

Sleepwalker

Jordan Castillo Price

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A Note From Jordan

Dear reader,

We are witnessing the start of a huge shift in the publishing industry.

Before 2003, if I wrote a story that wasn't corporate America's idea of What Deserves to be Published, the best I could have put together was a photocopied 'zine that I distributed at whatever comic shops could be coerced into keeping a few copies on consignment.

The advent of epublising and print-on-demand has changed that. Big time.

We're on the cusp of a meritocracy of ideas, where books sink or swim based on what readers want, rather than what corporate marketing folks think will sell.

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Thank you very much for buying an independent book. It does make a difference.

Jordan Castillo Price
Owner, JCP Books LLC

Special thanks to Lisa Rock, who named the MAHPS grant and foundation, and even came up with their geeky slogan!

Sleepwalker

By Jordan Castillo Price

Chapter One

How much time actually passes in five minutes? Depends what you're doing, I guess. Staring into the eyes of a guy you're about to get naked with, five minutes probably seems like it's there and gone in a heartbeat—but when you're wandering through a hundred thousand square feet of dead animals and crushed dreams, five minutes can stretch to fill an eternity.

I checked my watch to make sure I hadn't read it wrong, that George hadn't skewed my vision, blurred something, scrambled the numbers. But no. Five minutes had passed. Nearly four hundred minutes to go until I could wander home in the cold, gray dawn. Fifty minutes until I allowed myself to take my "morning" break, which actually happened closer to midnight. No one would know if I took my break early...probably. Unless Luke or Bridget checked the security footage—and we were so understaffed, I couldn't imagine they'd bother—but it'd be my luck that on the night I started to goof off, one of 'em would happen to click somewhere random on the playback and land on the precise second I cut myself a little slack.

Overnight lighting in the museum is low, but not pitch-dark. If tightwad Bridget could've figured out a way to leave the Faris Natural Sciences Center running on a single nightlight, she would have. But our insurance agents weren't keen on leaving valuable artifacts, what few we owned, in the dark all night long. The Center could only afford a single night guard—which wasn't nearly enough for a three-level facility—but at least that single guard wasn't expected to have night vision. Not for \$9.58 an hour.

Even though I could see in the low light, the bare minimum that Bridget could get away with and still retain our insurance, I hit every corner of the third floor display room with my flashlight anyway, then the locked emergency stairwell door and the gap between the display cases. The plexi bounced the light back at me briefly, until I shifted the angle so the beam fell on the inhabitant rather than the case. The Rock River Beaver stared back at me with his vacant glass eyes, and bared his long, yellow-brown teeth at me. Still not moving. Yet.

Though it was the biggest taxidermy beaver in North America, it wasn't the size of him that was spooky. It was the expression on his face, something between a smile and a hiss. There was a gleam in his dusty glass eye that seemed to say, "Watch your step, buddy-boy. I can put my teeth right through your arm."

"A full can of Pepper Shot says you can't."

I sighed. Another stellar moment for the security cameras to catch—me, talking to a beaver that'd been dead nearly as long as I'd been alive. Since George came to live with me, my impulse control just hasn't been what it used to be.

I moved through to the pre-colonial section. The People of the Plains tended a cellophane fire. Not moving. Rocks and minerals of the tri-state region—hell, no one ever went in that alcove at all—not even us guards. I shone my beam at the floor and the dust was evident even by flashlight. The crap in the building generated dust like nobody's business, but also, I suspected that Bridget had cut back on the cleaning crew in an attempt to squeeze even more blood from the turnip.

The Illinois Riverbed in dramatic cross-section. Nothing moving there, either. Fossils. Fossil castings. Diagrams explaining the fossils. And explaining the fossil castings. Not moving.

The broad marble staircase led down into the atrium, a big, hollow-sounding place where a live sycamore grew, spindly and stunted, reaching listlessly toward the skylights where daylight would begin trickling through in another four hundred minutes or so. My cousin Alex said that tree would be twice the size if it was outdoors as God intended. I probably then asked him where he'd gotten such cutting insight into what God intended, and then he'd likely clammed up, figuring it was some oblique reference to George.

When there's a "George" in your life, suddenly everyone assumes everything you say is an oblique reference to it.

Second floor. I checked the Petroglyph Alcove, noted that someone with idle hands and a ballpoint pen had changed the lettering in the sign from "Cave Art" to "Cave FArt" yet again—and even though I'd seen it a million times before, it still made me smile. Not that it was all that clever, as far as vandalism goes. I supposed my level of amusement said something about my maturity, or lack of it. Even so, I dutifully made a note on my pad to let the cleaning crew know—if the cleaning crew hadn't been laid off. In which case, I'd need to tell Bridget.

Administrative offices—locked. I pulled the keyring taut on its retractable tether, unlocked the door, then hauled it shut behind me. Once upon a time the pneumatic closer at the top probably worked, but like anything else non-essential in the museum, its repair wasn't high on the list of fix-it priorities. The door led to a room that used to be a waiting room, but had since been repurposed into a break room with a mini-fridge, a water cooler and a microwave.

I suspect there was no need for a break room in the Center's original design, since a food court had been envisioned in the atrium. What had looked promising on the drawing board and what actually came into being were often two different beasts. It's possible they'd served hot dogs or frozen pizza once upon a time, but I couldn't remember ever having eaten there. I couldn't even recall seeing them with their roll-down window guards rolled up. One metal-accordioned window displayed the T-shirts for sale by the ticket counter, and another featured science projects from the Faris Middle School. Better than two empty gaps, I supposed.

At least the ad hoc break room itself was still in decent repair. It didn't get the punishing traffic of the public parts of the building. Not that "traffic" was all that heavy, but you'd be surprised how much wear and tear the occasional field trip put on the building.

Although it was earlier than I wanted to take my break, I thought a sip of water might keep me going until it was time to put my feet up and take my pill. I went into the minuscule staff break room, held a mug under the water cooler spigot, and flipped up the tab. Or I tried to, anyway. The watercooler tab was taped down.

A note from Bridget hung from the cooler that read, "Use the sink. Water for guests."

The sink? There was no kitchen sink in the ex-waiting room. The only tap was in the staff bathroom. Bathroom water.

More annoying still, it wasn't even a hand-written note, something she could've dashed off in a sudden fit of extreme miserliness, but a typed and printed communiqué from her computer. She'd actually gone back to her office and typed something up to keep me from having a glass of paid water.

Oh, fuck you, Bridget.

My eye twitched. Down, George. It's not worth it.

I glanced at my watch again and decided that the world wouldn't end if I took my Neurontin half an hour early—with bathroom water.

I checked my watch. Ninety minutes down. Seven long, lonely hours to go. You'd be amazed at how long seven and a half hours can be.

• • •

It was the last sweep of my shift. First floor—easy. Most of it was locked off, hadn't been used in nearly a decade. Second floor—more to see here. Denizens of the Sky. Cave FArt. Stairwell atrium with stunted tree. I rounded the corner and continued my second floor sweep expecting more of the same, nothing moving but the sluggish churn of the fountain on economy mode.

The light was on in the Admin office.

My heart did a weird fluttery thing as I tried to remember if I'd left it on. I never rounded the corner by the dimly-lit Illinois Riverbed and saw a wedge of light shining out from beneath the staff door. I never left that light on. Never.

Although, I could have.

I checked my watch. My hours all seemed to be present and accounted for—but what if George had snuck in for a ten-minute quickie, then snuck out again, leaving me none the wiser? Who knew what I might have gotten up to?

I might have poured myself some guest water from the water cooler, for God's sake.

My hand hovered over the doorknob, and I second-guessed myself. What if it hadn't been me? What if some idiot was looking for a safe full of money, some idiot who didn't realize the take at the door was less than a hundred bucks a day. Some idiot with a gun.

I pulled my pepper spray and pressed my ear to the door. If he was a burglar, he was a really quiet burglar. I eased the break room door open, and heard a burst of muted clacking coming from the hallway beyond. If he was a burglar, he'd broken in to use our computers. Didn't he know they had newer CPUs at the library which opened in...I checked my watch. Three and a half hours.

Another burst of keystrokes. I should have put my pepper spray back in its clip, but the urge to find Bridget typing up another one of her love letters at the crack of dawn wouldn't let me

put it away just yet. If I nailed my own boss with Pepper Shot, I could always claim I'd thought she was a burglar, right?

I passed the break room and rounded the corner of the hallway fully poised to blast Bridget in the face, but instead of Bridget, I found Luke Presioso hard at work in his office—the office next door to Bridget's. At six in the morning. Luke, with his bright white teeth and his male model looks—Luke, who never came in before one, because he said that people never took fundraiser calls before lunch.

I shifted my weight and my clothes rustled, and Luke swiveled in his creaky pneumatic chair. "Web."

Luke called me *Web*, short for my last name, Weber. Everyone called me Web—everyone but Bridget, who called me Dan.

I've never corrected Bridget.

Luke glanced down at the Pepper Shot, which I re-holstered as unobtrusively as I could. I doubt I would have ever actually sprayed anyone, even Bridget, but it's not every day you threaten to incapacitate management. "I probably should've called if I was coming in before opening," he said, "shouldn't I? Didn't occur to me."

"No biggie." I took off the khaki security guard baseball cap and flexed it in my hands. A baseball cap and a clip-on tie were a bad enough fashion statement as it was, and no matter how often I tried, I could never squeeze the damn cap into a shape I liked. The uniform always made me feel like a supreme dork. "Thought you were Bridget, typing me another one of her manifestos. Is it really six, or is my watch broken?"

"I couldn't sleep." He motioned at the chair beside his desk, and I sat and twisted the cap, glad for something to do with my hands. "Listen, someone from Mid-American is scheduled to visit us on Thursday. There's grant money that we might be able to get our hands on, enough to plug the hull of this sinking ship for a couple of years."

Holy cow. Bridget made it sound like we'd be just fine if we all used less toilet paper and turned down the thermostat a couple of degrees. "Don't sugarcoat it, man. Tell me how you really feel."

Luke laughed and leaned back in his chair. Tanning salon? Maybe—or maybe it was his Italian blood. He was fortyish, with dark hair and dark eyes to match his Mediterranean skin, and just a few grays starting to sneak through at his widow's peaks. A good-looking guy. And probably straight—but that didn't mean I couldn't look.

"Is there anyone you can talk into coming and acting like they're interested in this place?" he asked. "A decent attendance would make a big difference. There's always some parent-teacher conference thing going on when I need a good school visit."

"I'll see. But pretty much everyone I know would be at work."

“And what do you say to a double shift that day? Marvin looks like he’s about a hundred years old—and we should probably have more than one guard on, anyway. You need money for a haircut?”

Money would be nice, but I didn’t want a haircut—and George wouldn’t be too pleased with me for pulling a double. I didn’t mention George, though. I couldn’t afford to get canned. The Faris Natural Sciences Center was the only job that was within walking distance from my apartment and offered health insurance.

Luke didn’t wait for me to answer. “D’you think we could find a temporary guard? What about your cousin—he’s just about your size. Your uniform would fit him. Would he stand in? He wouldn’t need to do any actual duties, just park himself in a visible spot so that it looked like we had more of a staff.”

“It’s getting pretty dusty upstairs....”

“The check for the cleaning service bounced.”

“Oh. Well...it’s bad up there.”

“You’re telling me. The taxidermy’s overdue, too.”

Taxidermy’s a bitch to keep clean. Dead animals are cobweb magnets.

“Here’s what we’ll do...” he said. “Focus the detailing work on the second floor. Keep the lights low on three, tell the MAHPS guy we’ve got photosensitive artifacts up there.”

“People of the Plains? Good luck with that.”

“There’s an old redneck in Iowa who’s supposed to work taxidermy magic. We’ll get him out here to give the furballs a going-over. If he knows what he’s doing, he’ll be faster than those kids from the biology department.”

A year and half ago *I’d* been one of those kids from the biology department. Back when I still had aspirations of being something other than a security guard. Or a vegetable. I didn’t mention it to Luke...and he didn’t seem curious as to why I had the sudden strong urge to resume my rounds.

I went upstairs and did a double-sweep of the third floor so I didn’t have to keep encountering that wedge of light shining out from the door to Admin. The People of the Plains could do with a little TLC from a qualified professional. The Kickapoo woman’s hair was going prematurely gray with cobwebs and dust, and her bare legs had dried trails on them that suggested she’d been spat on.

At the end of my shift, as I watched Marvin plod up the marble atrium stairs, I decided that although Luke was an asshole for bringing up the biology department, he was right. Marvin did look like he was a hundred. Ninety-five, at least—though I think he was closer to a leathery, chain-smoking seventy-one.

I checked my watch. Ten after seven; Marvin was late to relieve me. I used to toy with the idea that he was later each day by some incremental amount, say two seconds, which would add up to a minute a month. But watching him shamble up the staircase, I decided that maybe he actually left his house at precisely the same time every day, but hadn't realized he was getting slower and more arthritic as the year wore on.

He touched the brim of his baseball cap and said, "What's new, Web?" Those were his standard three words, and my standard reply was that I had a date with a two eggs over easy and a cup of decaf at Pat's Diner, but today there actually was news. "Some big shot's coming to the museum on Thursday. Luke's here already with his panties in a twist."

Panties? Okay, that was a weird way to put it. I blamed George, who's convenient to blame since he can't actually defend himself.

"Hope he don't ask me to work a double," Marvin said. "I'm too old for this. Should've retired five years ago."

"And someone wrote 'Cave FArt' again."

"Fuckin' kids." That was the standard response to "Cave FArt." Marvin and I liked our routines.

"All right, then." I gave Marvin a half-wave he couldn't see, since he was already making his laborious way toward the second floor. "Have a good one." He raised a hand in return anyway, like he trusted me to wave whether he'd been looking or not, and plodded on toward the office.

My cousin Alex was pulling out of the driveway when I got home. He stopped halfway to the sidewalk and rolled down his window, and I took the travel mug of coffee off the car roof and handed it to him.

I could see the sun glinting off his scalp through his short black hair. I think he'd been going for some kind of slick, corporate look, but the barber'd taken his hair way too low, and instead Alex looked like he just rolled out of prison and slapped on a suit so he could find a job.

Our whole lives, everyone's told us we look like brothers. Same dark hair and dark eyes, same chin, same crooked smile, like we'd just broken the rules and we were waiting for you to figure out exactly how.

Alex didn't smile much anymore. He had a pissy expression on his face when he dropped the cup into the cup holder. I didn't take it personally. He'd been pissed off so long his face had frozen that way.

"You wanna play security guard Thursday?" I asked. "We need to look staffed."

"What time?"

"First shift, maybe second."

“I suppose I’m sick of being the only one around here who doesn’t get to bring weapons to work.” Alex ran his hand over his buzz-cut and gave it some thought. “Maybe the new guy can cover me. Lemme see what I can do.”

I rapped a couple of times on the hood and said, “Later.” I didn’t care if he filled in or not—and maybe I should. Maybe I should be worried that without this grant, the Center might close its doors and become nothing more than a big, empty three-story building with a stunted sycamore inside.

Which would leave me with no job, no insurance, and no prospects for anything resembling a normal life. Until George came along, I’d spent my whole life trying to figure out how to get away from Faris. Now it seemed like I was doing everything I could to figure out how to live here.

Chapter Two

“Are you all right, Web?”

I took a careful breath and oriented myself. Dinner table. Fork in one hand, knife in the other, and a mouthful of Salisbury steak. Alex’s wife. Damn it. Known her since I was fourteen and couldn’t think of her name. Which wasn’t even the worst part—I’d never told them about the way George took words out of my brain and tossed ’em out the window. They weren’t going to quiz me. But the fugues, the stretches where I would sleepwalk without the benefit of sleep for minutes, even hours at a time—those were harder to write off.

“Yeah, good,” I said, not quite a lie. I wasn’t bad, after all—I hadn’t flung the green beans against the wall or tried to swallow my steak knife while I was out. I just wouldn’t remember her name ’til I looked it up in my notebook. “Dinner’s great.”

“That’s the third time you’ve said that,” Alex muttered. It sounded strangled, like he wouldn’t have commented if he’d had any control over it, but the words had forced their way out. And he couldn’t blame George, like I could.

“Because it’s really, really great.” I smiled at what’s-er-name, and she gave me a wan return smile. She used to think I was charming, back when she was an undergrad at U of I, and I was Alex’s cute little gay cousin. Now she mostly felt sorry for me. “There, I said it again.”

“So tell me this, Space Captain,” Alex said. “When did you zone out?”

“Who said I—?”

“What were we talking about, then?”

“The MAHPS Grant,” I said. “From the Mid-American Historical Preservation Society.” No reaction. So we *had* been talking about the grant. I’d wow ’em with the slogan, then.

“Mapping to the future by preserving the past.” I eyed both of them to see if either of them bought my “fully conscious” act, but given that Alex had a vein throbbing at his temple and...his wife...was sitting up far too straight, I was guessing not.

Alex said, “You know I pulled a bunch of strings and got Thursday off for you.”

No, I didn’t know. “How many times do you want me to thank you for that? They’ll pay you, y’know.” If he was lucky, the check wouldn’t bounce.

“You on your meds?”

“Why do you always think I’m skipping my meds?”

“Web doesn’t skip his meds,” Alex’s wife said. Bless her heart, whatever her name was.

“I can never tell if you’re really here or not. You’ll ask me if you can burn a CD off me, take it upstairs, then come back down ten minutes later and ask for it again. It’s like Groundhog Day, but you’re the only one stuck in it. It’d be different if you at least acted funny when you’re out to lunch—but you don’t. It’s creepy.”

Try living with near-constant déjà vu like I did, then come and tell me about creepy.

“Neurontin is for seizures.”

“I know, I know.”

“I haven’t had one in eight months. So there you go—I’m taking my meds. Happy?”

Alex glared at his plate. “Tickled pink.”

His wife made a weird sound, a hiccup thing that I took for a laugh, until she clapped her hand over her mouth, said, “I’m sorry,” into her palm and took off into the living room.

“It’s fine,” I called after her. “I’m fine.” Damn it. I knew her. I had loads of memories of watching movies and eating dinner and hanging out together. If only I could remember her name.

I pulled out my notepad, wrote *told Marvin* next to *Cave FArt*, then wrote, *Alex working Thursday, tell Luke* beneath it. Then I flipped back a few pages until I spotted something useful: *Pick up Kathy’s dry cleaning*. Kathy. Kathleen. It flooded back all at once like it did every time, ten years of saying her name. Kathy. Kath. I knew her name, I did.

What a relief.

Alex stabbed his potatoes so hard his fork clacked into the plate. “And then she goes and gets all worked up about it....”

“You know, look. I appreciate everything you guys have done for me—more than I can ever say—but this is too stressful for everybody. Maybe I should move.”

“Don’t say that.” He nailed me with a fierce look. “We’re family, and we stick together. You stay here—ignore me, all right? I’m an asshole.”

He wasn’t, though. He was just pissed off. Anger—I’d moved through that stage a long time ago, and currently I hovered somewhere between acceptance and bemused derision.

...

Watch, pills, notebook, leftovers. What more could an eager young man like me need for a wild night in a museum? I passed the dry cleaners where I'd picked up—Kathy, her name is Kathy—where I'd picked up Kathy's down comforter a week ago. It was closed now for the night, and security gates were drawn. All the businesses in New Faris had security gates now, not because it was particularly wealthy, but because the number of abandoned houses had skyrocketed with the latest recession. Back when the new part of town had been built, fifteen years ago, no one had realized what a ghost town it would turn into.

