniforms, she launched from the chair. She delivered ferocious front-snap kicks to the closest officers, catching one in the groin. Another cop tried to wrestle her down, but she spun him around with a powerful yank. They toppled into the pool, splashing in a tangle of flailing limbs. Other officers dropped their weapons to provide assistance. Subdued, the woman was hauled from the pool then proned out, her large silicone breasts mashed into the deck.

"It hurts!" cried Lizzy. "I can't breathe!"

Bulmer would bet Tom Labrador would have said that when the knife was plunged into his chest. But Tom never had the chance to cry out.

Bulmer recited the Miranda rights while he straddled the woman. He secured his own pair of handcuffs around her wrists. Lizzy squirmed hard, trying to break the bond while she cursed every expletive in the bad language book. They managed to get a lounging robe around her shoulders.

The detective rose to his feet, letting two officers take over. The woman continued to deliver savage kicks to anyone near her. Bulmer watched, fascinated that such a transformation had come over a person, who according to Avy, had never in her life displayed a flicker of uncontrolled behavior or spoken a cross word.

When they finally got the suspect to her feet, three officers had to half drag, half carry her through the house. A table lamp, a potted plant, and two ceramic sculptures went down in the melee before they made it to the entrance. Bulmer couldn't remember such a vicious takedown in his entire career.

* * * *

Avy likened the thrashing body being manhandled out the front door to a snagged fish that refused to give up. On the way out, Lizzy hooked her foot in the doorjamb, throwing the officers off balance. She toppled onto the front porch stoop, taking two cops down with her. The officers redoubled their efforts, this time trying to secure a strap around her ankles. But the woman continued to fight against her hold like a rabid animal, forcing additional officers to restrain her.

When Lizzy caught sight of Avy sitting in the van, she did a double take. Her face went from red to purple. Then came the death glare.

"You traitorous bitch!" Lizzy screamed.

You wish, thought Avy.

"Ingrate!"

Not true.

"You filthy slut!"

Cheap shot.

"You're going to pay for this!"

Not like you will.

Avy wanted so much to slap Elizabeth Labrador across those collagen-bloated lips or at least spit in her face. She held her anger in check in spite of it. In a perverse sort of way, she almost felt sorry for the woman. She could admire the superhuman strength and determination that should have belonged to a much younger woman. But the power Lizzy possessed had now become something to use in life's struggle for freedom.

Bulmer helped hoist Lizzy to her feet again, but the woman darted her head, clacking her teeth near his fingers. "Knock it off!" Bulmer demanded. "Will somebody please get her legs secured."

"Copy that."

One of the cops used his belt to finally lasso the suspect's legs

Whether it amounted to poetic justice or a remarkable coincidence, Lizzy remained partially nude due to her own violent tantrum, while her police escorts fought with her every inch of the way, dragging her across the lawn to the awaiting cruiser. It was sheer spectacle. Avy remembered the account of how her mother had been humiliated at the time of her arrest.

Lizzy had one last damnation for them. "You'll all burn in hell for this! I'm a socialite!"

They locked her in the car, shutting off her last muffled cries and wails. With her husband already booked and jailed by now, Avy knew there would be no exchange of stories between the two suspects. There would be no chance for lies, exaggerations, and escape plots. There would be no opportunity for them to tear each other apart. These two had come full circle.

* * * *

Avy stood on the front steps of the police station. Though she had discarded the old roses Sebastian had sent, she had kept the card that accompanied them. She now opened it up to read.

Dearest Avy,

I know that so much of this doesn't make any sense to you. It may never become crystal clear. I just wanted you to know that you made sense to me, maybe for the first time in my life. I know what it means to have a heart now. It means that it can be broken. It seems that all my life I've been talented at making things disappear. It looks like I've done it again. All the conjuring and sleight of hand in the world can't bring you back to me. I wish I had the magic wand to perform that trick now.