I let myself into the Center's east entrance and made my way toward the staff break room to drop off my midnight lunch and my overcoat, but stopped dead at the top of the stairwell as I saw the second floor lights were on. Not just the Admin offices this time—all of them. Bright as open hours. I checked my watch to make sure it wasn't me who'd gone and turned them on while I was sleepwalking. Five to eleven. Nope—not me, not unless I'd been running really fast.

Theresa, the second-shift guard, walked out of the office door pulling on a ratty hooded sweatshirt. She's a Puerto Rican girl with hips so big she looks like her top and bottom halves came from two different people. She also looks like she could kick my ass. "Taxidermy guy's here," she said. "Don't mace him."

Theresa and I didn't have a routine like Marvin and I did. Theresa didn't wave. She also always made sure to leave the second I got there, whether I was early or not. Maybe she did it on purpose, maybe not. Hard to say—I've never once seen her check her watch.

Not one of us was thrilled to be there—I could personally vouch for that—but Theresa didn't even try to fake it. She used to make her living doing nails, and I guess she was good at it. But then one of her kids broke his arm and the trip to the emergency room convinced her that she needed to give up a job she liked for a job with...health insurance.

Given her situation (and mine) I couldn't exactly throw stones. Even so, as I watched her high-tail it toward the exit, I couldn't help but thinking that she never moved that fast while she was making her rounds.

I sighed, pulled out my notepad, and wrote, *Taxidermy guy here*. I've forgotten weirder things, after all.

Once my leftovers were stowed in the fridge and I'd tried for the umpteenth time to mash my khaki baseball cap into the semblance of something that fit, I headed up to the third floor to start my rounds.

The guy standing at the edge of People of the Plains gazing at the beaver didn't look like some old guy from Iowa to me. He was young, younger than me probably, with a black bandanna over wavy brown hair that hung down to the middle of his back. He was wearing big, low-slung jeans and a flannel shirt. The way he stared at that beaver, you'd swear he was watching a Blink-182 encore.

I flicked on my flashlight and bounced a beam of light off the beaver's case to get his attention. "Are you the, uh, taxidermist?"

He turned and shot me a look over his shoulder, and whoa damn, he was way too hot to be a taxidermist. Probably straight, given the grunge-getup, but like I always say—no harm in looking.

“Jesse Ray Jones.” He seemed like he should’ve had a twang, but he didn’t. Midwestern accent, soft-spoken, even shy. I was suddenly painfully aware that I hadn’t gotten laid in months. And I was wearing a clip-on tie.

“Dan Weber—call me Web.”

He cocked his head at the display. “This guy’s got a plastic nose. Shame. Good cape, otherwise. And big.”

The Rock River Beaver never made it to the U of I biology department. Too special to be manhandled by students. “I didn’t know they made plastic beaver noses. Can’t imagine where I’d shop for one.”

“Mail order, back when he was mounted. These days it’s all online.”

“You local? I heard we were outsourcing to Iowa for a specialist....”

He smiled. Dimples. He had dimples in that strong-featured farm boy face. I was such a goner. “That’s my old man. He’s at a conference in Alaska, and you guys couldn’t wait a week, so you get me instead.” Good thing I hadn’t quoted Luke directly—thought I didn’t remember if Jesse Ray’s father was supposed to be a hillbilly or a redneck. One thing for sure, he’d fathered one fine-looking kid. “You got the key to this case? The one Theresa gave me sticks. I don’t want to break it off in the lock.”

I sorted through the keys on the heavy ring attached to my belt—he loves me, he loves me not—and opened the case. You’d expect a dead animal to smell, but taxidermies don’t, not like dead animals, anyway. They smell like attics.

“I’ll see to him right here instead of hauling him down to preservation. Got my work cut out for me if I want to get everything buffed up for Thursday.” He flicked open a roll of canvas and unzipped a duffel bag. “You show me where I can plug in my extension cord and I’ll let you get back to what you were doing.”

Which was wandering around the museum and seeing where else a bored twelve-year-old had penned something stupid. “If you need any help...” I shrugged. “I’ve cleaned these before.”

I’m not sure if Jesse would’ve taken me up on my offer or not. The shoosh-shoosh of rubber-soled shoes on marble alerted me a fraction of a second before Bridget entered my airspace. I never saw her at the Center that late, never. Just like I’d never seen Luke there so early.

I planted my hands on my hips and turned toward her. Bridget Barker was the great-great-great-granddaughter of Isaac Faris, the town’s founding father. I’d put her age around fifty or so. She was squat and solid with a no-nonsense silver bob. Tonight she had on a navy pantsuit with a brooch on the lapel. I’ve never seen anyone else in a brooch. “I see you’ve met Mr. Jones,” she said. “Help him bring the ladder up from the basement when he gets to the Denizens of the Sky.”

“All right.”

“But keep out of his hair. He’s got a lot of ground to cover over the next three days, and it’s critical he finishes before the MAHPS representative gets here.”

Keep out of his hair. There was one hell of a mental image to ponder—burying my face in that long hair and seeing if it smelled like Iowa sunshine. Feeling it tickle my shoulders as we moved together, skin to skin. “All right,” I repeated, just as inflectionless as the first time.

“You got a phone on you?” Jesse asked me. “I can call you if I need anything.”

“That’s a great idea,” Bridget said. “Give him your phone number.”

I pulled out my notepad, jotted down my cell number and gave it to Jesse. He dimpled slightly as he took it—and time expanded for once, rather than mysteriously compressing.

He’d just angled for my phone number, him, the longhaired skater-kid from Iowa.

• • •

It was two o’clock in the morning. First floor, local history. To my left, Isaac Faris discovered lead while mining for silver—and the great lead rush of 1848 began. Beyond them, a bunch of pathetic framed newspapers bridged the diorama to a fiberglass representation of a tornado’s path of destruction. To my right, the slim mannequin, who was supposed to be local legend Ty Robson, lunged over the finish line in the 1937 Olympics to take the gold. In my pocket, my phone rang. The display showed a number with an Iowa area code. I hit the on-button.

“Hope I’m not bothering you,” Jesse said, “But I think the boss is gone and—”

“You sure? She has a tendency to ‘forget’ things so she can come back five minutes later and check up on you.”

“Fine by me. I got nothing to hide.” What was that supposed to mean? “Listen, maybe you can help me out. I’m trying to figure out a plan of attack and make sure I hit all the most important exhibits, but I’m not a hundred percent clear on the building’s layout. You got one of those visitor maps?”

“Yeah, I’ll dig one up for you. But it was printed ten years ago and half the stuff isn’t where it says it is.”

“I guess I’ll take what I can get.”

Once I disconnected and keyed him into my address book, I took the elevator to the third floor and found the Rock River Beaver was encased again on his small stretch of riverbank, looking lustrous, though still evil. I spotted Jesse over by a family of foxes on the cross section of the Illinois River, and our eyes met across a dimly lit room full of dioramas and plexi cases.

I walked over and did my best imitation of nonchalant. He eyed me for a minute while I stood there and tried not to look like I’d been thinking salacious thoughts about him. “I’ve been

thinking,” he said, “I was gonna shower at the Petro, but it’s forty-five minutes outside Faris—”

“You’re showering at the truck stop? Don’t you have a room?”

“Why blow a hundred dollars on a room? I’m only here for three days. I can sleep in the truck.”

“Don’t sleep in your truck. I have a couch.”

He shrugged, but that damn dimple was back, like he knew how adorable he was. “I don’t want to be any trouble. I was just hoping to save myself some driving.”

No trouble at all...though after my shift, I did hurry home to make sure my apartment wasn’t as much of a wreck as I thought it was. I had three hours between the end of my shift and his, since he was bound and determined to stay until ten so he could work right up ’til the doors opened to the sparse public. That left me three hours in which to notice how dusty the blades on the ceiling fan were, or the shower curtain that was streaked with mineral deposits, or the weird smudges around my doorknob, as if I pawed all around the door with filthy hands while I was sleepwalking, but only noticed it now.

The doorbell rang. I went downstairs and found Jesse leaning in the doorway with a box of donuts in one hand and a 2-liter bottle of Mountain Dew in the other. “I brought breakfast.”

I’d eaten the usual two-egg special at Pat’s Diner for \$2.99, but there’s always room for a donut. Jesse followed me up to my flat and threw his beat-up jean jacket over the back of a kitchen chair.

I set out a couple of plastic tumblers. Jesse cracked open the new bottle, which let out a carbonated sigh, and poured. “Course I heard about the way half the town got flattened,” he said. “Everyone knows the story—but I didn’t know how weird it would look, one side of the street old and the other brand new. Like the twister just plowed down Main Street in a straight line.”

“That’s pretty much the size of it. There’s a whole alcove dedicated to it on the first floor. Old Faris, New Faris.”

“Any taxidermy in it?”

“I don’t think so.”

He pulled the old map I’d given him out of his pocket and turned it over a few times. “Not much to see on the first floor. That seem funny to you?”

Funny wasn’t exactly the word I would have picked, not in either sense of it—funny-weird or funny-ha-ha. “There used to be restaurants down there, and tables under the big skylight where you could hang out with your friends—so my cousin tells me. But now there’s a whole lot of nothing. The Center is just like everything else in Faris. It’s trying so hard to prove how it’s bigger and better than ever after the tornado by putting on this act that everything’s great—only it’s all just a big empty shell with nothing inside. One wrong move and it all

comes crashing down again.” I shrugged. I wasn’t very comfortable with the way the analogy was going. I figured I should shut up before I dug myself in any deeper, and focus instead on looking charming and available.

Jesse eyed me over the rim of his Mountain Dew. He seemed shrewd enough to know that something was going on, but once he gave it some thought, he decided to steer the conversation into safer waters. “So, you live alone?”

Was that a come on? A year and a half ago, I would have known, and it would have been second nature for me to grab that ball and run with it. I’d done it all the time, picking up guys. It was as easy as picking up a six-pack at Harley’s Grocery and Bait.

“Yeah, I uh...downstairs, my cousin Alex and his wife...” Damn it. I forgot. Again. Maybe someone should re-introduce me to her so I could store her name in a different cluster of brain cells.

Bad idea. My brain took umbrage at me thinking about it directly.

There was no warning, no telltale halo, no buzzing in my ear, no flash of light or lance of pain. The kitchen turned abruptly into the living room, and Jesse was right there in front of me, brushing my hair back from my forehead and tucking it behind my ear. “What’s your middle name?”

“Anthony. Why?”

“And who’s Governor?”

“Pat Quinn. I was sleepwalking, wasn’t I?”

“Don’t know about that. Your eyes were tracking funny and you thought Blagojevich was still in office.”

“That’s just George. He put in an appearance before I had a chance to introduce you.” I checked my watch. Jesse’d only rung the doorbell five minutes before, and we’d talked for maybe two. I’d lost three minutes, then. Not bad—though plenty of damning things can be said in three minutes.

“George?” Jesse asked.

“Temporal lobe meningioma.”

“Dude, you got a brain tumor and you named it George? That’s messed up.”

The few people I tell about George usually have trouble keeping eye contact. Then they tell me about how chemotherapy worked for someone they know, or how I should get a fourth and fifth opinion before I decide against surgery once and for all. Jesse was the first one who ever laughed.

He totally got me.

What a weight off my shoulders, to have all my cards on the table. Not like work, or most everywhere else, where I still acted like the only reason I kept a really detailed to-do list was that I was anal-retentive.

He went to the kitchen and came back with our pop. When he sat back down on the couch, I noticed, he positioned himself so close to me our knees brushed. Either he'd figured out where the old springs pressed through the thin cushions and was avoiding a poke in the ass, or he wasn't as put off by George as I probably would have been if our situations were reversed. Our fingers brushed when he handed me my glass. I said, "So how'd you know what a meningioma is?"

"I skin things for a living. You'd be amazed at what you find under there. I look it up. Guess I'm just curious that way."

My knuckles tingled where his fingertips had skimmed them. Unless I planned on being celibate for the rest of my tumor-riddled life, I needed to remember how to flirt. Now. "Did I say anything incriminating when George took over?"

"Like what?"

"Like you don't have to sleep on the couch?"

"No, but that's good. Your couch sucks."

Yes? That sounded like a *yes* to me. Sweet relief flooded through me. "It's better than your truck."

He flashed me those dimples and I had to fight back the urge to throw him down and nail him on the spot. When he stood and stretched, he flashed me a tiny sliver of skin in the gap between jeans and t-shirt, but too quick for me to notice any distinguishing marks. "Just so you know, I've been awake for thirty hours, I'm covered in fur dust and I'm running on fumes. I don't imagine I'll be very good company."

Good company? Heck, I'd been without any company at all so long I'd take anything, even a guy who could do nothing more than roll into bed and fall asleep. I wasn't about to volunteer that. But it was the truth.

We finished our donuts and he asked if he could take my shower for a spin. I sat and listened to the patter of water. He came out in boxers and a t-shirt that had a dark wet mark between the shoulders where it was wicking the water from his hair. I pointed out where the bedroom was, doing my best not to leer at his bare legs.

He took a long look at me and smiled—an utterly exhausted smile, but a cute one—and said, "I hope we can pick up this conversation where we left off, once we've had a little shut-eye."

While I've heard of people falling asleep before their head hit the pillow, I'd never actually seen it in action until I watched Jesse Ray Jones collapse into my bed. I hadn't been awake nearly as long as he had, but it was my third-shift equivalent of the middle of the night. Sleep was out of the question for me, though. Light filtered in around the edges of my blackout shades, enough to see that long, brown hair of his, still wet from the shower, spread over my

pillow—to drink in the fringe of his eyelashes on his cheek, the sprinkling of freckles over the bridge of his nose. I couldn't take my eyes off him, even if all he was doing was breathing.

George was hardly a blip on Jesse's radar—which wasn't to say he seemed like some kind of pig who wanted a free place to stay while he was in town, and maybe a blow job for the road, and as long as I didn't have a grand mal while he was here it didn't matter to him one way or the other what was inside my skull. No, that look he'd been giving me while he tucked my hair behind my ear told me he was a decent guy. Plus, he'd brought donuts.

Chapter Three

The phone rang. I woke with the sick feeling of disorientation that feels more like landing in your body than regaining awareness of it. My answering machine beeped. Alex. “Are you coming down for dinner tonight, or do you want Kathy to put a plate in the fridge? Lemme know.” Dinner—it was already six? The light that leaked in around the edges of the shades seemed muted, and the clock read 6:11. I never slept past five.

Weirder still, I was all mashed over to one side of the bed. And then it hit me. I'd toned down my usual sprawl because I'd fallen asleep with Jesse in my bed. That side was empty now, but the pillow had a dent in the middle. Damn it, how did I manage to keep on sleeping while he climbed over me? I wanted to do him so bad you'd think the wanting would've woken me up, but no. Physiology is so disappointing. I touched the empty space on the pillow where his head had been, then snatched my hand back and felt pathetic for doing it.

I thought we had agreed we would get that awkward initial sex part out of the way. What made him change his mind? Had I been doing something weird in my sleep—or had he just been running late and decided not to wake me up?

The only traces left of Jesse were a shower that was cleaner than it had been when he'd found it and a couple of soaked towels. Nothing more to see in my apartment, nothing more to do except analyze and re-analyze a bunch of clues that added up to nothing, so I figured I should go downstairs and grab something to eat. I ran a comb through my hair, pulled on some jeans, clomped downstairs without lacing my sneakers and let myself in through the kitchen door. Kathy and Alex were already at the table.

“Did I wake you up?” Alex said around a mouthful of pasta. He chewed it a few more times so he could swallow it. “You never sleep this late.”

“Yeah, no, I...I didn't get to bed on time.”

Kathy dropped her fork. It bounced off the plate, hit the side of the table and clattered to the hardwood floor. She grabbed it, then ducked out to the kitchen to get another one.

Alex said, “They're in a tiz over at the Center about this grant guy, huh? Who's worse, Bridget or Luke?”

“Luke's fine. He's a little too slick, but you can at least talk to him like a human being. Bridget was in full control-freak mode last night. She must've stayed 'til midnight, at least.”

“She’s used to her nine-to-five. She’ll run out of gas before Thursday. I’ll bet she skips out right after the big shot leaves.”

Kathy sat back down at the table and started spearing rigatoni. I almost looked past her, then realized that her lips were pressed together so tight they were white around the edges. “Kath? You okay?”

My asking her that made Alex focus in on her too, and her mouth practically disappeared. “What?” Alex said.

“It’s nothing.” Jab. Jab. Jab.

Alex looked up at me and cocked an eyebrow. I shrugged.

We each took a forkful of pasta at the same time and chewed them carefully, darting glances at Kathy, at each other. And just as Alex drew a breath to talk, maybe switch gears into some safe topic like what he’d had for lunch today or the state of the lawn, Kathy said, “I saw a boy coming out of your apartment.”

I shut off like she’d tripped a circuit breaker—because what was that supposed to mean? That I couldn’t have people over because I lived in their two-flat like some kind of charity case? Who’d been the ones to insist on me moving in after George—they, that’s who. Or would it have been different if it were girls up there? And besides, it wasn’t like we’d done anything but sleep.

“Way to go,” Alex said. In a sincere way, even. Kathy gave him a look. “What? He’s twenty-four. He shouldn’t have to be alone.”

“I didn’t say that....”

“We had the whole coming out thing when he was in high school—”

“Come on, you know it’s not that.”

Really? What else could it be?

“Web’s a grown-up,” Alex said. “He’s older than we were when we got married, and it’s his apartment up there. He brings home a date, that’s his business.”

Wow. It was awesome having him step up to the plate for me, don’t get me wrong. He’d been so mad about the tumor I’d nearly forgotten how close we used to be before, back when we were the terror of touch football. Back before George.

But Kathy hadn’t been trying to pick a fight, and now I saw tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes. “Everything’s cool,” I said. “It’s all good.”

Kathy focused hard on her plate and speared even more rigatoni.

“It wasn’t even, you know...nothing happened. He’s just the taxidermist they hired to clean up the displays.”

Kathy sighed hard and put down her loaded fork. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s fine.”

She grabbed me by the wrist and stroked my forearm with her thumb, and when she spoke her voice was all high-pitched and funny as she strained to get words out without actually crying. “It’s just, I’m so worried you’ll end up getting hurt.”

• • •

“Alls I know is, I can’t wait ’til this guy from that foundation place is here and gone.” It was the most Theresa had ever spoken to me in one stretch, I think. We’d been passing each other in the first-floor atrium, and she didn’t stop, didn’t even slow. I turned and watched her pear-shaped body disappear past the sycamore with a mag light slapping one hip and an eight-ounce pepper spray tapping the other. “If it ain’t one o’ them high-and-mighties here when they don’t belong, it’s the other. Getting real sick of it. Or maybe I’m coming down with something. Y’know, I think there might be somethin’ going around.” She fake-coughed into her hand, turned and gave me a meaningful look, then rounded the corner that led to the exit.

Bridget would shit a brick if Theresa called in sick on Thursday. That would be worth seeing. Then Alex would need to act like he actually knew what he was doing, and that’d be good for a couple of laughs, too.

I took the atrium stairs up to the second floor, and Luke rushed out of the Admin door and up to me before I’d even reached the top of the staircase. “Thank God you’re here.”

“Yeah?” I said. I was even ten minutes early, but I probably would’ve sounded like a prick if I pointed that out.

“There’s mildew on the buffalo hides. Mildew. You’ve got the key to the case, right?”

“We all do.”

Luke had me by the arm, and he hauled me straight past Admin without letting me hang up my overcoat or stash my lunch in the fridge. I squeezed the paper bag so that it rustled, but he was too keyed up to do subtlety.

“Mildew. Do you realize this HVAC system was state-of-the art when it was installed? Humidity is controlled within three percent of ideal. And then someone takes it in their head to move an open-topped display case underneath a duct that connects to a men’s room on the other side of the wall, and there you go. Mildew.”

We stepped into the elevator and I reclaimed my arm while Luke was busy pushing the third floor button. “I thought you were gonna dim the lights on three and hope the Mid-America guy doesn’t go there.”

“I made a few calls, tried to sniff around, see what he focused on when he gave the MAHPS Grant to the Mississippi River Museum last year, but you know how it is over there.” He made his voice a mocking singsong: “Ooh, look at the cute otters—touch the coral, pet the ray.” The elevator door whispered open and I spotted Jesse among the People of the Plains,

combing the Kickapoo woman's eyelashes with a tiny brush. His plaid flannel shirt looked exotic among all the buckskin and feathers. Luke was so deep into his head trip that he didn't even seem to see the diorama. "It's so easy when you've got live displays."

Right, like the Denizens of the Sky. Once upon a time, when I was still a kid, they hadn't been taxidermy. I kept my mouth shut about the dozens of bird casualties. Jesse locked eyes with me as if maybe he'd heard me say it telepathically, and he smiled—the tiniest smile. A tightening around the eyes and a shadow of a dimple. And, my God, I wanted him in the worst way. Right there by the cellophane campfire.

So here's the thing—I used to feel that way all the time. Faris isn't exactly a Mecca for alternative lifestyles, but with U of I down the road, there were at least a couple dozen other guys to meet, to sleep with, to break up with and start all over again with a new face, a new story, a new set of melodramas.

Then George came along, and those melodramas were nowhere near as compelling. George set the bar so high that all the other stuff couldn't even touch it, and suddenly everyone I knew seemed so shallow I couldn't imagine why I'd crushed on any of them before.

Jesse met my gaze again. Serious, now—telepathic for sure. "You found the mildew?" I asked.

"Yeah. Shame. I could swap it out with a bison hide from my old man's shop for the visit if I had time to drive to Ames and back. Four hours each way, though, and too much to clean up around here."

"Can't you fold it or something so the mildew doesn't show?" Luke sounded panicky, and it was only Tuesday—for another hour, at least.

Jesse stepped down from the Kickapoo campsite. "What you need for that is a conservator."

"Are you looking for a bonus? I'm paying you double-rates as it is—"

"No disrespect, sir, but the money's between you and my dad. What I'm telling you is, best practices say I'd need to be supervised by an AIC-certified conservator to alter that artifact. But if I'm the best you got and you're in a bind, I'll figure out a non-destructive way to hide the damage. Folding's out of the question on a stretched hide that old. A proper cleaning would help, some. I'll see if I can find something to hang over the worst of the damage, and make it look like part of the display."

He took my key from me and opened the case with the mildewed hides. Best practices—ha. He looked like a skatepunk and talked like a grad student. He couldn't have possibly known that combination was a total wet dream for me.

"Can't clean it here," he said. "I'll need your word that if anything happens to that pelt from me taking it down to the workroom, you don't file any claims on our insurance. We lose our liability coverage, that could sink us."

"Fine, that's fine. Do what you can."

Jesse tuned from the bison hides to us and held out his hand toward Luke. “Shake on it.”

Luke stared at Jesse’s hand like he expected to find a joybuzzer, then pumped it up and down a couple of times like it was baffling that he needed to humor someone with something as archaic as a handshake.

We watched Luke stride off to the elevator together, and when the door shut, Jesse said, “I was kinda hoping I could leave here at seven when your shift was over.”

“I was kinda hoping that too.”

Actually, I was kinda hoping he’d slam me into those mildewed bison hides and lay one on me...but his focus had shifted to his work, and he knelt down beside his toolkit to find something to test the mildew with. “If I’m gonna try to clean this, I’ll need to stay here until the doors open again. And if I show up at your place at ten, that probably does a number on your sleeping habits.”

It did. “No.”

“So it’s cool if I come by?”

“I’ll leave the door open for you.”

He flashed me a smile that made my knees weak, then squeezed into the glass case sideways. It was shallow, maybe a couple of feet deep, and his long hair and the back of his flannel shirt pressed into the plexi while he worked at unfixing the hide from the wall with a cordless screwdriver.

I hovered at the opening of the glass in case he needed me to hand him something—and maybe to watch the way his farm boy face set itself in such serious lines as he worked. It wasn’t just my recent lack of companionship that had me so eager to get to know him better. I was turned on by the thought of a guy my age who knew an actual trade, so he didn’t have to live off student loans and checks from his grandma.

Awkwardly, though I was burning to connect with him so badly I didn’t care, I ventured, “So you know a lot about, uh....”

“Why are you here, Web?”

That stopped me in my tracks. “Huh?”

He tucked his screwdriver into the pocket of his flannel shirt and looked at me over his shoulder, relaxing as much as the narrow confines of the display case would allow. “It’s pretty plain why I’m here, doing what I’m doing. Learned it from my old man, and maybe someday I’ll get that piece of paper and go into museum work—or maybe I’ll decide none of that really matters, that I don’t want the suits bossing me around and take over dad’s shop so he can retire—spend my time mounting fish trophies and making people happy. But what about you? You don’t strike me as the type to do the guard thing ’cos you flunked out of the police academy.”

“Heck, no—not that I’ve got anything against cops. This isn’t a career or anything. But I don’t exactly have a lot of options.”

Jesse pulled a foil packet from his pocket, unwrapped a moistened swab, and stroked at a spot on the edge of the pelt. The swab came away black. He rolled the damp fur gently between thumb and forefinger, studied it closely, and said “There’s always options. Just got to figure out what they are.”

I wanted to feel sorry for myself—because, come on, it really isn’t that simple, not with a meningioma pressing into my temporal lobe.

But what if it was?

“D’you need help with that?” I asked him.

“Not right now. It does need to come down, but it’s up here with a million and one screws. I’ll call when I need you.” He shot a look at me over his shoulder. His eyes—just this side of naughty. “You’re on my speed dial.”

While part of me wanted to stand there and watch Jesse grapple with a bison hide, another part of me was glad that he’d not-so-subtly suggested I let him get back to work. I needed time to think.

Luke was staggering out of the office when I made it back down to the second floor to finally put my lunch in the fridge.

“You need me to pull your car around?” I asked him, because he looked like he could barely make it out the door, let alone to the far side of the parking lot. Funny, how easy it is to forget shredding my license after George showed up on the CAT scan—though I suspected I could trust myself to make it across the parking lot without an incident.

“It’s that obvious?” Luke flashed me one of his dazzling smiles. Tanning booth or tooth whitening. Maybe a hint of both. His eyes looked weary around the edges, though. “I guess I’m not used to burning the midnight oil—not in the Center, anyway. Listen, that farm kid needs any help, give him a hand, okay?”

“Okay.”

I walked him to the elevator and he gave me a once-over. “You seem pretty plucky for the middle of the night.”

“I sleep all day.”

“No...it’s more than that. You know something about MAHPS that I don’t know?”

I pushed the down button for him and the doors whooshed open. “A little optimism never hurt anyone.”

“I’ll remember that. Maybe I can even take it to heart after I grab a few hours’ sleep. ’Night, Web.” The doors slid shut, and I was alone to try, and fail, to stop smiling.

So I was jazzed 'cos I'd had a hot guy in my bed—even though nothing had happened. It still might. Luckily George didn't take over and say that to Luke...in a perfectly reasonable voice that sounded exactly like mine.

It was less disruptive to let Luke think my good mood was a product of team spirit, of the hope that a big fat grant would make everything at the Center good again—but, come on. Things had slipped too far. Not only were the displays and the building neglected, but the understaffing went a lot farther than the need to have Alex put on my spare uniform and stand around looking official. They didn't even have a real conservator on staff anymore. The best we could hope for was that the grant would keep the Center afloat for a couple more years.

I supposed that'd be better than nothing.

I shouldered through the door to the break room and opened the fridge to put my lunch inside, then felt my stomach bottom out when I saw the paper bag was already there and my hands were empty. I checked my watch. I was missing about fifteen minutes. Damn it.

According to Alex, I'm pretty mild mannered when I'm sleepwalking, but there's a first time for everything. My initial thought was Jesse. Had I done something fucked up in front of him? I felt my mouth—yep, there it was, right where I'd left it. No wayward spit. No mouth-to-mouth residue. I checked my phone. No incoming or outgoing calls. Then I zeroed in on my heart rate. The muscle in my chest was pounding, but more of a panicky stutter than an indication that I'd been running up and down the stairs to make a fool of myself in front of Jesse.

Sometimes at home I'd find ice cube trays full of water in the pantry, or shampoo bottles in the oven. I opened the storage cabinet to see if anything was blatantly out of place, but it was mostly empty, with that sparse look of a room that's not lived-in, and nothing seemed too disconcerting—unless you counted the microwave popcorn with an expiration date three years past. I couldn't even remember who it belonged to, just that Bridget always bitched up a storm about how badly it stunk up the offices when someone got desperate and nuked a bag.

I scanned the molded plastic chairs, the crumb-topped table, the brown-tiled bathroom with the toilet handle you had to jiggle to stop the water from running into the tank all night. Nothing wrong.

The biggest likelihood, assuming Jesse was still among the Kickapoo with his moldy animal hide, was that I'd just zoned out, maybe talked to myself about the Cubs for a few minutes. No big deal.

I had Jesse's number. I could call him and double-check, try and judge by the tone of his voice if I'd just done anything...weird. Except how needy would I look, calling him every fifteen minutes when he had a whole museum to clean in two more nights.

Nope. Looking needy was at the bottom of my wish-list. I slipped my phone into my pocket and told myself to get a grip and start my rounds. I checked my mag light and pepper spray—still there—and did a quick check of the hallway that led to the offices. As I approached Luke's office, I saw a semicircle of light cast onto the linoleum from beneath the door. Had he left it on? He had been pretty wrung-out. Heck, who knows, maybe I'd turned the light on myself.

Half the offices weren't even in use anymore. They'd belonged to employees the Center had let drift away over the years without replacing them: Curator. Personnel. AIC-certified Conservator. I flicked through my keys and found the one I wanted—Director of Fundraising and Marketing—Luke. I pinched it out from the bundle and opened Luke's door with the sudden rush of dread that maybe I'd find something in there that would top the shampoo in the oven—like the Rock River Beaver sitting smack in the middle of Luke's desk, his freshly cleaned fur and scaly tail all agleam.

No beaver. The invisible hand of dread around my chest loosened enough for me to take a breath or two.

Luke's office was just like I'd remembered it. Desk. Computer. A mounted golf club on one wall, a photo of him giving a bright white smile beside Jane Goodall on the other, and a half-empty pack of gum on his desk.

The fan on Luke's computer whirred—the thing was still on. I had to admit it was possible George could have stopped in for a game of solitaire...or MPEG downloads of supposedly straight college students in tube socks and sideways baseball caps jerking off for the camera.

I jiggled the mouse and the black-screened monitor crackled and hummed the way whopping-huge CRT monitors do as they wake up, and an e-mail filled the screen. Not my e-mail—what a relief.

I moved the cursor to the start menu to shut everything down, and my name caught my eye. It took a second, because it wasn't "Web" I'd noticed. It was "Dan."

To: Luke Presioso
From: Bridget Barker

Re: Cutting line item 12 by over 10k

Maybe it would be more cost-effective to hire out the security, but it's not something we can jump into without putting the framework in place first. At the very least, I would keep one of them on as a security supervisor and hire the rest from the service. Dan is my first choice, but I don't know how long he plans to stay on. As you say, Marvin should have retired years ago. I don't think Theresa has the right attitude.

Yesterday at 10:10 am, L Presioso wrote:

> I got a quote from Reliable Security, the company I told you about when we were going through the numbers. Not only can outsourcing save 10k from the security budget, but Reliable can add an extra guard during the day. Four guards for the price of three, plus the regular weekend shift.

> I told you nobody expects benefits packages anymore!

I printed the document and double-checked the names to make sure I was reading what I thought I was reading. *Luke* wanted to outsource our jobs and *Bridget* wanted to keep us—or one of us, at least. Luke would've been happy to put all three of us on the chopping block. What a prick. Smiling at me with those Goddamn white teeth of his, and all the while talking

behind my back about replacing me with a subcontractor so he didn't have to foot the bill for my health insurance.

Shit. I felt dirty for even having the thing in my hand, but when I turned on the shredder to get rid of it, a grinding sound came out of the motor, and a weird smell like burning plastic. Broken, like everything else in the Center.

I leaned back against the wall and checked my watch. Three and a half minutes since I'd found my lunch already in the fridge.

Not sleepwalking. Completely and utterly awake.

Chapter Four

My phone rang, and I jumped like I'd found the coffee maker in my shower. The readout flashed JR Jones. "Hello?"

Jesse said, "I was thinking. I wonder if you really meant it when you asked me if I needed any help, and you weren't just checking me out."

The mere sound of his voice made me stand down, enough so I didn't sound like a weirdo. I did my best to hide my annoyance at the e-mail. "Do those two things have to be mutually exclusive?"

He laughed. "I like the way you think. Now, you don't strike me as an allergy sufferer."

"How do you figure that?"

"No telltale antihistamines in your bathroom."

"You went through my medicine cabinet?"

"I needed toothpaste. So what do you say? Think you've got the fortitude to move a musty, dusty bison pelt? 'Cos it's a hell of a lot heavier than I thought, and I don't think I can get it down to the conservation room myself."

"I'm on my way." No telling where that e-mail would end up if George decided to go sleepwalking; I'd need to play it safe. I read through it one more time, then I shredded the printout by hand, flushed it down the staff toilet, prayed that the paper wouldn't clog it, wiggled the handle so the tank stopped running, and finally hopped on the elevator.

Jesse had rolled the bison pelt into a plain white canvas. He hefted one end, me the other. "Hold 'er steady. Don't let it kink up in the middle—it's brittle."

It was as heavy as he'd said it was. And it reeked of mildew.

“Hate to do this to you, but we’ll need to take the stairs. Elevator’s too shallow.” Call me a glutton for punishment, but I got off on the idea that he didn’t think I was too infirm to help him manhandle a big, stinking roll of animal skin down three flights to the basement.

It wasn’t too difficult. The stairs were wide, and it wasn’t as if there were other people we needed to navigate. We went sideways, so neither of us had to bend, or lift the foul-smelling hide higher than waist level.

We’d made the landing between levels one and two and set the hide down to take a breather when Jesse asked, “Am I screwing up your rounds? If you’re busy, just say the word. We can pick up the pace.”

“Huh? No, it doesn’t make any difference.” I took off my baseball cap and ran my fingers through my sweaty hair—and realized that probably wasn’t the best way for me to handle an artifact, wrapped in canvas or not. I wiped my hand on my pant leg.

“You seem ticked off.”

He could tell? “It’s nothing to do with you.” We maneuvered around a corner, and I shuffled sideways to make sure I didn’t drive Jesse into the Lead Rush diorama. “I just found out I might lose this job.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.” We set the roll down again while I unlocked the basement access door. The hallway was warm from its proximity to the boiler room. It smelled stale and close. “The doors shut for good if the Mid-America guy decides he doesn’t want to spray you with the money hose, right?”

“No, not that.” We lifted the hide yet again. It felt about fifty pounds heavier than it had on the third floor. Jesse hadn’t even broken a sweat. “I might lose it anyway. No matter what. They’re looking at hiring a security service.”

Jesse whistled through his teeth. “That’s a shame. Worst part is, if it weren’t for George, I don’t suppose it’d matter much.”

We shuffled into the conservation lab and heaved the heavy canvas roll onto a work table, then I looked at Jesse hard. How was it he got it, whereas Alex would try to talk me into Medicaid, and Kathy would tell me it was all right, everything would work out, and the neurosurgeon said George might never get any bigger, and besides, universal health care was right around the corner. Jesse didn’t say any of that.

He opened the canvas so the hide could lie flat, then did a quick look through the cabinets to raid them for supplies. “First thing my old man taught me was to always have a backup fleshing knife in case the one you’re working with loses its edge. Might not ever need to use it. But if you do, at least you’re not stuck with your hand inside a bobcat and a dull blade.”

I stood between him and the door. A few steps closer backed him into the corner created by the worktable and the wall. “Now you’re just trying to freak me out,” I said.

“Am I?” The corners of his eyes creased. That smile, damn. That smile ambushed me each and every time.

Another step toward him, and there it was—we were closer than straight men got for anything other than beer bonging and semi-pro wrestling, and there I was, me, putting the move on someone.

He wasn't quite as tall as me. I had to tilt my head down to kiss him.

He met me halfway.

I was careful at first. We were both careful. Lips only. Closed lips—but softly closed, as if the nudge of a tongue would be all we needed to take things to a level that could easily spiral out of control. His mouth was warm, and good, and despite all the mildew and the dust, the smell of my shampoo clung to his long hair. My lips parted then, in a gentle gasp. Sheer surprise at how shocked I was to kiss someone again.

His hands settled on my arms. He ran his thumbs over my biceps, and murmured his appreciation into my mouth. I tried to sneak my hands around him in return, but I couldn't seem to get hold of anything other than a couple handfuls of flannel shirt.

He had no trouble at all finding the places on me he wanted to touch. He ran his hands along my shoulders, lingered over the jut of my collarbones, then cupped my jaw with both hands while he plied me with sweet, slow kisses.

Still no tongue, though. Dare I be the one to initiate it?

As I tried to work up the courage, Jesse ran his hands back down my body, planted them on my hips, and eased us apart so he could see my eyes. "Sometimes the backup knife is simpler than you think. Sometimes it's just a matter of saying, fuck it all. I'm gonna do what I want."

My khaki pants felt way too snug. "I know what I want, but I think there's a security cam in here." And if there was, bad enough it'd caught me kissing him.

"I'm not talking about this one moment—I'm talking about everything. The whole bag of marbles. Lose your job? Fuck it. Figure out the details when they come to you. Go do what you've always wanted to do."

I knew what he was saying, and maybe someday it'd even sink in. But at that moment I wanted one thing, and one thing only. I tried to pull him toward me again, but he slipped out of my grasp easily, smiling. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind another taste—but right now I've got to make sure I get paid for this gig. The old man couldn't afford Alaska, but he's been wanting to go for years so he went anyway, and more power to 'im. Think of it this way, Web. We make it through tomorrow night, and it's a downhill coast from there." He slipped a hand around the back of my neck and drew my face down to his for another kiss, but only a brief brush of his lips. "I gotta go grab my toolkit."

Nothing's ever a downhill coast, but I supposed I could handle a day and a half wait after all the long, lonely months I'd already spent by myself. Jesse turned and left me there alone in the abandoned workroom, thinking about how his lips felt, and how his hair smelled, and how his jeans were too loose for me to tell exactly what his ass looked like underneath them...though it was fun to guess.

Part of me wanted to panic at the thought of that bastard Luke angling to eliminate my job, but part of me, that part that hadn't been touched or kissed or even sweet-talked for so damn long, really did want to say, *fuck it*.

I glanced up at the corner of the acoustic drop-ceiling, and sure enough, a small, wired box with a blinking red light and a tiny lens hung over the door.

I gave it the finger.

Fuck it.

Then I flipped my notebook to a new page and wrote on it. *Kissed Jesse*.

I stepped out of the conservation lab and found him staring at a scattering of pennies on the floor, along with scraps of paper covered with forbidden four-letter words painstakingly written in clumsy grammar school cursive, and probably more than a few spitballs. "There's a grate in the ceiling," I said, "and the roots of the sycamore are on the other side of this wall. The architect was on crack or something, I guess."

"Nah, I think it was a cool idea, once." He pressed his hand into the wall as if he could feel the tree's underground structure pushing back, then looked up through the grate like he was searching for the starry night sky beyond the tempered glass atrium ceiling. "It just didn't turn out the way they thought it would."