They called me in for rehearsals ahead of time. Yeah, I got the job at the Purple Diamond Casino in Las Vegas. Hooray for me, eh? The act won't be anything like it used to be. It's missing its most important ingredient—you. I'll do the best I can. Oh, I promise not to cheat.

P.S. I couldn't take your cute little Jeep. I parked it behind the motel—you know the one where we first, well, you know. The keys are in the air cleaner. I hope you find your way home. We need people like you in this time. Live long, darling. Love forever.

Yours,

The Amazing Idiot

She tucked the card in her purse then started down the steps. Someone called out her name. She turned around to see Detective Bulmer skipping down the steps.

"I'm glad I caught you," he said. He looked winded, his forehead damp with perspiration.

“You were so busy with the investigation I didn’t want to interrupt you,” she said.

“You can interrupt me anytime you want. I just needed to tell you that this case will be sewn up the minute we start pushing it through the system. The trial might take months. Now, I know that you have your own plans. We’ll try not to inconvenience you past the point of—”

“I’ll be available for trial testimony. You’ll just have to let me know when everything starts.”

“Will do. We’ll provide transportation wherever you end up. I will say that it looks solid for two convictions. That’s all due to your exceptional evidence gathering. Avy, we can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done.”

“Huh? Oh, I would do it all over again if I had to, Detective Bulmer.” She felt miles away from the conversation, finding herself gazing off in the distance.

“You wanna know something?” He put his hands on his hips. “If you were to take a course in criminal justice, you might find yourself making detective in a very short time. It wouldn’t surprise me if we had such a position open in the not too distant future.”

She looked past the tops of the walnut trees, out over the hills to the west. “I don’t think I’d be a very good detective. I’ve always wanted to be an actress.”

“We have plainclothes vice, you know. Lots of acting in that division. Talk about props!”

She smiled, admiring his determination and appreciative of the offer. “Thanks just the same. I have another calling of sorts waiting for me. For the first time in my life I think I’m happy with who I am right now.”

“Ah, good news then? By the by, we all chipped in for a grave marker for Raymond Hammersmith. He’ll be buried in a cemetery on the west side of the city.”

She saw the cherubic face in her mind’s eye. It gave her heart a tug. “I think he would like that. Bless you and the department for everything you’ve done. I’ll be in touch. There’s just something I have to do now.”

“Remember you’ll always have the keys to the city. The mayor insists. Can I drop you off somewhere?”

“I have my own transportation. Besides, I think right now all I need is a good long walk and a little time.”

“Hah! I wish I had more time! I could get a lot more done.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” She winked at him. “More time might take you somewhere you never expected.”

She walked down the steps, sucking in a chest-full of Raleigh air. It would be months before she returned to North Carolina for another such breath.

Chapter 24

Avy arrived by cab at the rear employee entrance to the Purple Diamond Casino, located on the strip in Las Vegas, Nevada. She had arranged to have her Suzuki Samurai driven across country by a courier service. A four day road trip over the highways of the United States had not appealed to her. She preferred the alternative mode of travel. She wouldn't say that she excelled at making precise jumps through the space-time continuum, but she was getting better at it. Janus had been right in telling her that Gate-Walking required copious hours to perfect the skill.

She gazed at the huge hotel edifice. It took her breath away. The loading dock bustled with activity akin to a hive of bees that were behind schedule. Carpenters, engineers, electricians, crew bosses were hard at work, flooding through the many service bays. Forklifts, electric carts, wardrobe racks, raced across the pavement. Pneumatic air tools murdered the air with an unceasing racket. It looked like a textbook definition of "organized chaos." Avy realized that the grand opening preparation for a multi-billion dollar casino began months in advance, lasting up until the time the doors opened to admit the public. It was the first time she'd seen such a spectacle. She even felt a tinge of the glamour associated with such a large-scale production. Pomp and circumstance—personified. The whole thing bespoke of acting, endless portrayals, huge stages, and elaborate costuming. The greatest show on earth.