After we parted ways, I made an effort to do my regular rounds. It was no use. I kept running my tongue over my lips to see if I could taste Jesse's mouth there, even though if there even had been any traces of him, I'd licked them off while I was still in the workroom.

In terms of my rounds, floors two and three seemed like they only needed a quick check...since Jesse had set up camp on the first floor once he finished scrubbing down the mildewed hide. He crouched among the lead miners who always looked a lot more excited than I would have been to be drawing lead from the earth. Maybe no one had told them it was lead yet, and they thought it was silver. Or maybe they were just eager to make more bullets. A donkey hauled half a cart out of a mineshaft that was only six inches deep, but had been cleverly painted to appear at least three inches deeper. I'd never really given much thought that the donkey had once been alive, not until I saw Jesse dusting it with a blow drier and a little paintbrush.

"That's the most action that nag's seen since I've worked here," I said.

"It's in good shape. The mannequins around it? They're another story." He rocked the hair dryer to the side and the tips of a nearby miner's mustache fluttered. "I'll blow the cobwebs off 'em, but I wouldn't know the first thing about doing any hardcore restoration."

I hitched my thumbs in my pants pockets and tried to will Jesse to stop working for all of two seconds and realize I wasn't done flirting with him yet. It wasn't fair, I knew. He was on a killer deadline, and me? I was being paid to wander around. "Are you that much of a perfectionist about everything?" I said.

He did pause then, though not quite for a second. “Depends who you ask.” His eyes flickered to mine, and he bit back a smirk that looked tantalizingly naughty. “Shouldn’t you be busy guarding me, Mr. Web?”

“What else could I possibly be doing?” I spread my hands, and he spared me another quick glance. “I don’t walk around all night with a can of pepper spray digging into my thigh for my health.”

“Well, since you seem to have a decent amount of latitude in your job description, hold up this sheet so I can get busy with this blow dryer without melting this donkey’s neighbors.”

I planted my feet carefully in the diorama, stepping only on areas that Jesse had covered with paper, and blocked one of the waxy lead miners from the dust cloud that came out of the donkey’s mane.

Once I could stop coughing, I said, “So by pitching in like this, I’m buying you enough time that you can knock off at seven. Right?”

Jesse moved to take the fabric away from me, but instead of grabbing the cloth, he wrapped his hand around mine. “I want to.” He stared me right in the eye. His eyes were blue. Really blue. “I do. But I keep finding stuff that’s in a lot worse shape than it looks, once you scratch the surface.”

I needed to look away from his blue, blue eyes, and found myself staring at his knuckles like I’d never seen a hand before.

He moved the fabric, and me, around the back of the donkey and blew another, smaller cloud of dust off the dead animal’s hide. “You’re lucky,” he said.

“I am?”

“Living where you do.”

I glanced at the Old Faris, New Faris diorama, with the invisible tornado cutting main street in half. “We are talking about Faris, aren’t we?”

“Try the middle of Iowa. There were less than four hundred kids in my whole high school. You know how many of ’em were gay? Two.”

“Probably more than two. Statistically, I mean.”

“Right.” He nodded, and his easy smile went hard. “Like that football player I dated who was such a homophobe he had to boff the whole cheerleading squad to compensate for a little reacharound. He doesn’t count. He was ‘straight.’”

“Oh.”

“Larry Newbauer, who everyone called ‘Larry the Fairy’—he was the other one, besides me. Couldn’t stand him.”

“‘Cos he was ‘Larry the Fairy,’ or...?”

“‘Cos he was into drama club, for Chrissakes. ‘Cos he stuck his pinky out when he drank. ‘Cos he talked like Truman Capote.”

I flapped the sheet into place just before another dust devil could engulf my head.

“Larry didn’t like me much, either. He called me ‘Deliverance.’ Not to my face, of course.”

“Of course.” I peeked over the fabric’s hem. Jesse was swabbing out the donkey’s ear with the delicate, precise movements of a master craftsman. “Better than ‘Larry the Fairy.’”

His smile, the real one, hinted at the corners of his mouth. “Guess so.”

He swabbed each eyeball, then combed out the donkey’s eyelashes with the tiny paintbrush. “You’re right,” I ventured. “Compared with your hometown, Faris is a regular pride parade. There’s a dozen queers here. At least.”

“No way. You got the U of I right down the two-lane.”

“Okay, but Faris campus is one of the smallest in the state, and half the student body’s studying bio-ag. Maybe twenty. Twenty-five, tops.” Yeah, twenty-five sounded about right. And I’d slept with all of them. “You could always move,” I said. And for a second I’d almost said “move here,” which would have made me sound like I was planning our wedding or something. Luckily I’d stopped myself before the last word crossed my lips.

Jesse didn’t seem to notice. Thank God. “Hold your breath,” he said—at least he warned me that time—and he gave the donkey’s mane a final fluff. When the blow drier was done roaring, he said, “We got fifty wooded acres. I tried leaving once, and within a month I was so homesick I broke my lease and headed back. The rest of the world’s a nice enough place to visit...but I wouldn’t want to live there.”

He finessed a wayward tuft of mane into place and gave the beast a pat on the rump. “That’s it for the first floor. I’m gonna spend the rest of the night on the bird wall. Feathers are a bitch and a half.”

I stepped back so he could roll up his gear. He adjusted the knot on his bandanna and slung his roll of tools over his shoulder while I watched and made no apologies about watching. I supposed I couldn’t really picture him having tea and scones with Larry the Fairy. Too butch.

He twisted the bandanna more firmly into place, hooked a strand of long hair out of his collar with his forefinger, and then froze when he noticed me looking. “What?”

I shrugged, and gave him a smile that he couldn’t possibly mistake for anything *but* flirting.

“Maybe it was a blessing in disguise that no one else in my high school was gay. I woulda flunked out for sure if I had guys like you giving me looks like that.” He flashed a grin of his own—less sultry than I imagined mine was, but a heart-stopper nonetheless—and turned toward the staircase. “‘Course, I’m a lot more focused now than I was five years ago. I got a bird or two I need to see.”

Chapter Five

I'd tried to wait up for Jesse. I had. Maybe, pre-George, I could have done it. But I was running on maybe four hours' sleep and no matter how hard I tried to force my eyes open, to pinch my forearms or slap my knees, no matter how many times I washed my face with cold water or looked really hard into a bare 100-watt bulb, I still conked out by the time Jesse came back to my apartment.

Either that or I had another bout of lost time in which I did something I would really have preferred to remember. But judging that nothing felt spent or sticky, I was guessing the only place I'd wandered was the Land of Nod.

Jesse lay curled beside me, with his hair in a ponytail and his rump against my hip, wearing an old gray gym shirt and a pair of boxers. I glanced at the clock. Five thirty in the afternoon, nearly an hour until he had to go, if he wanted to start work right when the Center closed its doors to the public. I supposed I should let him sleep. But I didn't really want to.

I stared at his face, his cheekbones and jaw. The light dusting of freckles high on his cheekbones. The thick, strong eyebrows that kept him from looking prissy with his long hair. His mouth—the bow at the top of his lips had the most kissable curve.

Footfalls in the stairwell jerked me out of my contemplation of Jesse's mouth, kissable or not. I checked to make sure I wasn't tenting my pajama bottoms—because I wouldn't have been surprised, given what I'd been thinking about, but thankfully I wasn't—and I headed for the door before Alex could bang on it. His knock was as loud as his footfalls.

"Hey," he said as I opened the door. "Why don't you give me that—"

"Shh." I stepped out onto the landing, and he backed up to give me room to clear the door and shut it behind me. "Jesse's asleep. He's been putting in doubles."

Alex's expression did a little "Huh? Oh!" flip, and he rubbed his jaw as if he felt a blush start to creep up on himself. "Hey, I didn't realize...I'll let you get back to...uh...."

"It's fine. You're not barging in on anything." Yet. "Like I said, I'm just giving him a place to crash."

Alex smirked. "And one of you's been sleeping on the couch."

"Well, no...."

"You need a rubber?"

"A stud like me?" I said. "I need a whole box." And then he did blush, bright red. "It's fine," I told him, "I've got it covered."

“Well...tomorrow’s the big day.” I almost thought Alex was predicting the precise moment I’d get lucky, but then I realized he meant the MAHPS guy. “I won’t see you between now and then. Hang your uniform on the hook in the stairwell and I’ll grab it.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I said, okay.”

Alex looked at me strangely, that face that looked so much like mine, my “big brother” whose mother was my father’s sister, and said, “You like this guy?”

“It’s a little early to....” Damn. His eyes were so piercing I felt like they’d burned two smoking holes through my head. “Yeah. I think so.”

He nodded. “Good. It’s good you met someone.” He turned and jogged down the stairs before it got schmaltsy between us. But I think he might have been making an effort to not be quite as loud as usual.

I went back inside and checked on Jesse. Still gorgeous—and still asleep. I found my notepad and wrote, *Put out uniform*. The last thing I’d written? *Kissed Jesse*.

• • •

I did briefly consider waking Jesse wearing nothing but a smile, but nakedness reminded me of doctor visits and paper sheets now—instead of up all night, and *damn, I slept with that other guy’s boyfriend*.

A big tumbler of Mountain Dew seemed safer. “Room service too? Awesome.” Jesse sat up and chugged the pop.

I watched his Adam’s apple work as he swallowed, and I imagined running my tongue over the column of his throat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then smoothed back his hair. His ponytail was in place, mostly, but a few dark strands had slipped free to frame his face, and without his flannel shirt, bandanna and big jeans, he looked hot.

I crawled into bed with him, and before I could cozy up against him, he got out.

I said, “Did I do something wrong?”

“Nah, you’re good. It’s...I should probably get back to the Center.”

“Right this second? That clock’s five minutes fast.”

“I need more time than that to get the lay of the land.” He rolled out of the doorway and made his way toward the bathroom. I followed, and watched him pull a toothbrush out of his jean jacket pocket and help himself to my toothpaste.

“Let me get this straight. Aren’t you the guy who weaseled my phone number out of me, invited himself over and planted a kiss on me in the conservation lab?”

He gave me an “And?” look around his toothbrush.

“You got to thinking about George, didn’t you? It’s too freaky. I get it.”

He spat, rinsed, and smiled at me. His dimples made an adorable reappearance that left me weak-kneed and giddy. “You’re mad ’cos I didn’t put out.”

“No, I...I mean, I—”

“Just messing with you. Seriously, though, I gave it some thought, and I was kinda hoping we could, I dunno, maybe do regular stuff together first.”

“Regular stuff.”

“You know. Like whatever you did with the last guy you were with.”

Puke in his Jeep and give his ex a hand-job at the world’s most pretentious dinner party? Probably not that. “As in, go on a date?”

Jesse focused extra hard on rinsing out his toothbrush. “If that’s not cool—”

“Um, sure. We could do...something.” Color me cynical, but I didn’t exactly trust a “let’s take it slow” speech from another guy. I tried to check myself before I came off as desperate, ’cos when you’ve got a liability inside your head, the last thing you want to seem is desperate. I backed out of the bathroom, turned to the kitchen sink, and started rinsing out the plastic tumblers.

Jesse tied on his bandanna as he did one more circuit of the place to see if he’d forgotten one of his layers. “Don’t worry,” he told me on his way out the door. “I’m a real cheap date.”

I held on to the sink and let my breath out slowly. One kiss, one single kiss, and I’d fallen for him like a bag of bricks.

At six o’clock I told Alex’s wife...damn it all, I had to look in my note pad...Kathy. I told Kathy I had a headache, ’cos I wasn’t in the mood to endure any dinner table stares, and when I went into work that night, I skirted around the prairie dog diorama so I wouldn’t bother Jesse on my way to the break room to drop off my lunch. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I ran into Luke again in the hall outside the offices.

“Web—your cousin’s on board. Right?”

What? I took a look at my notepad. *Alex working Thursday, tell Luke.* I crossed it out. “Yeah, he’ll be here.”

“I knew I could count on you.”

Oh, really? And that's why he wanted to let me go and replace me with some scab from a service so he wouldn't have to pay my benefits.

"Tomorrow morning," he checked his watch, and reflexively, I did too. It was just past eleven. "Mr. Trevino from MAHPS will be here when we open, and that'll be it. Our big moment."

I nodded, and tried my best to look totally neutral, a blank slate where someone could project whatever reaction on me they'd been hoping for. I did that often enough, when I discovered myself in the middle of a conversation with no memory of how I got there. In Luke's case, I just wanted to cover my ass. If he wasn't going to question whether or not he'd shut down his computer the night before, I sure as hell wasn't gonna give him any reason to suspect he hadn't.

"You get off at seven, right? Be back with your cousin by nine-thirty, just in case Trevino's early. That ought to give you time for a quick nap."

"Sure." How nice to know he was so "concerned" about my well-being. Or did he know about George? I'd been scrupulous about not mentioning it at work—while I was awake, anyway. I ducked around him and went into the break room, where I was pleased to see my lunch was not already in the fridge.

Luke was still in his office when I made my rounds. People of the Plains. Looking good, even the Kickapoo woman...although the case where the bison hide had once hung looked conspicuously bare. Rock River Beaver. Still lustrous. I skipped down to the first floor. Isaac Faris, crouched beside his newly-found lead, had definitely made out well from Jesse's visit. He'd had a good spit-polish—but he still wore that unfocused gaze that sent shivers down my spine; I worried that was how I looked when George was in the driver's seat.

Once I'd made my way through every other part of the building and there was no way I could possibly keep avoiding the second floor, I crept up the stairs and walked the perimeter. I was so focused on not running into Jesse that I nearly shit myself when I rounded the corner and found Bridget attempting to scrub the F off the Cave FArt sign.

"Can you believe this?" she said. "Of all the ridiculous...it's been vandalized so many times we've worn a groove in the plaque."

"Maybe Jesse can retouch it."

She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language.

"Jesse Ray Jones," I said.

"Oh, the taxidermist's boy. You're right, I'm sure he'd be better at this than I am." She knuckled her eye, and her mascara made a u-shaped ring beneath her lower lashes. I shifted uncomfortably and wondered if I was supposed to tell her. Bridget planted her hands on her hips, looked around at the petroglyphs, and sighed. "Pretty soon it'll all be over."

Was that what Luke had said? I checked my notepad.

Alex working Thursday, tell Luke

Kissed Jesse.

Put out uniform.

I never wrote down what Luke had said, but I did remember him telling me when I was supposed to be back. I jotted, *9:30—all over soon* and tucked the pad back into my pocket.

Bridget bustled past me and made a beeline for Denizens of the Sky. “Mr. Jones? Mr. Jones—come here a moment.” Crap. I’d just managed to get another item tacked onto Jesse’s to-do list. I slunk off to the third floor to have another look at the People of the Plains.

After midnight, I was outside the abandoned food court scanning the Old Faris, New Faris diorama when my phone rang. JR Jones. I supposed I should answer it. “Hello?”

“Did you call in sick? I haven’t seen you all night.”

“No. I’m...here. Just trying to let you get your work done.”

“Boss lady’s gone.” An awkward silence, and then, “I was kinda hoping you’d try to distract me for a minute or two.”

My heart pounded at my chest, the way it had when I’d found my lunch already sitting in the spot where I’d been in the process of putting it. “Less than eight hours to touchdown. I can wait.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

Another stretch of silence where the sound of my own pulse hammered in my ears, and then he said, “Okay, that’s cool. But could you give me a hand in the petroglyph alcove?”

“Sure.”

I went upstairs and found him inside the display, shining a small flashlight at the series of stylized figures. He said, “This tunnel actually goes somewhere.”

“It’s about three feet deep. Which is two and a half feet deeper than any other tunnel in this place.”

“That painted rock is real, huh? Not some artist’s rendition.”

“Yeah. One of the miners found it and realized it had cave paintings on it before they blew it up looking for more lead.”

I glanced down at the Cave FArt sign. The F was missing. Jesse swung a leg over the ledge and tapped on the railing, inviting me to join him. I felt like the world’s biggest dumbass, all those things I’d said back at my apartment, but I came over and stood beside him.

“The drive between your place and mine is doable,” he said.

“You may not have noticed, but I don’t have a car.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” He situated himself so he was fully seated on the railing, clasped his hands between his knees and swung his feet. “And it’s no big thing. I’ve got my truck.”

My heart hammered harder. I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I still got you on my speed dial,” he said. “We don’t have to figure anything out right this second.”

“Easy for you to say. I have no idea where to take a date in Faris that’ll convince him I’m a total stud.”

Jesse laughed. “Look. I gotta pick up my old man at the airport Friday morning. After that I can come back—if I haven’t worn out my welcome.”

I turned toward him and stepped between his knees, and now, with him sitting on the railing, his head was a couple inches higher than mine. I rested my hands on the rail on either side of his legs and leaned in. He was dusty, but I didn’t care. I wanted to bury my face in his hair and breathe him in. “Sorry I was such a freak today....”

“Dude, you totally weren’t.”

“It’s like George came along and now I think everything’s about him.”

“Hey.” He took me by the chin and made me look into his eyes. “Unless you happen to be talking about George, I don’t give him a second thought.”

It was another one of those “will it happen?” moments that I live for and yet I feel so wound up about that I hope one never happens again. Him staring, me staring, and damn it, he still had his hand on my face, and what was he waiting for? All he had to do was...he tipped my chin up, and my eyelids fluttered closed.

Our lips met. He sighed against my mouth, gently, everything about him gentle, like he might float away if I hadn’t been anchored between his knees. He shifted his grip on my chin and caressed my jaw with his fingers that smelled like turpentine, and this time I felt the small, wet touch of his tongue.

Yes.

I got my arms around his waist and inched up closer, swept my tongue over his lower lip. I pictured his mouth, how pretty it looked when he slept, and I teased it more, dared him to let me in good and deep.

I couldn’t get him to rise to the bait. He pulled back—gently, of course—and sucked on his lower lip briefly before he spoke, with his face shyly averted. “I can finish here by seven,” he said, and he slid off the railing. I didn’t move back to give him room, and his whole body rubbed the length of mine as he did it. I wanted to touch him so badly I ached with the need to

do it, to peel off that flannel shirt and unhitch that heavy belt, and all the while run my lips over his suntanned skin....

“Mr. Weber.”

I jumped back from Jesse like I’d been shot in the ass with a triple-pumped air rifle. Bridget stood in the alcove that led back to the Denizens of the Sky. She saw. Exactly how much, I didn’t know. But she’d seen enough.

“We were taking a break,” Jesse said reasonably, and I had to hand it to him, for a small-town farm boy, he was pretty cool and collected about being caught making out on the job with another guy.

Then again, he was just a temp.

“Break time’s over,” Bridget said.

Jesse crouched down to gather up his tool roll, and metal clattered on marble as tools scattered. Maybe he wasn’t quite as collected as he looked.

“I’m taking my lunch,” I said, and I tried to angle past Bridget, but somehow she managed to block the entire twelve-foot alcove span.

“Just a minute, Dan.”

I kept walking. I heard the squeaks of her rubber-soled shoes pursuing my loud footsteps.

“Danny....”

I stopped in front of the locked Admin door, swept my ugly baseball cap off my head and ran my fingers through my hair. “My father was Danny. It’s Web. My name is Web.”

She gave a loud, exasperated sigh. “What are you doing to me, here? What were you thinking? We’ve only got a few more hours before Mr. Trevino gets here, and you’re off messing around with the taxidermist.”

“It was like...two minutes.”

“I’m not closed-minded, you know. I don’t care what your preference is. I’d say the same thing if it was Theresa back there. Just...keep it in your pants until the MAHPS meeting. Understood?”

I’d bet she wouldn’t say the *exact* same thing to Theresa—but I got the message loud and clear. I nodded, and said, “I really do need to eat.” And take my pill.

She gestured at the door. “Go.”

I unlocked the Admin door, took my pill and ate my sandwich. Bridget stormed in as I was finishing the last few bites, and said, “I’m really disappointed in you.”

“Who are you, my mother?” Oops. A George-slip. Really.

“That...was in very poor taste.” She grabbed her purse out of her office, slammed her door, and power-walked out.

I popped a couple inches of crust into my mouth. Oh well. Nothing I could do about it now.

I was finishing my tap water when my phone rang. JR Jones on the caller ID. “Bad timing,” he said.

“I shoulda known better—she’s famous for acting like she’s leaving and showing back up. It’s creepy—like she’s got a secret passage, watching you through portraits with their eyes cut out.”

“I’m really sorry, man. Are you in big trouble?”

I sighed. “No. Maybe. Uh, I dunno. She’s just on the rag ’cos of the grant.”

“I’ve gotta triple-check everything so she doesn’t find an excuse to knock down my old man’s fee, y’know? But I’m gonna haul ass, and I will be done at seven—that’s a promise.” He hung up.

My throat was dry. I drank more tap water.

I’d never been the type of guy to work too hard at the whole relationship thing; if someone got to be too much trouble, there were other fish in the sea—even in the small sea of Faris. “Let’s not rush things” would have translated into “Somewhere down the line you’ll figure out I’m way too high maintenance,” and the guy’s e-mail would mysteriously disappear from my address book.

So why did Jesse’s one step forward, two steps back approach make me feel like I had smoking hot lava coursing through my veins where my blood used to be? Maybe it was just my meds reacting to something.

Right.

I stood and stretched, and got ready to make the rounds again, when I noticed the door to Luke’s office. There was no light creeping out from under it, and it was closed, as usual for the middle of the night. So why did it look positively sinister now, when before it had simply been a door?

I tried it. Locked. I picked through my heavy keyring—eeny, meeny, miny, moe. There—I selected the key, turned it, and I was in. The computer fired up just fine, but the login was password protected and after a couple of obvious tries, including “asshat,” I gave up and shut the box back down. Luke’s chair creaked as I rocked back in it and drummed my fingers on the armrests.

It wasn’t as if I needed to see more e-mails to know Luke was backstabbing me, but I wanted to get a bead on exactly when I should expect the axe to fall. Bridget had been angling to keep me on as some kind of supervisor—good luck with that now. Sonofabitch. I put my face in

my hands and rocked in the squeaky chair, and did my best not to imagine myself with half my brain scooped out in a state hospital straight out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* for lack of decent health coverage.

The not imagining wasn't going so well.

I breathed, and tried to calm down, and checked my watch. After three. All my time was present and accounted for, and better still, it also meant I might at least see some action in few hours. That notion cheered me up, a little.

The desktop was clean, which wasn't surprising, since Luke was expecting a visiting dignitary first thing in the morning, but the trash can hadn't been emptied. No cleaning crew—and while Jesse was probably ten times better than them at dusting off old Isaac Faris, it wouldn't have occurred to him to gain access to the offices and empty the wastebaskets.

I rifled through. Quotes from cleaners, lists of grants and organizations, pages of phone numbers, napkins, paper cups, and brittle wads of gum wrapped in sticky notes. No conveniently-printed e-mails about me and my job, not that I'd actually expected there to be.

There was a wadded-up letter that hadn't compressed very well since it was printed on cotton rag, the type of stock you'd put a resume on, with a raised MAHPS logo on top.

Dear Mr. Presioso: blah blah blah. General stuff about the visit, the time. And then the last paragraph got interesting.

“We'll also work out a solution to the Isaac Faris lead mine diorama, pending the recent slavery allegations of the Kickapoo nation and their demands for reparation. A larger memorial to the ten victims of the tornado would be in better taste.”

Eleven, counting Walter Bronski, who'd died five days later of the heart attack he'd suffered when the tornado plowed past his house and sucked all the dishes out of the dishwasher through the kitchen skylight.

I touched my eye to see if it was twitching. Seemed to be under control. I re-wadded the thick letter and kept searching.

A to-do list—a handwritten thing, complete with boxes he'd drawn beside the items, and then checked off as he'd done them. Talk about obnoxious. I scanned it for anything related to me, but since the list only included things he wanted to get ready for the visit, the only reference was benign.

(X) X-tra guard - web's cous?

(X) Fresh water break room

(X) Good coffee, not too showy

() Class visit? Conference day - call home schoolers

(X) Van Dyke appraisal, bison hide - 22-24k! Call insurance.

I stared at the last item. There was a phone number beneath it with an Iowa prefix.

That fucking bastard. He was going to try to milk twenty-four grand out of Jesse's insurance, when it was the Center that had placed the thing under a mildewy duct and ruined it—when they'd *shaken* on it, for Chrissakes.

I had to tell Jesse...and for a minute there I was tempted to wait until after our 7 o' clock rendezvous—but I only considered it for a second—maybe two. Of course I'd tell him. Immediately.

I was hell-bent on letting the cat out of the bag when I found myself in the cab of a pickup truck with the sun slanting in my eyes. "Oh, fuck me."

"Is that Web I'm talking to, or George?"

I checked my watch, though I hardly needed to, given the sunrise. Ten after seven. "Sonofabitch—I'm missing three hours!"

"That long, huh? I found you about an hour and a half ago giving the People of the Plains a good talking to. Let's hope you didn't do anything too wild before then."

An hour and a half. I closed my eyes and cradled my forehead in my hand. "Did I say anything that would make me wish I'd never been born?"

"Well, the running theme was 'Gotta tell him,' but you wouldn't say who you needed to tell, or what it was you were going to say. Then there was, 'Gonna kick that fucking snake's ass.' Hate to break it to you, but snakes don't have asses. Just an anal slit."

I peeked at him through my fingers. Dimples.

"You're taking this awfully well."

"No way, man. You shoulda seen me for the first half hour, I freaked. Found your cousin's number on your cell and called him. He told me it wasn't dangerous, and since it didn't make any difference whether you were at the Center or at home, you might as well stay and get paid for your whole shift."

"He said that?"

"Yep."

"Anything else?"

Jesse's smile got even wider. "He said if I fucked you over, his wife would have my nuts on a platter."

"Oh God. Let me die now. Please."

I squeezed my eyes shut tight, but I swore I could feel him smiling.

“I was in Luke’s office,” I said. “We’ve got to go back and lock it up.”

“Sorry. He came in right after I hung up with Alex. I had to make it look like you were helping me with the tarp again.”

“Oh fuck. I am so screwed.”

“Look at it this way—maybe you did lock up after yourself. And if not, maybe he didn’t even notice. If he saw anything funny, don’t you think he would’ve come out and said something on the spot?”

Like Bridget had when she caught Jesse and me getting familiar. Huh. Maybe Luke would have, maybe not. Maybe instead he’d save it up as ammo to shoot me with the second I let my guard down.

The fifteen-minute walk from the Center was more like a three-minute drive and we were already back, but I couldn’t just charge upstairs without telling him what I’d seen. “Listen, Jesse...I don’t know how to say this.”

He cut the engine, and watched me carefully.

“The thing I found in Luke’s office—I think he’s trying to stick your insurance with the appraised value of that bison hide.”

Jesse took off his bandanna, threw it down on the dash, then slammed his back against the seat. “What a prick! You were there when he promised it was all good, weren’t you?”

I nodded.

Jesse shook his head. “I’ll be. I knew better, I damn well knew, but I wanted to help him out of a bind. I’ll bet it’s a period piece and he won’t take a trade.”

“I dunno. It was just a one-line note to call your insurance.”

“Maybe I can pay him off. Trade the hide and pay the difference so it doesn’t end up costing my old man’s shop its liability.”

“So...how much does a bison hide run these days?”

“A good one? Two grand. Not that the one he had was any good even before he wrecked it.”

“The figure on the paper was higher than that.”

He cut his eyes to me, and it tore me up to see him looking so serious. I wished George could take over for maybe thirty seconds so I didn’t have to tell him that number and see what it did to him.

“Add twenty thousand.”

He stared at me for a long time, a really long time, and finally said, “Oh, that spineless motherfucker.”

Chapter Six

So much for the “big reward” I’d been saving up for myself for holding it together until MAHPS day. If life’s taught me anything, it’s that you might as well eat your dessert first, ’cos the ceiling might fall in before you’re even done with the salad. “If you need to go home and deal with this....”

He pulled out his phone, checked the time, and threw his hands up in aggravation. “No one’s around yet, it’s too early. And if I start driving now, I’ll be in the middle of nowhere when the agent’s office opens. If it’s cool with you, I’d rather stick around ’til I can see what my options are, make a few phone calls and figure out what I’m doing.”

“It’s cool.”

We went upstairs, but instead of heading for the bedroom, I poured us the rest of the Mountain Dew while Jesse waited for my laptop to stop downloading updates and take him online.

“I wish I could do something,” I said.

Jesse glanced up from the screen. “Dude, you gave me a heads-up. That’s huge.”

I would’ve offered to give him a little something else if I thought it would take his mind off things, but his focus had narrowed to the twenty-some thousand dollars Luke was planning to wring out of him, and I figured it was best if he didn’t associate me with the whole mess as anything other than the bearer of bad news.

Normally, I’m not much of a napper, so I had my doubts that I’d actually do any sleeping before my second shift of the day—especially knowing that I had Jesse one room away. Pissed off, but here. I set my alarm for nine, triple checked that I’d chosen a.m. and not p.m., then checked that the a.m./p.m. was even set correctly to begin with, and crawled into bed.

I listened for a while to the bursts of keyboard clatter and occasional sighs from the next room, and imagined those sighs being about something a hell of a lot more fun, and next thing I knew the weather guy was predicting clouds and a twenty percent chance of rain. I sat up, disoriented, and looked at the alarm clock. Nine a.m.—time for round two at the Center.

A flyer for Sky High Pie, the worst pizzeria in Old Faris, lay face down on my closed laptop. On the back, Jesse had written in huge block letters, “Thanks Web! I’ll call you!!!”

Yeah. I’d heard that one before.

I didn’t bother eating anything—no appetite. I brushed my teeth, but without much actual effort. I dressed, but I couldn’t find my mag light and pepper spray, and Alex had my spares. I

was nearly late when I clumped down the stairs to his apartment and knocked on the door, but not quite. I had my health insurance to think of.

“Oh, shit,” Alex said. “We’d better leave right now—did you even comb your hair? You need a haircut, or something. Maybe start putting some gel in it. You look like you think you’re in one of those indie college bands.” He beeped his car locks open, I climbed in, and he started the engine. Sports radio blasted for a second, then Alex turned it down.

“Good. I’m glad. Maybe I don’t want to make a good impression. I wish I’d quit washing it a week ago. I wish it smelled. It’d serve that fuckface Luke right.”

He stopped backing out of the driveway and looked at me.

“What?” I snapped.

“Who am I talking to, Web or George?”

“Don’t be a jag.”

He checked the street for traffic and pulled the rest of the way out. “I’m not being a jag, I’m serious. You’re pissed off at Luke? I can’t remember the last time you were pissed off at anybody. Hell, you put the fairy in *laissez-faire*.”

I shrugged.

“I figured maybe you’re tired,” he said. “Maybe you haven’t been getting enough...sleep.”

“I wish.”

“Serious? What do you mean, you haven’t been getting lucky all this time? I always thought it’d be easier to be gay—no offense. But you wouldn’t have to figure out if you were in the doghouse because you didn’t notice your girl’s new blouse, or you slipped and said something stupid about her mother.”

I sighed, and tried to figure out how to explain it to Alex in a way he’d understand, when I didn’t really get what was going on myself. “He’s gone already, back to Iowa. It’s all Luke’s fault—he’s trying to suck twenty grand out of Jesse’s insurance.”

“Shit,” Alex said gravely.

We pulled into the parking lot and I got a look at the west façade, which I don’t normally see since I walk to work from the opposite direction. The shrubs looked scraggly and overgrown, though at least someone had made an effort to pick up the drifting trash. Theresa’s ancient hatchback and Luke’s SUV were lined up at the far end of the lot. Bridget’s hybrid was nowhere to be seen, but I wouldn’t put it past her to prove how ecologically-conscious she was by walking to work, even on the day the MAHPS guy was coming. I wondered if I could convince Alex to park close enough to ding the side of the SUV when he opened his door. Probably not.

As we neared the building, the sound of knocking rang through the lot, and Alex and I exchanged a puzzled look. “That sounds like the front entrance,” I said. We rounded some overgrown evergreens and headed toward the main doors. At the top of the white marble stairs, a middle-aged guy in a brown suit stood with his arms crossed, frowning, while Theresa struggled with a key, then knocked again on the glass.

“Crap,” I whispered to Alex, “if that’s the MAHPS guy, he’s more than half an hour early.”

Theresa spotted us, and being her usual charming self, said, “Well, it’s about time. Where the hell is everyone?”

“Welcome to the Center,” I told the guy in the suit while I ignored Theresa. “I’m Daniel Weber. I’m sure Bridget and Luke are upstairs in the office.”

“Jose Trevino from the Mid-American Historical Preservation Society.” I’d always pictured guys named Jose as being fun guys. Mr. Trevino shattered that stereotype.

“No one’s answering the phone,” Theresa complained. “And what about Marvin? Don’t he start at seven? Where’s he at? And why don’t any of my keys ever work?”

The thought of grabbing her baseball cap and stuffing it in her mouth was tempting. I glanced over my shoulder at Alex. He met my eyes and the corner of his mouth twitched, and then I had to put all my energy into not bursting out laughing, not because anything was actually funny, but because it would be the worst possible time to crack up.

I’m not one of those people who believes everything happens for a reason. Maybe some people with brain tumors think that way; I suppose I can’t begrudge anyone their coping mechanism. But me? I think sometimes we’re just in the wrong place at the wrong time when the shit hits the fan—and it cheered me immensely to know it was someone else in the path of the shitstorm for a change. Luke, in this case. Because I knew how much he was counting on the grant.

I whipped out my keyring and sifted through in search of the front door key—one potato, two potato, three potato, four. It turned the lock easily. “Sorry for the inconvenience. I’ll walk you to the offices.” I might even set him up with a little something special from the water cooler, if he was nice.

I held open the front door and they all trooped in, Alex last. He half-mouthed, half-whispered, “Where do I go?”

The executive decision I made, even though I was a peon who was probably about to be downsized out of a job, was to put the guy who didn’t know what he was doing on the farthest floor from the entrance. I held up three fingers.

“Where the...heck is Marvin?” Theresa muttered, avoiding the F-bomb at the very last second. She stormed off toward the six-inch deep lead mine. Alex’s mouth twitched again.

I did my best to give a good tour, though there hadn’t been tour guides at the Center ever since I was a horny high school sophomore. “The Faris Natural Sciences Center was founded fifteen years ago.”

The elevator dinged open and Alex, the MAHPS guy and I got in. “Faris received federal funds after an F-4 tornado destroyed half the town, and that money allowed construction on the Center to begin.”

It was a grand time, too—or so Aunt Noreen always told us. Tourism went up, and Faris became the natural sciences darling of the Midwest.

For a couple of years, anyway. Until buildings sprouted up in New Faris, and the freakish path of the F-4’s destruction became less apparent.

What could I say that wouldn’t make our situation sound as dire as it was? That the tourism drying up made the museum tank? That the nearby Chevy plant closing added a few more nails to the coffin? That Dubuque and Chicago had the natural sciences covered, and slapping up something in between the two where we didn’t have the population to support it had been a doomed idea from the get-go?

Instead, I said, “Our Rock River beaver is the largest on record in North America.”

The elevator opened, and I led Mr. Trevino toward the Admin offices, then stepped back out of his visual range, pointed toward the staircase, and mouthed, “Go,” to Alex.

He nodded and ran self-consciously toward the stairwell with one hand on my spare flashlight where it flapped against his thigh. The only thing that made him look even remotely like a security guard was his buzz cut.

I pulled out my keyring on its tether, then saw the Admin door was ajar. The building had obviously decided to demonstrate every single thing that wasn’t working properly during Trevino’s visit, like it wanted to get even with the handful of us trying to keep it afloat. Or maybe put us out of our misery.

When I opened the door all the way to let the guest of honor in, the smell of scorched microwave popcorn billowed out. Trevino squinted his already-narrow eyes as if it would help him navigate through the stink.

Jesus. Of all days to make popcorn—and burn it. I hoped it wasn’t the ancient box from the back of the cupboard. That stuff was so old it belonged with the People of the Plains.

“I’m sure Bridget or Luke...or someone...is here,” I said, louder than I normally talked, hoping that one of them would emerge from the offices and save me. Neither one did.

“Izzat you, Web?” Marvin came out of the bathroom with a wad of bloody toilet paper pressed to the corner of his mouth. He looked like he’d aged another ten years and just gotten over a bout of double pneumonia. “Glad you’re here. I gotta go. Broke my partial on that fucking popcorn and now I got a wire stuck in my gums.”

I flinched as the F-bomb Theresa had avoided earlier finally detonated. “Shouldn’t you be telling Bridget or Luke?”

“Can’t find either one of ’em. Look, it’s an emergency.”

“Okay, yeah, sorry to hear about your...uh...why’d you make that popcorn, anyway?”

Marvin shrugged into his jacket. “I didn’t make it. It was there when I got here.”

I looked at the scorched bag in the center of the table. Okay. Maybe the real question was, what on earth had prompted him to try and eat it?

Marvin left with his bloody wad of TP while I took the tape off the water cooler spigot as casually as I could. “Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

“Thank you, Mr.—Weber, is it? But no. I think I can show myself around.” Mr. Trevino turned toward the doorway that Marvin had just exited, and nearly ran smack into Bridget.

“Oh! You must be Mr. Trevino. Welcome to Faris Natural Sciences Center. Can I get you some coffee—?”

“I’ll need to evaluate the displays. Is there a map?”

Oh God. That awful, out-of-date map. I started to say, “I can show Mr. Trevino—”

“Yes, of course,” Bridget said, and then she turned to me. “Mr. Weber, thank you for showing Mr. Trevino in. I can take it from here.”

I waited for both of them to leave, then flipped open my notepad. It said:

Taxidermy Guy Here

Kissed Jesse

Put Out Uniform

9:30—all over soon

I added *Luke is a rat bastard*, then stared at the kissing part, as if that would take me back to the moment in the conservation lab when things seemed a lot more straightforward than they did now, when my job and Jesse’s livelihood weren’t threatened by that total prick, but just seeing the words wasn’t enough. I closed my eyes and imagined Jesse, his hair spread across my pillows, his mouth on mine—and it helped, a little.

The door to the Admin offices rattled open and Alex ducked into the kitchen. “I know, I’m supposed to be on three, but I gotta take a leak. Man, it stinks to high heaven in here.”

“Five year old popcorn—my people call it ‘maize.’”

Alex pulled open the bathroom door. “Whoa, who died in the can?”

When I went to show him where we kept the air freshener, I saw that he wasn’t talking about the lingering aftermath of a BM; the entire sink was spattered with blood.

“Oh my God. What if Trevino had come in here?” I grabbed a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and started smearing the blood around the sink while Alex stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me, flipped up the toilet seat, and peed without even bothering to close the door.

“You should probably be using rubber gloves or something,” he said. “You could get hepatitis.”

“Do you mind?”

“What? I told you, I had to go.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like we’re at home.” I stuffed the bloody wad into the garbage can, and was suddenly convinced that I was crawling with hepatitis.

Alex zipped up. I was scrubbing down my hands when I heard the scream.

Alex burst out of the Admin doors and past the prairie dogs with me hot on his heels. My wet hand kept grasping at my pepper spray holster as if groping for it could make it magically appear.