She mounted the steps to the loading dock, sidestepping her way to a double door entrance. She approached a group of females dressed in showgirl costumes. They looked like prissy peacocks, appearing to be on break from a live rehearsal, chatting, smoking cigarettes. Avy tapped the shoulder of the nearest girl. The young woman turned around in an explosion of feathers, sequins, and tassels. She raised her brows.

"I was wondering," began Avy, "if you could tell me where I could find an employee of this casino. His stage name is the Amazing Sebastian, last name, Norman. He's going to headline the magic show."

The showgirl stamped out a cigarette butt. "Who could forget him? Mr. Hunky is somewhere near the main stage in the Xanadu theater. That's in the west wing of the hotel complex. If you're interested in hooking up with him, you better grab a number. He's got all the thongs around here soaking wet." She laughed. The other girls joined in, preening like silly birds.

Avy sniffed. "Watch it, sister."

The showgirl blinked. "Oh? We've got the wrong message then?" She gave Avy an admiring once-over. "In that case, let me shake my tail feathers out of respect! Look, sweetie." She glanced toward the entrance. "You're never going to get in there unless you're wearing one of these." The

showgirl unpinned her nametag then fastened it over Avy's breast. "There, at least security won't toss you out. Just give it back to me when you're finished. Good luck. What am I saying—you are lucky!"

Avy gave her a thankful handshake. She squeezed past the women and entered the large warehouse. After several stops of inquiry, she found a small brochure that contained a map of the entire complex. After a ten minute walk, she found the Xanadu Theater at the end of the casino. She passed through a fountain of purple drapes to emerge onto the wing of a vast stage.

The grandeur of the theater bowled her over. It reminded her of the Roman Coliseum. The interior stretched out under a high vaulted ceiling that was decorated with paintings of angels, nymphs, sprites, and other mythological creatures. Dozens of props sat on the stage. She could see a few people between two of the largest magic sets. Sebastian. A girl. Attired in street clothes, Sebastian was giving the girl pointers.

Avy crept closer, winding her way through the colorful machines until she came within earshot of the two.

"Okay, when you pull the tablecloth," Sebastian was saying, "you have to do it with a stark yank—smooth but fast. Got it?"

"I think so," said the girl. "That way all the glassware will stay on the table because they're not supposed to get broken."

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that's the whole idea. Gosh, I hope I don't have to cheat this."

"What?"

"Nothing. Now try it again."

Avy stepped out to better watch the maneuver. The girl curtsied then yanked on the tablecloth. The place setting flipped helter-skelter into the air, then crashed to the floor. Fortunately for the girl, the props were plastic.

"Oh, I did it again!" said the girl, stomping a foot.

Sebastian clawed at his face. "Now I know I'll have to fudge this. Let's try it again with a fresh load." He caught sight of Avy in his peripheral vision. His mouth unhinged when he turned to look at her. He made slow strides across the stage until he came within a few feet of her. He raised his arms in embrace but dropped them in a fit of embarrassment.

"What about me?" said the other girl.

"Take the day off," Sebastian hollered over his shoulder. "I'll call you when I need you."

"How come?"

"Because I said so."

Avy waved a naughty finger. "What's this about cheating? I hope you weren't going to break a promise so soon."

"God, Avy. I'm so glad to see you." He peered at her nametag. "I mean, Pinky Donaldson? Little name change?"

Avy threw her arms up. Their embrace was a body smash. When they kissed, their teeth clacked. “I love you so much,” she blubbered. “I couldn’t stand to be away from you any longer. I’m sorry for leaving you the way I did.”

He looked at her, his eyes misting. “Don’t ever leave me. I couldn’t take it. I won’t ever hurt you again.”

“We’re just a couple of freaks,” she said, tears spilling. “We deserve each other.”

Sebastian dabbed his eyes, recovering somewhat. “Well, did you ever find your car? What do you think of Las Vegas?”

“I’m having the car sent by courier. Las Vegas? I dunno, it’s very hot here.” She wiped her eyes, then blew her nose.