Jose Trevino stepped out of the petroglyph alcove, shouting, “Security! Security!”

Sonofabitch. That was me...and I’d never had to do anything more than lock and unlock doors. Behind Trevino, Bridget yelled, “Somebody call an ambulance.”

I don’t think a twelve-foot alcove had ever been so many things to a person before that very moment. Once upon a time, it was a tedious stop on a Boy Scouts field trip. Later, a source of irritation with its constantly reappearing letter F. Yesterday, it had been the magical place where I held Jesse up against me, tasted his mouth, and felt the heat of his body—and got caught.

Now it became the spot I saw Luke Presioso with his head bashed in. That topped everything.

Chapter Seven

Alex was talking serious and low to the cop in the suit—his softball buddy, Bobby. Faris only had two police departments, so of course the one handling the murder was the one where we knew everyone. Very awkward. “But he was with me,” Alex was saying.

“And what, he sleeps in the same bed with you and Kathy?”

“Don’t be a—”

"I'm just saying that he could have come and gone a dozen times while the two of you were asleep, isn't that so? Listen, this is the first murder since the lead rush days. If we fuck it up, we look like a bunch of backward hicks. Don't worry. I won't mess with your brother."

"Cousin."

"You know what I mean."

Kathy glanced over from where she was marking off the petroglyph alcove with black and yellow crime scene tape. We lived in the same house, so obviously I was used to seeing her in uniform—Alex called her the Tidy Bowl Man, or Tidy for short—but I'd never seen her doing anything more official than handing out a traffic citation. I couldn't decide whether I should be worried that she wouldn't be allowed to question me, or relieved.

"You know how sound carries in our house," Alex said. "Besides, you've known him since he was a kid. Take it easy, would you?"

"It'll only take a minute. I swear—on my mother's grave."

My eye twitched. His mother was alive. Jag.

"C'mon, Web," he said to me, cutting Alex off with a "stop" hand gesture. "The less we roam around here contaminating the area, the better. Let's go sit down in the cruiser. I'll take your statement."

I wondered if I should lawyer up—but I wasn't stupid. There was no way in hell I could do it without looking incredibly guilty. No one knew I was missing three hours but Jesse and Alex, and neither of them would rat me out. Right?

We got in the cruiser. Bobby stared through the windshield at the side of the Center while I watched him through my hair, doing my best to look like I wasn't looking at him. He was blond, really blond, to the point where even his eyelashes were pale. Stocky, too—not much of a neck. "That's something," he said, "ain't it, seeing your boss covered in blood, stuffed in a fake cave."

"Are you going for a *Law and Order* delivery, or what? Last time I checked we were in New Faris, not New York."

"Tell me you were nowhere near this place when Presioso got his head beat in and give me a real good reason why your shirt's covered in blood, and we got no problem with each other."

"This is Marvin's blood—he bled all over the bathroom sink and left it for me to clean up. I don't know when Luke was killed, so I have no idea if I've got an alibi or not. I was here for my last shift until seven, then I went home and slept until nine, grabbed Alex and came back."

That seemed pretty cut and dried to me, but apparently Bobby thought that no detail was too small to omit, so I substituted one of hundreds of typical shifts for the three hours I was missing. I talked, and he wrote, and I told him about my rounds, my return, the front door that wouldn't open, the world's oldest popcorn, and Marvin's dental emergency.

“Should be easy enough to check out. So, one more thing. When you walked home at seven, you stopped at Pat’s Diner?”

Shit. I was that predictable? “No, I got a ride from the taxidermist.”

“So someone did see you. That’s good.” He glanced through his notes. “Jesse Ray Jones. Where’s he at? We’ll need to talk to him.”

“He’s in Iowa.”

“Iowa’s a big state.”

I knew damn well where Jesse was—on Route 30, halfway between Faris and a rural stretch of townships outside Ames where the only other gay guy was known as Larry the Fairy. But I just played dumb, and hoped to hell my eye didn’t twitch.

Kathy strode up to the cruiser and rapped on Bobby’s window. He rolled it down. She said, “Are you done yet?”

Bobby might have wanted to bait her, to draw out his answer for Big Bad Cop Guy effect, but she looked like she was brewing up a big one and just waiting for someone to get in her way, so he said, “Sure, we’re done.”

She looked at me, and when she spoke, her tone switched from whoop-ass to motherly concern. “I’ll drive you home, Web.”

Bobby sat perfectly still as I got out of the car, as if he thought he was camouflaged by the seat, and if he sat still enough, he’d avoid her wrath. In his position, I would have done the same.

I got in Kathy’s cruiser, and said, “I’m fine.”

“Web.” She clamped her hand over mine where it rested on my knee. “I’m so sorry you had to see that. Are you okay, really?”

I’d seen Luke’s body, sure, once Alex and I barged into the petroglyph alcove to try and figure out what all the commotion was about. He’d been jammed into that cave and covered with plastic foliage—fairly clean plastic foliage at that, thanks to Jesse’s blow drier. The way the body looked flashed through my mind like the Rock River Delta slide show. A shoe, light gleaming off its freshly polished surface. The relative paleness of a calf between the top of the silky black dress sock and the hem of the trousers where they’d ridden up. The dark plum shirt with its darker plum spatters. The unfocused gaze, as if Luke had been doing an impression of Isaac Faris, looking for silver and finding lead.

“I’m fine.”

“Was Bobby being an asshole? Because he looked like he does when he’s being an asshole.”

“He was fine.”

“Okay.” She peeled out of the parking lot on two wheels, and even though her lights weren’t flashing, what little noontime traffic there was on Main Street pulled into the bike lanes to get out of her way. “It’s just that you’ve got to be careful. Your medication makes you drowsy, and you’ve been up for how many hours?”

“I’m fine. Don’t make a big deal out of it—not in front of Bobby.”

“You know I’d never tell anyone about the tumor. Don’t worry, no one knows. None of them even suspect. You think you’re the only one who ever dropped out of school and took the first shit-job they could find?”

I tried to bite back a laugh, but it slipped out anyway in the way laughter does when it’s completely inappropriate.

“Oh God,” she said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“No, you’re right. It is a shit-job.”

She laid a strip of rubber from the street to the driveway as she pulled in, then slammed on the brakes before she made a casualty of the garage door. “So you were with that Jesse boy right up until he went back to Iowa, right?”

“What? Whose alibi are you trying to figure out, his or mine?”

“Neither.” She put the cruiser in park. “Both. I don’t think you’d do something like that in a million years, and Jesse? I don’t know him, but what reason could he possibly have?”

Time expanded, and not in a good way, as I realized that both Jesse and I had very, very good reasons to want Luke Presioso dead.

• • •

Back when Kathy got her shield I was a senior at Faris High, a National Honors Society student too young, and too geeky, to get in trouble. So the New Faris Police Department had never intimidated me. When I was at U of I, the department was someplace I’d stop to see if she could slip me a twenty ’til my student loans kicked in. Or, once I’d moved into the apartment upstairs, somewhere I’d go for the house keys if I’d left mine in the microwave or the toilet tank while I was sleepwalking.

The building looked colder to me now, vaguely intimidating, but my stomach seemed to think it was the same old place. It grumbled at me as if to suggest in no uncertain terms that it needed a donut. Most of the cops were female, or diabetic, or allergic to gluten, so the dozen donuts Faris Bakery and Café dropped off every other day usually went stale if I didn’t swing through the break room and grab a few.

I told my stomach to take a chill pill. Now that I was being fingerprinted, the New Faris P.D. seemed a heck of a lot less benign.

Theresa had been the first to be inked up and the first to leave. She was so matter-of-fact about it that I can’t have been the only one to wonder if she’d ever been fingerprinted before,

but I didn't want to ask Marvin. His partial was out for repairs, and now that he was short two lower front teeth he looked at least a hundred and five, and he whistled and spit while he talked. Bridget sat reading a magazine like she was waiting for something as routine as an oil change. And Kathy seemed to have a lot of reports that needed carrying to and from her desk. I figured she was just making sure I wasn't sprawled on the floor, kicking my feet and swallowing my own tongue.

It was near five when Jesse was escorted in by the desk clerk. He wore a backwards Hawkeye baseball cap in place of his black bandanna, his flannel shirt was a slightly different plaid, and he'd shaved recently—but other than that, he looked exactly the same as he had at my house, leaning over my bathroom sink, brushing his teeth with my toothpaste. "Mr. Marvin...Ms. Barker...Mr. Web." He nodded to each of us as if he was greeting us after Sunday mass, then sat down in the vacant chair beside Bridget.

"It's too bad you needed to turn around and drive back here for this," Bridget said. "Obviously some vagrant wandered in and..." she paused as if she'd just stumped herself, then said, "Well, your fingerprints are all over the Center. They need to be eliminated."

"It's a terrible thing that happened. I'm sorry for your loss."

Bridget gaped for a split second, then said, "Thank you." I don't think any one of us had felt actual sadness, not yet, anyway. Shock? Yeah. But grief? I didn't know if I'd ever feel anything other than betrayal when I thought about Luke and his white, white teeth, and his snaky e-mail.

The police tech stuck her head into the waiting room. I wasn't on a first name basis with her. She was so young her uniform looked like it still had its original creases. "Ms. Barker? We're ready for you now."

Marvin leaned toward me and loud-whispered, "Lookit that." I really wished he wouldn't whisper. It was mostly spit. "I'll bet she's younger than my grandkids."

"How many grandkids?" Jesse asked him.

"Oh, let's see. I got five in Chicago, and a great-grandson there too...."

I stared up at the ceiling and zoned out, because it was easier than looking at Jesse. Not that he wasn't easy to look at. He was. Probably too easy—and looking at him made me want to grab him by the shoulders, and pull him against me, and beg him to get in that big old truck of his and drive somewhere far, far away. And take me with him.

In a few minutes, Bridget power-walked out of the fingerprint room, twisting a wet wipe over the pinkie of her opposite hand. "It's a possibility that we'll have to temporarily close the Center," she told me, "but I won't know until I meet with the board. Either way, I'll have you report for work as usual Sunday night. If I hear anything before then, I'll call you."

"Okay. Uh...thanks."

The tech called Marvin in, which left Jesse and me, in that room that had just been so irritatingly full of other people, suddenly alone.

“Someone bashed Luke’s head in,” I said. Not really the opening line I’d been hoping for.

Jesse nodded slowly, and he watched me, and he waited for whatever else I had to say. Too bad it was nothing intelligent—I followed up with, “Who could do something like that?”

“Well, it wasn’t me.” He was kidding. I think.

When I didn’t answer, his face went serious. “You didn’t think it was, did you?”

“No.” Which really meant that yes, I’d considered it, but really had been hoping that when he described my sleepwalking episode, he hadn’t left out anything grisly.

“Look, either we were tucked away by the People of the Plains when whatever happened to him happened, or we were long gone. I remember—Luke was trying to get a progress report out of me, and I made sure I kept you out of his way to stop him from talking to you. Alex said your tumor wasn’t public knowledge, so I figured I should make sure it stayed that way.”

“So let me get this straight. You saw Luke, alive, after you found me sleepwalking. And you didn’t let me out of your sight ’til you brought me home.”

Jesse sat back hard in his folding chair. “Wait now, you’ve been thinking that *you* did it?”

I flipped my baseball cap onto my knees and ran my hand through my hair. “I was mad enough.”

“To kill someone?” Jesse leaned forward so urgently the chair creaked. “Web, we haven’t known each other long, but believe me. You didn’t kill anybody. Sleepwalking, or awake.” He glanced at the door to the fingerprint room. “Now let’s not talk about this right here.”

We sat there without saying anything for a couple of minutes, and then I said, “Who’s gonna pick up your dad at the airport?”

“My uncle will be there. I told him I got called back to the museum. There’s a lot more to the story than that, and I’m not in the habit of lying to them, but I don’t want all of ’em dropping what they’re doing and driving out here to rally around me. I want to get the long view first.”

“See if the F-4’s coming.”

“Well, the sky’s yellow, but sometimes that’ll pass without much fuss. Best not to get the whole mess of ’em worked up over nothing.”

I dropped my voice to a whisper. “A murder’s not nothing.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m a suspect. They just gotta rule out my prints, that’s all, ’cos I touched everything in that building. Same as you.”

The door opened and Marvin ambled out. “Well, we’ll see if I have a job come Monday, huh? Take it easy.”

“Mister...Weber?” said the tech. Probably trying to recall exactly how I was related to Officer Weber. Jesse raised his eyebrows at me as if to remind me that yellow skies could turn blue again. I knew that. The problem was, sometimes a tornado tore your life in half first.

The weirdest thing about getting printed was the ink. It wasn't on a spongy ink pad like you'd use for a scrapbooking page—and, for the record, that had been Kathy's weird craft-phase, not mine. It was a slab of metal covered in a thin, precise film of ink, and it was cold. I hadn't expected it to feel cold. And when the tech girl rolled my fingers onto the pre-printed slots on the card, the impressions they made looked like lumpy, wavy-sided rectangles, and not the whorled ovals you usually picture when you hear the word “fingerprint.”

“So, you're Kathy's brother-in-law?” she ventured as she rolled my final pinky onto the card.

“Cousin.”

“Oh.” She handed me a foil packet with a wet wipe inside. “Getting printed's no big deal. Even bank tellers have to do it.”

I probably looked like a moron as I tried to figure out why she was telling me that. Was she being nice because of my relationship to Kathy, or was it that obvious I was on the verge of pulling a Thelma & Louise? “They do?” I said, after a pause that seemed a smidge too long. Maybe she hadn't heard I was gay and she was cruising me. Awkward.

“Sure. Notaries, too.”

“Okay, well....” I opened the packet with my teeth, pulled out the moist square and scrubbed at the ink, because it was easier than looking at her.

“And there wasn't any hair or blood on your flashlight, so it's probably not the murder weapon.”

My flashlight?

Shit, was that supposed to make me feel better? It meant I really had left my gear at the scene. Fuck.

“Do you need another wipe?” She handed me a second foil pack.

“Thanks.”

She looked me up and down as if she might say something, but then she decided against it and opened the door. “An officer will call you if they need anything else.”

“All right. Uh, bye.”

Jesse stood as I exited the fingerprint room and the tech said, “Mr. Jones?” It seemed like he was trying to catch my eye, but I walked past him and out the front door, where I stood on the front steps and I hovered there with my hands jammed deep in my pockets.

Ten minutes later, Jesse came through the door holding a wet wipe. “You okay?” he said. “You don’t look so hot.” He nodded toward the parking lot and I fell into step beside him.

I waited until we were in his truck with the doors shut and the windows rolled up, and I said, “You told me I was raving about him being a prick. Maybe I’ve been storing up all my anger and it just...exploded.”

“That’s a damn long stretch and you know it. And not a prick...a snake.” He smiled. Jesus Christ. Dimples. “Look, he was walking and talking the last time I saw him, and I swear to you, I did not let you out of my sight for even a second after that.”

“You’ve got to admit, it’s weird, me losing a huge hunk of time right when it happened.”

“Is it? How often do you sleepwalk? Every week? Every day?”

I usually tried my best not to admit the frequency of the lapses. “Every day, I guess.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled it into his lap. “More than once a day?”

I looked down at his fingers working my hand. They were strong, and sun-browned. “I guess.”

“Then I don’t suppose it’s weird, with you low on sleep and all keyed up about the grant—”

I pulled his hand to my mouth and pressed it to my lips. I could try and blame George, but come on. It was all me. He stared, as if finally, in his I-see-everything-coming-a-mile-away nature, something had surprised him. I fit his second knuckle between my lips and kissed it, slowly, lavishly, like I would’ve sucked the dick of a hot transfer student I was trying to impress, back in my old life, back before George.

Jesse opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

When I tilted my head and moved on to the next knuckle, I left a trail of wetness behind. I breathed him in, and beneath the alcohol tang of the wet wipe, his hands held the mellow scent of the suede steering wheel cover and, I imagined, Iowa sunshine.

I traced his knuckle with my tongue and sucked on it some more, and he let out a breath he’d been holding—slow, and very, very careful. “Can I stay at your place tonight?”

I nodded.

“Then we’d best not do that here.” He glanced back at the building. “The cousin who’s gonna hand my balls to me works here. Right?”

I reluctantly let him lower his hand and rest it on my thigh, and I had to admit, Kathy would probably catch hell if anyone saw her cousin “fagging out” in the parking lot. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go home.”

Chapter Eight

I slammed my apartment door and grabbed Jesse by the shirttail. I was so fatigued I was shaking, and damn, he was probably just as beat—he'd been up all night and driven more than eight hours himself—and it didn't matter, none of it mattered. Our exhaustion just made the encounter seem all the more surreal.

He slung his arms around my shoulders and pulled my head down so my mouth met his, and I felt his strong fingers weave through my hair and cradle my defective head.

No more shyness, not this time, now that we could finally, fully connect. Our tongues met, slid, learned each other's mouths. My hands burrowed under jacket and three shirts, and I gasped against his wet lips when my fingertips finally connected with hot, smooth skin.

His hands roved my body, finding my shoulders and arms like he had back in the conservation room, but aggressively now. For someone who hadn't had many gay guys to practice on, he really seemed to know what he liked.

I worked at his clothes, so many clothes. His baseball cap dropped to the floor, and his shirts landed on the computer desk, the radiator, the TV. His tan stopped at his neckline and around his biceps, and his left arm was darker than his right. I yanked off my khaki uniform shirt and dropped it on the floor. I had a nocturnal creature's skin, the same color through and through, and my dusting of chest hair was stark against my pale body.

He touched me, tracing the shape of the hair, then he dragged a finger down over my nipple. I'd never been much for nipple play—but that single touch made my cock heave against my fly. I grabbed him by the wrist and said, "Come to bed."

I slung Jesse down on his back, and his hair fanned to one side in glossy, dark waves. His knees were bent and his feet hung over the side of the mattress. His big jeans had ridden down, and the place where his trail began to broaden into something way more private showed over the top of the waistband. I put my face to his lean stomach and traced the curve of the muscles with my lips, and felt them bunch as he got his elbows under him to watch me.

Once I pulled Jesse's belt buckle open, his jeans and boxers slid right down, but before I could dive in and finish what I'd started back in the truck, he hauled me up by the armpit and said, "C'mere."

He rolled us so that I was on my back, and him half on top of me. He seemed pretty big on eye contact, watching me with those blue, blue eyes of his as he smoothed the front of my hair out of my face. I said, "You did that to me the first time you saw me sleepwalk."

"I did?"

"Uh-huh. So how'd you know right away I was gay? Especially in that ugly uniform."

"Nothing wrong with a man in uniform. I've appreciated many a fine gas station attendant in my time." He flashed dimple, and my heart stuttered. "I didn't know, not until Bridget told you to give me your number, and you turned red."

“Great.” I felt my cheeks heat up again.

“Yeah, well, I’m glad you did.”

I unzipped my fly and shoved everything down, kicked off my pants and socks, and there we were, together, naked—and it somehow felt like an entirely new naked, because it was this new me who’d stripped down in front of him. I was already hard, and he was halfway there. He took hold of his dick and stroked mine with it, dragged the crown of his up and down the side of my shaft, and I stared at the two of them side by side like I’d never seen a dick before.

Downstairs, a door slammed—Alex or Kathy? The TV followed, droning the news. Alex, then. He’d want to talk to me, both of them would, but hopefully they’d see the 4X4 with Iowa plates and let me be so this one good thing could happen to me.

“What’s wrong, someone gonna come up here and lynch me?”

“No, don’t stop.” I pressed my hips closer to his, lined up our dicks and slipped my hand under his to stroke them both together. He stiffened in my grasp.

He trailed his fingers down my arm while I jacked us both, then back up again, over my collarbone, my jaw, all those places he seemed to like so much, where vein or sinew stood out against muscle, where planes met and angles formed. He lingered there, touching my face, then tilted my head toward his for more kisses, slow and wet. His hips began to flex to the rhythm of my hand, and we rocked together, thighs brushing. Our mouths roamed one another, leaving wet trails on cheeks and chins. His hair tickled against my shoulder, just like I’d imagined, only ten times better.

We moved together, breathing hard, as the strokes grew quicker and more urgent. Jesse’s thighs started to shake. He clenched all over and gasped into my mouth, and the wet splash of his come took me in the chest. Yes, I thought, and I kissed him harder, stroked our cocks harder, until the feel of his hips bucking pushed me to that sweet, sweet brink, and then over.

I gave his dick a final stroke, then eased my arm around him. He pulled me close and held me, with our come slippery between us, growing sticky, and he breathed a contented sigh into my mouth. “About the other day,” he said drowsily. “When I didn’t stay, and you wanted me to...it was lame of me, but you took me by surprise. I never pick up guys when I’m at work. Taxidermy freaks people out. Scares ’em off. Makes ’em think they’ll walk in on me someday with my hand up the ass of a twenty-four point buck.”

“You’re saying I won’t? Damn it—what about my deer fetish?”

When he kissed me again, he was smiling. I could’ve kept on kissing him like that forever—and more. I wanted to start round two, show him I really knew how to make a guy happy, but when I tried to move he held on tighter, and mumbled something against my cheek that didn’t much sound like words. I was relaxed. And content. My arms were like lead. My eyes felt sandy, and I realized how good it would feel to rest them, just for a second.

I woke up once, around eight p.m., because we were in the bed sideways, on top of the covers with our feet hanging off. I rolled Jesse against the wall, pulled the covers over us and curled up to his back. The warm scent of his hair lulled me back into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The knocking on my door pulled me right back out. I looked at the clock. Seven. Was that right? Seven in the morning?

“You’re on my hair,” Jesse groaned.

“Sorry.” I found a pair of sweatpants next to the bed and pulled them on. The knocking continued, evenly spaced raps, loud and firm. “Okay, okay,” I called. Luckily I glanced down at myself before I opened the door covered in the dried remains of our mingled semen. I pulled the flannel shirt off the radiator and buttoned a few buttons somewhere in the middle, then opened the door.

“Yeah?” I asked Alex.

He was in a T-shirt, boxers and flip-flops, and his eyes looked squinty. If he’d had enough hair, it would’ve been sticking up. “Did you eat dinner last night?”

I wanted to snap at him for waking me up to ask if I’d eaten, but something in the urgency of his tone told me to hear him out. “No. I went to bed.”

“How about your pill, did you take your pill?”

“Shit.”

“Listen, get yourself together. I think you’re in for a long day at the police department.” He looked over my shoulder and said, “You too.” I glanced back at Jesse. He had on his jeans and one of my T-shirts. “Come down for breakfast, both of you. Kathy wants to make sure you know what not to say when Bobby questions you.”

“But we didn’t do anything wrong,” Jesse said.

“Hey, what do I know about police work? I’m the copy machine repair guy.”

Alex turned and flip-flopped down the stairs, and I planted my hands on my hips and looked at Jesse. “This can’t be good.”

“What do you mean? The museum’s full of cameras—worst thing it’ll catch us doing is...you know.”

“But I went on his computer—I pawed through his garbage.”

“You didn’t steal anything, you didn’t hurt anybody, and you didn’t take a whiz in the coffee maker.”

“As far as I know,” I muttered.

“You’ll be fine.” His eyes dropped to the plaid flannel shirt. “And no one ever borrowed my clothes before. I could get used to that.”

I could get used to lots of things—to waking up sideways on the bed, to blue eyes and freckles and deep, greedy kisses. But it looked like Jesse would get his way, and we’d end up taking

things slow even though I would rather spend the weekend in bed, getting off on the way he touched me, mapping every inch of his body in return so I could learn every last spot that made him gasp and shudder.

We showered one at a time, because we both knew damn well we'd end up back in bed if we shared. And when he borrowed my T-shirt and a pair of socks, I realized that I could get used to someone wearing my clothes, too.

I opened my front door, and Kathy's and Alex's voices drifted up the stairwell. "Should I be worried?" Jesse asked as we headed downstairs.

"No, they're cool. I mean they would've been, if this whole thing had gone down differently."

I led the way into Alex's apartment, calling out, "Alex? Kath? This is Jesse Ray Jones."

We found Alex in the dining room. There were four places set at the table, and Alex was powering through oatmeal and reading the sports page from his usual seat. "You'd better eat something," he said.

I took the almost-cold pile of toast from the center of the table and split it between Jesse and me, and loaded my three pieces up with grape jelly. "D'you say grace?" Jesse asked us. Alex actually looked up from the paper and raised his eyebrows at me.

"We're lapsed Catholics," I said. "Super lapsed."

"Second generation," Alex added though a mouthful of oatmeal.

"You?" I asked.

"Me and the old man? Pentecostal snake handlers."

Kathy came in with a skillet full of hot scrambled eggs and started spooning them onto Jesse's plate. "Eat up. It's harder to focus when you're hungry."

Did she really need to make it sound like we were taking our GREs or something? She gave me a mound of eggs, then disappeared into the kitchen.

"She's nervous," Alex whispered.

I said, "Duh," under my breath.

"You took your pill?"

"Yes. I took my pill."

"And you have your next dose on you?"

"The next one's at midnight."

"If they keep us there that long, I'm gonna—"

Kathy swept back in. “You’ve got nothing to worry about,” she told me. “You were here.” She looked at Jesse. “The medical examiner says he died at approximately eight a.m., so you’re the one I’m worried about.”

Jesse thought back. “I was here. I was online. I didn’t leave ’til maybe quarter after.”

“At which time you could’ve gone back to the museum.”

“But I didn’t. I headed home.”

“I’m going to tell you something,” Kathy said, “and you’d better listen. Do not answer any of Bobby’s questions without a lawyer.”

“But I didn’t do anythi—”

“He’s either got to charge you with something or let you go. And meanwhile he’ll probably leave you sitting in a room for a few hours to make you nervous. Stay calm, don’t answer any of his questions, and keep asking for your lawyer.”

Jesse dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Do you know how much it’ll cost for my dad’s lawyer to drive out here from Ames?”

“Do you realize someone was murdered and only a few people had access to that building? You didn’t have keys, but if you showed up at the museum after hours and called Luke, he would have let you in.”

Jesse went very still.

Kathy said, “So you can guess what the last incoming call was on his cell phone, at ten to eight.”

He sagged against the chair back and closed his eyes, as if the gravity of the situation had finally hit him. “I was gonna tell him to mail my check. He didn’t answer.”

“And you didn’t leave a message.”

“No. I was...”

He was pissed off about that bison hide—and only three people knew about that: Jesse, me, and Luke. I guess that made two. Unless you counted the appraiser—but he had no way of knowing we knew, right? Cold toast churned in my stomach as I realized that because he’d never hurt a fly, Jesse would probably crack and spill it all. And then Bobby really would charge him with something, because if anyone had a good reason to kill Luke, it was Jesse, trying to protect his family’s livelihood.

Or me. Or Theresa. Or even ancient Marvin, for that matter. All three of us guards were potentially on the chopping block.

Who knew about what—other than Jesse and me? I couldn't very well go around asking, especially considering how I came by the information myself. But if it came down to it, if they actually did arrest Jesse, I'd have to man up and say something.

We really needed to get our stories straight before Bobby "invited" us in for another round. I tugged on Jesse's sleeve and said, "We're going back upstairs for a minute."

Kathy said, "Web? Sit."

"Just a sec. I need to—"

"Sit." There wasn't any arguing with her when she sounded like that. I sat. She said, "The M.E. also told me Luke was covered with pepper spray."

I was glad I was sitting. Otherwise I probably would've keeled over. "My pepper spray," I said.

"Oh God, that's what I thought. What happened, exactly?"

"I don't know. It's missing."

"That doesn't mean anything," Jesse said. "Just that it's missing. What would be bad was if you still had it on you."

"You'd better start keeping your logic to yourself." Kathy started to pace. "It might make sense to you, but what you don't get is that Bobby can't screw this up—he's got to treat everyone like they're a killer."

"No he—" Alex said, but Kathy turned to me and started talking over him. She said, "How did you lose something that was clipped to your belt? You weren't...were you...?"

"Yeah. I was sleepwalking."

"Shit." She enunciated the "t" like a little stab.

"The time of death, is that for sure?" I asked her.

"It's pretty accurate, within half an hour either way," she said, and I wondered if that would give me enough time to leave my place after Jesse did, sleepwalk to the museum, let myself in, mace Luke, beat his head in, hide his body and come back to bed as if nothing had happened. She knew me so well I might as well have been talking out loud. "The worst thing you do when you're having one of those spells is to hide things from yourself. You must have put your pepper spray where someone else could get hold of it. That's all."

"Why do we have to keep guessing?" Jesse asked. "Isn't this all on tape?"

"What do you mean?" Kathy snapped.

"The video cameras—all over the museum."

“Were you going to mention this at any point?” she asked me.

“I guess...I just thought....” I shrugged. “I don’t even know where the monitors are. There was a head of security who handled it, years back when they used to get foot traffic, but not since I worked there. I figured Luke or Bridget dealt with that.”

Kathy pulled out her cell phone while Alex mouthed, “Holy shit!” to me.

“Bobby? Listen, there’s video surveillance. Yeah. I’ll ask.” She put her hand over the phone and said to me, “Do you have the key?”

“I don’t even know which room the surveillance is in...but if anyone does, it must be me.”

Kathy hung up her phone. “You,” she said to Jesse, “stay here. Alex, you stay with him. Web and I are going to the Center.”

Chapter Nine

It wouldn’t be the first time I was driven to the Center in a police cruiser; Kathy hated it when I walked to work in horizontal freezing rain. There were signs on every door across the front of the building, four regular entrances, the revolving door, and the handicap door, all of them printed on copy paper, too small to read from the street. *Closed pending police investigation.*

Faris was a small town. No doubt no one would even need to be able to read the signs from street-distance. Not by the end of the day, once the rumor-mill had done its work.

We put plastic covers on our shoes and latex gloves on our hands, and I led Kathy around to the side entrance. “Do not touch anything unless I say you can. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“If you can remember anything, any detail, no matter how small....”

“I would tell you,” I said. “Don’t you think I would tell you?”

The inside of the Center was cool and dim with the overhead lights off, and the slight attic-smell seemed more pronounced than it had right after Jesse had finished his cleaning. The building felt foreign, as if I hadn’t walked it hundreds of times before, and the weak light shining down through the atrium made me want to head over to Pat’s Diner for some eggs. “Look,” I said. “I don’t even know where the cameras all lead.”

“How many places can they be? It’s fine, Web, we’re not on a timetable. And it’ll give us a chance to....”

“To what?” To get our stories straight? Damn it.

“To make sure you don’t say something that you don’t mean.”

We bounced our flashlights in tandem through the shadows at Isaac Faris looking for silver and finding lead. And the donkey that had once been alive. My beam dropped to the floor, and Kathleen's traveled to Old Faris, New Faris. A series of framed news clippings—not actual newspapers, because they would have been brittle and yellow with age from the acids in the newsprint, but careful reproductions on archival stock—five articles in all bridged old Isaac Faris with the freakishly divided town that bore his name.

Kathy's beam lingered on the reproduction in the center, probably because a big, melodramatic photo of a 10-year-old version of her husband was on the cover, holding an 8-year-old version of me against his chest. Both of us had our faces scrunched into wails, with tears coursing down our cheeks. *Brutal Tornado Leaves Ten Dead, One Orphaned*. That was the headline. I couldn't see the story from where I was standing, but I knew how it started off. *Young Daniel Weber, playing with his cousin in a two-flat south of Main Street, is lucky to be alive*.

Right. I was the Goddamn poster child for luck. I looked hard at a hairline crack on the opposite wall and said, "It's either somewhere in the basement offices where no one's worked for years, or it's in one of the empty offices in the Admin section on the second floor."

"What's your best guess?"

Anywhere but there. The stairs seemed closest. "Let's try the second floor."

Kathy grabbed me by the arm. "No, we'll start in the basement."

"Why'd you ask if you weren't gonna—?"

"Because maybe my biggest arrest was the shoplifter with three thousand dollars' worth of disposable diapers in her garage, or the guy who keeps stealing the big 'E' from the Great Shakes sign, but that doesn't mean I don't have a gut feeling about this."

I presumed I didn't want to know what her gut was telling her, but I didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to guess. "I'm being straight with you. I had a blackout that night, but Jesse kept an eye on me and got me home safe. I'm not trying to make this harder for you."

Except that I was. By not telling them about all the dirt I'd found in Luke's office, I totally was.

I might as well try to frame the Kickapoo Nation by saying they were up in arms about their diorama, or whatever it was that letter from MAHPS was about.

Seriously, though. Maybe I could mention Luke's plans for outsourcing the guards without divulging that I knew he was planning to eat Jesse alive over that bison skin. Saying something about the security company would at least divert the attention to...who? Big-assed Theresa? Marvin the great-grandfather?

Or me. After all, I was one of the guards, too. And technically I could have sleepwalked over and nailed Luke, then come back home and crawled into bed like nothing had happened. I only lived a few blocks away. And I like to think I'm a pretty efficient guy when I set my mind to something.

Kathy chafed her bare forearms and said, “It’s creepy down here.” Daylight slanted down the penny-throwing grate and threw a pattern of lozenges on the wall. The places where the sycamore roots caused the cement floor to shift looked starker and more neglected by the filtered daylight than it did under the bug-yellow after hours lighting.

Pennies glinted along the cracks in the floor.

“What is...?”

“For luck. Kids throw ’em down the grate.”

Kathy looked up at the ceiling. I got a shiver of *déjà vu*, hopefully not because my body had done something down there while my brain wasn’t along for the ride, but because she was in the exact same spot doing the exact same thing that Jesse Ray had been when I’d explained the pennies to him. Kathy broke the pattern by shining her flashlight up toward the ceiling, onto a thing hanging from the grate.

I didn’t know what to make of it at first—that long, narrow whatever-it-was dangling there. Icicle? Stalactite? I shone my beam at it alongside Kathy’s.

“Golf club,” she said, and a wave of dread washed over me, because I hadn’t known at first sight where the club had come from, but I could sure as hell figure it out easily enough. We were looking at the putter that had killed Luke Presioso.

“That’s from Luke’s office.” My voice sounded incredibly calm, given that I was totally freaking out inside.

Kathy sighed, long and loud. “Okay. I’ll call Bobby and have it collected.”

“I could have touched it. I mean, I don’t remember touching it, but I could have.”

“But he was your boss—you went in his office all the time. Nothing weird about that—right?”

Was there? “I mean, I think I was sleepwalking in there.” If not the morning he was killed, then probably before—when I found myself standing in front of the fridge, but Luke’s monitor was conveniently displaying that jerky e-mail. “So, I could’ve touched...things.”

“Damn it.”

And then there was the issue of me rifling through his garbage. I bet the paperwork was still in there—no cleaning crew. Paperwork full of my greedy, greasy fingerprints. “A lot of things.”

“Web? Look at me.” I did—but why was it so difficult? Something about her tone of voice. “You weren’t fraternizing with him, were you?”

Fraternizing? What the heck was— “My God, I can’t believe you’d even say that!” I was so pissed off I was pacing around her, waving my arms like I was nuts. “I’m gay, he has a tan, so we must be fucking! Right?”

Kathy grabbed me by the shirt and pulled me toward her so she could whisper at me in a way I couldn't possibly miss. "We're family. I'm on your side. Would you stop seeing homophobia where it doesn't even exist? It's not unheard of for someone to fall into a relationship with his boss. Now calm the fuck down and tell me—as your cousin, not as a police officer—if you were sleeping with him or not."

"No," I said. It sounded like a wail.

She let go of my shirt and the tension drained from her shoulders. "Thank God."

Fraternizing. What a stupid word.

"Listen, before I call that thing in," Kathy nodded toward the dangling golf club with her chin, "Let's go look at those tapes. That way we'll know. When it's just you and me, we'll know."

She turned and punched the elevator button. I asked, "What is it you think we're going to find?"

"I don't know. I just need to see."

"Because you think I did it?"

The doors slid open behind her as she turned and cupped my chin in her hand. "No. Never. You don't have that kind of violence in you, sweetie. Not you, and not Alex. The only way you'd lift a finger to anyone would be to defend yourself, or defend your family."

Did keeping Luke from destroying the life of the guy I really, really dug count as defending my family? Maybe so.

My hands were surprisingly steady as I unlocked the Admin area, but that was probably the Neurontin.

Of the five offices off the break room, one belonged to Bridget and another to Luke, and a third was a graveyard for all the really, really old computer equipment that no one had the initiative to take to the recycling place across town—easier for the Center to let it all pile up than to pony up the disposal fee. I'd never gone into the other two offices. Never had a reason.

We approached the first unused office and I sifted through my keys. The third key I tried unlocked the door. My first thought was that someone had ransacked the place. The room was a mess of institutional furniture, garbage and old magazines. But once I put together the cleared-off bench, the empty pop cans and the titty-mag spread open on the floor, I decided it looked more like a space that had been squatted in, rather than robbed.

Kathy crouched to look at the magazine cover without disturbing it. "Two months old. This is fairly recent."

"Marvin." He was the only person in the world I knew who drank cream soda. "He must come up here early in the morning and sack out until Bridget comes in."

"Maybe someone found out about him ditching work in here. Maybe Luke came in early...."

“Come on. No one’s gonna kill Luke for finding out he’s been slacking off. Not when he could just retire.”

Kathy stared down at a mound of crushed soda cans. “How much time did he have here to himself every morning? Not more than a couple of hours.”

“Looks like he’s been making the best of it.”

Kathy gave the room a final scowl, then ushered me out the door. One office left. I fit a key I’d never used before—not that I knew of, at any rate—into the lock. The doorknob was stiff, but I murmured, “Open, Sesame,” under my breath, and it gave.

Three gigantic tube-monitors dominated the desk. They were a dozen years old if they were a day, and if they’d been on, they would have been able to heat half the building. But they were dark.

“Jesus,” Kathy said. “This looks like something out of Flash Gordon.”

The equipment was about as effective as a movie prop, too. Heck, for all I knew, we were in a backup computer graveyard and not a security station. I should have been disappointed, because the quicker we figured out what had happened to Luke, the more likely it was that Jesse and I could recover from the wrench in the works and have half a chance at actually getting to know each other.

But mostly I felt relieved, because it was impossible for me to think that Jesse had done it, so I’d been selling myself the idea that it was me. And as much as prison would mean free health care and all the cornholing I could handle, it still struck me as an even lamer career path than security guard. Color me brain-damaged, but I liked sleeping in on Saturdays and ordering out from Sky High Pie.

Kathy circled the desk, found a dusty power strip, and flicked it on. Two of the huge monitors crackled and hummed to life. One did not. Security station. Probably.

“C’mere, Web. Don’t touch anything—just tell me what I’m seeing. Where’s that spot we found Luke’s body?”

I squeezed into the narrow slot with her between the hulking monitors and the wall and tried to orient myself to a view of the building I’d been circling through for the last year and a half, but in black and white, from a vantage point up by the ceiling. Each functional monitor was divided into quadrants, and the views in those quadrants changed every few seconds, so that whoever was looking could monitor a few dozen cameras at once, twelve shots at a time—if all three monitors were functioning. We were stuck with eight, and since we were the only people in the building, there was a lot of nothing going on. Kind of like watching a golf match, with picture-in-picture. “The trashed monitor must’ve hooked up to the first floor,” I told her. “We don’t have shots of any of the exterior doors here.” Movement caught my eye. I saw a shot of the backs of our heads, and my own finger pointing. “There we go. Say cheese.”