“I’ve been following the newspapers,” he said. “It looks like mission accomplished. Damn, honey, you pulled it off.”

Avy nodded. “They’re going to pay for what they did, Sebastian. The arrest part of it is over. But it looks like I’ll have to return to testify at the trial. For what it’s worth, you were right all along. About the way things work, I mean.”

Sebastian gripped her shoulders, stepped in closer. “Avy, I want you to be my assistant. It’s all new stuff, with a different show format, but it has all the same basic moves. We’ll have plenty of time to get the act down pat. I sent for my animals, too.” He licked his lips. “The cuisine is awesome. They’ve housed me in one of the whale suites. You wouldn’t, couldn’t believe what they pay for a single show! Two shows a night—four performances a week. They call the show *Metamorphoses* after one of Houdini’s greatest tricks. Avy, it just wouldn’t be right if Vegas didn’t have the privilege of seeing Lady Labrador. Please say you will!”

“Isn’t there anything you don’t like about Las Vegas?”

He looked thoughtful. “Well, they don’t have a *Burgersaurus*. But no place is perfect.”

“Gee, I don’t know.” It was fun toying with him.

“Avy, I already picked out a little place to visit in case you turned up. It’s called the Silver Bell Wedding Chapel. I don’t need anything traditional for me. I’m not orthodox. What do you say?”

She didn’t have to speak a word. She let her eyes answer.

Chapter 25

The Xanadu Theater was filled to capacity on opening night. A war hero, the mayor, several celebrities, even Pinky Donaldson's entire showgirl troupe showed up. Of course, Pinky and the girls hadn't come to watch Avy perform. The Amazing Sebastian had never looked more handsome or charming. There were more than a few moist undies in the audience that night. The show had gone off without a hitch. Well, except for one glitch. Avy had been required to fling her top hat into the air to perform the celebratory farewell when the curtain began to drop. Whether the fault resulted from the opening night jitters, a surplus of adrenalin, or with the costume design, the result was the same. Avy threw her breasts out of her costume top in front of six thousand and five hundred attendees—the largest show audience in Las Vegas history. Of course, it being a Las Vegas crowd, the audience demanded an encore, thinking it was part of the act. Avy did manage to recover, but failed to cool Sebastian down backstage before he went looking for the costume designer with murder in his heart and vengeance on his mind.

The second show closed at eleven that night. Nothing extraordinary happened except for the elevated decibel level attributed to a wilder, boozier crowd. A tornado of panties, motel keys, love letters, and flowers ended up on the stage. The debris was so thick they had to use push brooms to remove it. When the curtain fell, Sebastian traipsed off through the wing, still obsessed with finding the costume seamstress.

One special guest, sitting in the furthest row in the back, approached the stage when most of the theater had cleared. The man held the largest bouquet of roses Avy had ever seen. She jumped off the stage to wrap her arms around Janus.

"I've missed you so much," said Avy. "I'm so glad you came. I could feel you in the audience! I'm so sorry I didn't—"

He put a finger on her lips. "You did everything right, daughter. There is nothing to be sorry about. You've arrived right where you were supposed to be—this place, this moment, into the arms of the man you love. This is the first time that I have been here with these flowers. It's been a long journey, but we've arrived on the last page of this new beginning."

She heaved a great sigh. "Then I guess it's great to be home. For good."

"For good," he echoed, then linked his arm with hers. They walked up onto the stage. As they strolled through the wing, they spoke of many things. Some of the things they talked about concerned distant realms while other subjects explored victories, tragedies, timelines, and alternate histories. He enlightened her about the Conjurors—Sebastian's folk, who they were, where they had come from. He explained the riddle of the Sun and the Moon, the Key in between. She listened with rapt attention, knowing that one day she would know it all, just like he'd promised. She also confessed that she had a lot more to learn because being a Gate-Walker held a special privilege.

"I think I know what my purpose is now, Father," she said.

"No regrets or recriminations?" he asked.

"No, Father. I'm very happy now. I have everything I've always wanted. Where do you go from here?"

"Wherever there is trouble," he said. He whispered something in her ear before raising his voice. "Once you're settled, you'll make pilgrimages too. It's part of your calling. There is no shortage of heartache or misery in today's world. For every shining divinity that abides by the light, there is an Emmaus, a Wax Man, to cast them into darkness. Part angel, part warrior, your days will be long but they will not be forever. Gird yourself now, for you will become ancient. Those of your 'today' will pass before you like flowers that have wilted under a sweltering sun. When your time comes to pass through the last Life Gate, you'll combine souls with your mother."

"I'm looking forward to that day with mother," she said with a wistful swoon. "Gosh, I guess I'll always be able to stay young for Sebastian no matter how old I get. Lucky him." Then she looked perplexed. "If we have a child, Father, just exactly what will it be?"

He whispered again in her ear.

"No kidding? Now why does that sound like a leprechaun?" *I can read your thoughts right now. You're reminding me of a promise I made to someone. No, I will never abuse the privilege. Yes, I'll learn much more about the Sun and the Moon, the Key in between. I promise you I will.*

"That gladdens my heart," said Janus. He held her shoulders. "Until I see you again, daughter." He gave her a cheek a gentle kiss. He turned around, then walked through the folds in the stage drapes. They ruffled once, and lay still. A small piece of paper skittered across the floor.

Avy heard heavy thumps upon the stage. Sebastian emerged from around the corner. "There you are! Where have you been?"

"Sebastian, please don't torment the costume seamstress. It wasn't her fault. It was just the excitement. As for me, I've been talking with Janus. We had a nice visit. See?" She held out the bouquet of roses.

"How come I missed him?" Sebastian screwed up his face. "Damn it! He never wants to visit with me anymore. Where did he go?"

"Somalia. Then he's off to Iraq. Don't worry. You have to learn how to relax a little. You're so intense."

"I guess you're right. I'll take stress classes or something." He looked at her with expectant eyes. "Avy? You have that crooked little smile on your face again. You're up to something."

She dithered. "I was just wondering about visiting hours. I have to keep a promise. There's somebody I have to see."

Sebastian held up his hands in surrender. "Sweetheart, I swear I'm not going to bug you about it or try to stop you. I won't even ask you how long you'll be gone. Just have a safe trip. Bring me back a souvenir or a hamburger. But damn it! I don't know what I'm going to do without you. Again!"

“You’ll just have to get used to it,” she said with a sly wink. She handed him the bouquet.

Avy raised her wrist to her face to look at the compass. She stepped toward a closed fire exit door. “I won’t be long, love. Here’s a question for you that will give you something to think about until I get back. When we have a baby, try to guess what she or he will be. Chew on that one.”

* * * *

Sebastian started to speak, but it was too late. He watched her dematerialize when she stepped through the heavy metal door.

He pointed an accusing finger. “Now that’s cheating!”

There could be heard a young woman’s laughter in the air over his head. It was almost a cackle, raising then lowering in volume. The voice stretched into a thin whisper, fading with the Doppler.

He hunched his shoulders in surrender and mumbled, “Looks like from here on out life’s going to be pure magic.”

About Chris Stevenson

http://www.lyricalpress.com/chris_stevenson

Chris Stevenson has been writing spec fiction for the past 22 years. He's published in every genre and medium except screen writing. Twilight Zone magazine was his first introduction into fantasy story-telling and he hasn't stopped since. Gate Walker was inspired by one of the Roman Gods, Janus, who was the gate-keeper in times of peace and war. The questions was asked: what if a divine being could use the gates and doorways into the past and future? What impact would such a God have on humanity and history?

Avy Labrador soon finds out that she is something more than mortal, and she has the gift of changing the face of all mankind.

Chris' Website:

<http://www.freewebs.com/uncle/>

Reader eMail:

Stevenson_333@msn.com

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