The shot changed to Bridget’s office. Empty. Then it went black.

The closer I looked at the shots, the more I realized that some of the quadrants went black for a minute before they cycled to something else, and some of them showed stellar views of tops of doorframes, or ceilings.

I don't know why I was surprised. Everything else in the center was on its last legs. Why not the cameras?

Kathy tapped something into the keyboard and the shots started cycling quickly on the second floor monitor. "Whoa," I said, "shouldn't you wait for Bobby?"

"This is almost exactly like the system at the bank—maybe a few years older—and I know that one like the back of my hand. Everything's still recording, I'm just taking a look at what happened yesterday."

I felt a lurch of disorientation when people appeared in the frames, all moving backward. Cops and technicians reverse-swarmed the break room, and Kathy slowed the tape. "Which rooms are we missing, here? I don't see that weird hidey-hole Marvin made."

"Nope. He must have covered up the camera. And I think Luke's office is the shot of that acoustic drop-ceiling."

"Shit."

I told myself it made no sense for me to feel relieved. But I did.

"I can't tell where that cave diorama is," Kathy said.

I watched the images cycle. There was a shot of the prairie dog display, the stairs, the Denizens of the Sky. And another shot that looked like a bunch of nothing, with a single plastic leaf showing right at the edge of the frame. "There. It's all messed up, but I think I recognize the plant."

We went out to the petroglyph alcove and ducked under the security tape Kathy had stretched across the entryway the day before to see if we could locate the camera.

The lens, and the area all around it, were covered in about a year's worth of spitballs. Kathy muttered something under her breath. I thought I heard "tubes tied," but I couldn't say for sure. "Okay. The surveillance footage is useless. I'll call Bobby about the golf club."

I eased away from Kathy, pulled up the last incoming call on my cell, and hit "talk." I expected Jesse. What I got was five rings, and "This is Jesse Ray Jones of Jones and Son Taxidermy. Leave a message."

I almost hung up, but then I remembered how Jesse'd hung up on his last call to Luke, how it made him seem suspicious, and thought better of doing it myself. "Hey." *Just thinking of you—smiling to myself every time I think of you in my T-shirt, and practically crawling out of my skin wondering when I'm going to get to be with you again.* "Uh, nothing, never mind. I'll talk to you later."

While I had my phone out, I figured I might as well check with Alex, and not just because he was probably with Jesse. He was speed dial one, and I called him so often I'd almost worn the digit off the button. "Hey," he said.

"Hey. What's up?"

There was a muffled noise of him putting his hand over the receiver rather than hitting the mute button, which he never remembered to do. "I gotta take this quick." Another few seconds of movement, and then he was back, whispering. "Don't freak out, but Bobby brought us in for more questioning."

I glanced over to where Kathy was angled away from me behind a prairie dog hill. "Great. So where's Jesse? How come you could answer your phone and he couldn't? Is he getting questioned right now?"

"Uh, yeah." Alex was nose-breathing, loud. Not good. "Actually, he's waiting for his lawyer."

Chapter Ten

"You knew," I snapped at...fuck, I was so pissed I couldn't think of my cousin's wife's name. "You knew Bobby was angling for Jesse all this time."

Her hand hovered over the dashboard as she considered hauling us back to the station with her lights flashing, but she decided against it and punched the cruiser into drive. "For your information, I just found out about the twenty-five-thousand-dollar artifact. One of you could have mentioned it, you know. Didn't you think we'd check out all of Luke's recent phone calls? Smooth move. Now you both look like you're covering something up. On top of that, one of his tools was found right underneath the Cave Art sign."

I couldn't think of a decent comeback. I was too busy trying to remember her name. While she laid on the horn and charged through a red light, I snuck my notebook out of my pocket and took a peek.

Taxidermy Guy Here

Kissed Jesse

Put Out Uniform

9:30—all over soon

Luke is a rat bastard

Great. Fucking great. That didn't look suspicious at all. I considered chewing up that page and swallowing it before it could incriminate me—or us, I supposed, since my cousin's wife would've gotten a nice show of Jesse and me sucking face in the conservation lab if she'd backed up those surveillance tapes far enough. Wouldn't you know, the only floor where all

the cameras were functioning was the basement. I needed to ditch that note, but tearing a page out of a book is one of those things other people tend to notice—unless you’ve got a good reason to do it.

I flipped back to *Pick up Kathy’s dry cleaning*—Kathy, right—and said, “Hey, Kath. Got any gum?”

She dug a pack out of her pocket and handed it to me. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but you’re making me crazy. How can I help you if you won’t let me?”

I unwrapped a piece and chewed for all I was worth. “Seems to me that the best way to help us is to figure out who really killed Luke.”

Kathy pulled into her parking spot by the station, put the cruiser in park, and gave a heavy sigh. “Theresa had a record for shoplifting. Did you know that?”

“No.” It didn’t surprise me, either. Maybe she’d heard about Luke scoping out cheaper guards. She knew a lot of people in Faris, so why not someone at the security outfit? So she did have a motive—health insurance—not only for herself, but for her whole family. Seeing as how it was the same motive I had, I didn’t think it would be too smart to bring it up. Besides, she didn’t seem nearly industrious enough to have arranged for none of her keys to work so she could come in months later, douse Luke with my pepper spray and brain him with his own golf club, then sneak back out and act like she couldn’t open the door.

“Maybe once we recover the footage from the first floor,” Kathy said, “we’ll find a shot of someone dropping that club down the grate.”

If it was just the monitor that was on the fritz, and not the whole damn computer. “Maybe.” Hopefully that someone wouldn’t turn out to be me. As we headed for the station, I spat the gum into the world’s most incriminating page of notes, wadded it up, and slam-dunked it into the garbage beside the front door.

• • •

The New Faris P.D. is only about two thousand square feet, plus a basement—but even though it’s relatively small, I didn’t spot Jesse anywhere. Even the holding cells that were normally full of drunk and disorderly U of I students were empty. I hoped they hadn’t trussed him up and stuck him in the basement next to the parade float.

Alex stood from the narrow corridor of chairs where I’d been waiting to be fingerprinted the night before and came toward us. His stubble was nearly as long as the hair on his head, and his old hockey jersey had a mustard stain on it. “Um...so...did you find anything?” He looked like he was trying to figure out if he was expected to hug either of us, or if it was just too awkward. I took a step back to spare him the dilemma.

“Nothing new,” Kathy said, which wasn’t true, since we’d found the golf club hanging through the gate. “Look, why don’t you go home?”

He caught my eye and jerked his chin toward the doors. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Not Web,” Kathy said softly.

When Alex gets mad, it’s like one of those cartoons where you see the red climbing up a character’s face as if they’re a human thermometer. In half a second, when he was somewhere around eighty degrees, Kathy added, “I’ll take care of him, hon. He knows the Science Center building better than anyone, and he might be able to help us with the surveillance footage. That’s all.” She leaned forward and her voice dropped to a whisper. “You know I wouldn’t let anything happen to him.”

Alex’s coloration backed down to approximately seventy. “It’s not you I’m worried about. Bobby—”

“We’ll talk about it later. Okay?”

Alex stole another look around. He seemed incapable of doing subtlety at all. He sighed. “Okay.”

Alex left, and I checked my watch. It was nearly two in the afternoon. My stomach did an acidic clench that I took for a hunger pang. “D’you think there are any good donuts left?” I asked Kathy.

“Go check. Get me one, too.”

The office was deserted. The other cops must have passed us on their way to the Center to collect the golf club and the surveillance servers. I opened the massive donut box and wolfed down the half-Bismarck that someone always left—I’ve never determined who—and tried to find a cream, not custard, with no powdered sugar, for Kathy.

The fax machine squalled while I was sinking my thumb into a stale wad of dough to see what kind of jelly was inside. Did people even fax things anymore? I would’ve thought e-mail was a heck of a lot easier. A sheet finished printing out just as I swallowed the last of the donut, which wasn’t very good, but I’d get razzed about touching them all if I left behind any of the ones that had been obviously tampered with. The paper slipped over the basket that was supposed to catch it and fluttered to the floor. I wiped my hands on my jeans and picked it up—and I probably would have put it right into the basket if there hadn’t been a mug shot on it. The picture was dark and grainy, which made it all the more intriguing. A punk in a backwards baseball cap....

Jesse.

Shit. Crap. Shit. My fingerprints were all over the fax now, in traces of jelly. It hadn’t even occurred to me that I was wandering around inside the station alone, totally unsupervised, but there I was, stuck to my latest crush’s rap sheet. I told myself no one would dust the fax, that they only fingerprinted crime scenes, but I was so busy trying to figure out what he’d done to get himself arrested that I wasn’t thinking straight. Drag racing? Hunting without a license? Damn, he looked incredibly young in that picture—truancy? I wasn’t familiar with the form, and the image was so pixelated I could hardly read the type.

He didn’t even strike me as the type to have a record, what with the whole “best practices” and “let’s shake on it” deal. What I really wanted to do was fold up the printout and stick it in

my pocket so I could tear it up and flush it down the toilet once I was done ogling it, but with my luck the sheriff over in Boone County would follow up with a phone call. I found an arrest date seven years prior, and a birthdate—he was six months younger than I was, so he’d been in high school at the time, probably a junior. Crazy—I’d been on the chess team, and he’d been in a jail cell. For what? I scanned back up to the top of the page, and then I found it, half-buried under an image of a paper clip that some lazy clerk hadn’t bothered to remove before the copy was made. Loitering—and Lewd and Lascivious Conduct.

Oh, shit.

I heard footsteps in the hall, so I dropped the fax in the basket, ran over to the donuts, and stuck my finger in another donut.

“I hate it when you do that,” Kathy said. “Someone besides me is going to catch you someday.”

“They’re stale.”

“I know, but I’m starving. Here, give me one that won’t get powdered sugar all over my shirt.”

“Is Jesse here?”

Kathy sighed, and her donut sprayed granulated sugar and cinnamon, not quite as telling on sky blue with navy trim as powdered sugar would’ve been. “We’re still waiting for the lawyer. It’s Saturday, and we haven’t been able to get hold of him.”

“His dad’s lawyer? From Iowa?”

“He can’t practice in Illinois, so Jesse opted to go with the court-appointed attorney. Don’t worry, it’s Reggie Stillwell. He’s good.”

“Wherever he is.”

Kathy threw half her uneaten donut in the trash can and brushed the sugar from her hands.

“So Jesse is here,” I said. “Where? Did that fuckhead Bobby lock him up? Because if he—”

“Would you keep your voice down?” she hissed. “He is in the meeting room. At the very worst, he’s bored ’cos the magazines in there are three months old. Now you need to calm down and trust us to do our jobs. Got it?”

“I want to talk to him.”

“Web....”

“He didn’t answer his phone. That means Bobby took away his phone, right?” I thought about what I’d just said. “And that means he’s under arrest.”

“Web, sweetie...you’re exhausted. Go home. Rest. Let me call Alex to come and get you.”

I shouldered past her. "I'll walk. I need some air."

It was a longish walk from the New Faris P.D. to our two-flat, forty-five minutes or so. And I was about to make it even longer by looping around the station a couple of times to see what I could see of the meeting room. A scraggly ring of juniper surrounded the perimeter. The building was a bland, flat-roofed, utilitarian slab of architecture—and that was good. It meant that everything was on one floor.

I jogged past the lobby, the office, and the wing of the building where the holding cells were—those didn't have windows—and then, finally, the room where the village board met faithfully each and every month to determine if anyone's driveway violated an ordinance.

The sun was getting low and the lights were on inside, and there was Jesse, framed in the window. Several magazines were fanned around him on the tabletop, but he wasn't reading, just staring off into space. I rapped on the window, and he jumped.

He rushed over and fiddled with the window. It opened, but only a few inches. He crouched so we could see eye to eye through the narrow gap. "I take it the surveillance tapes were a bust," he said. "Otherwise they'd let me go."

"They're all fucked up. Like everything else in this town."

"Hey." Jesse put his hand through the small opening, and I took it. Squeezed his fingers. "I'm not worried. Whatever they find, it's not gonna add up to me. It can't."

"But what if they try to force it 'cos they can't figure out anyone else? You had as much a reason as anyone to want to shut him up, you had access to the building—what do you want to bet your prints are on my Pepper Shot?—and, uh..." I hadn't meant to bring up the fax, but thanks to George, I said a lot of things I didn't intend to say.

"And what?" Jesse gave my fingers a squeeze. "Dude, you're turning red."

How could I not? Okay, so maybe I didn't think I'd been navigating virgin territory, what with the whole quarterback fling, but I'd never dreamt the quiet taxidermist from Iowa was working on his rap sheet back when my idea of a living dangerously was a bag of Doritos, a few math nerds, some graph paper and a handful of twenty-sided dice. "You have a record."

"A what? For what?"

"Public, uh..." what was the jargon? "Lewd something."

"Aw, c'mon, I was only a kid—that thing was supposed to be sealed. Besides, that doesn't prove anything, just that I got caught with my pants down at the Petro."

I bit back a laugh, because it so wasn't funny. "You got laid at a truck stop?"

"Shit, back then I spent so much time there, my old man thought I was looking to get my CDL. 'Til I got picked up by the sheriff, anyway." He eased up closer and rested his other elbow on the windowsill so his eyes were framed in the open window. The corners creased as he smiled. He was probably flashing dimples at me, but I couldn't see, not through the small

gap. “Truckers are more my thing than Larry the Fairy.” His eyes went serious. “Too bad they’re mostly married, living these double lives. I get to feeling sorry for ’em when I think about it too hard.”

Double lives. Acting like you’re normal when you’re not—not at all. I got a chill that was something like *déjà vu*, but was probably more of an epiphany.

He pressed his cheek against our twined fingers. “I don’t want to make another phone call like that to my old man, Web. He survived hearing that I dig guys—from the sheriff. But I won’t tell him someone thinks I killed a man. I can’t do it. You’re smart, and you know that building like the back of your hand. You know the people in it. And if you figure out what happened, Kathy will listen. She’ll make Bobby listen, too.”

I twisted my hand as far as I could, though the gap was too small for me to angle my wrist just like I wanted to, and I tried to run my thumb over Jesse’s lower lip. Mostly I poked him in the chin, I think.

“Okay,” I promised. “I’m getting you out of there.”

Chapter Eleven

Alex’s color was only slightly elevated when I got done telling him everything. Even about the note I’d wrapped around a wad of gum so I could throw it away. He nodded very slowly, as if he was working one of his copier-repair flowcharts. Step 1 branching into 1a, 1b, 1c, and so on, as he tried to figure out every possible way the fiasco could end. “Okay,” he said, finally. “But if we figure out your boyfriend’s the only one who could’ve possibly done it, I’m not gonna lie to Kathy and tell her otherwise just for your sake. Got it?”

My *boyfriend*? I managed to keep from smiling by forcing my face into an expression of grim concentration.

Alex and I both suited up in khaki, him with the backup pepper spray and me with the backup flashlight so that neither of us looked suspicious with totally empty holsters, and we took a long, winding route to the Center.

There was a single cruiser outside the east entrance. My blood ran cold. “This is crazy,” I said. “We’re gonna get caught.”

“We’re not gonna get caught. One car means there’s only two cops here. Until they call in the state police or the feds, they haven’t got enough staff to have the Center crawling with uniforms like they did yesterday. Even if they stop arresting drunk frat boys and give up manning the speed trap at Ridge Road, there’s still not nearly enough of ’em to keep an eye on this place.” He whacked me in the shoulder—I’m guessing in a way that was meant to be reassuring. “Besides, no one knows their way around this building like you.”

“It’s not exactly a labyrinth, y’know.”

“But you’ve got the key that’ll keep the alarm from going off if we sneak up the emergency exit stairs.”

I did. I had the keys that would get us everywhere.

We wrapped our shoes in plastic wrap, pulled on some latex gloves from Alex’s toolbox, and approached the back west entrance. Our feet crinkled with every step we took. I fished out two keys from my packed keyring: the big, sturdy key to the emergency exit, and the small key that would deactivate the alarm panel. I was overtired, my nerves were frayed, and I wasn’t sure when I’d last eaten anything with nutritional value. While I wasn’t in the habit of chatting with George, I did ask him to keep quiet when I was messing with the locks. I had thirty seconds to deactivate the alarm before it would alert three square blocks of New Faris to our location.

I unlocked the outer door. The lock was stiff. It took some jimmying to finesse it open. Alex slipped in between me and the alarm panel. “Move it,” I whispered.

He looked wounded. “What?”

I gave him a shove and pointed to the dusty blinking panel, and he backed away from it like it was a diet soda.

Calm down, I told myself. Deliberate, controlled movements. Thirty seconds is actually a good stretch of time to fit the key into the—

The bottom of one of the other keys snagged my latex glove, and the whole thing jingled to the floor, landing in a big, bristly heap of brass.

“Shit!” Alex loud-whispered. “Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.”

“This would be a lot easier without you pogoing around.”

Alex clamped his arms to his sides and stopped jumping.

I held up my keyring and let it fall open. The key to the panel was short, like the keys to the rare artifact cases. Rock River beaver, Driftless Region Geodes....

“Oh shit,” he breathed, like it was too difficult to control both his jumping and his voice.

Finally, the control panel key. My hands were a bit clumsy in the latex, but if I was good for anything, it was that I knew my way around a keyring. I plucked out the key and the others shifted away. I put the key in the lock and turned. Three seconds to spare.

“Oh shit,” Alex said gratefully.

“What’ll they do if they catch us?” I whispered. Not that I thought anyone inside the Center could hear me from the back stairwell, but I didn’t want to take any chances.

“They won’t catch us.”

“But what if they do?”

“A slap on the wrist. Don’t worry about it.”

Does anyone ever worry less just because they’re told not to? “Right, that’s why you were just doing the ‘Oh Shit’ dance. What if you got Kathy in trouble?”

“We’re smarter than that. Stop thinking about getting caught and start thinking about where we should start. The basement?”

Why did I have to be the one to figure out where to go? Maybe, technically, I was security. But in reality, I didn’t feel like I knew anything beyond the bare minimum—locking and unlocking, and checking the perimeter with my flashlight. Jesse’d been right—I didn’t see me as a security guard either. God damn it. Jesse, sitting in that stupid boardroom waiting for Reggie Stillwell to come back from his fishing trip, or the Mall of America, or wherever the hell he was.

“Web? Are you still here?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m just thinking.” About everything except who killed Luke. I told myself to focus. The basement? Logical, if we were to start there and sweep our way up. But if the golf club had been dangling from the grate, it must have meant the killer ditched the club from the first floor, probably fast, on their way to the parking lot. “I don’t think there’s anything to find in the basement.”

“Okay. Where, then?”

“Second floor. That’s where he was killed, that’s where he was found. If there’s anything left to see, that’s where it’ll be.”

Alex started up the stairs. “So that guy Jesse. Is he really a snake handler?”

“I think that was supposed to be a taxidermy joke.” Probably.

“Too bad. That’d be wicked.”

We walked up the stairs, and I found the key that would let us in from the stairwell. While those doors didn’t lock from the inside of the building, since being emergency stairs, you couldn’t keep people out of the stairwell, it was perfectly legal to lock them from the stairwell side and keep people from getting into the museum. Alex held his finger to his lips (as if I didn’t know to stay quiet) then slowly, excruciatingly slowly, eased open the door. The second floor lights were on, but other than the gentle ripples in the sluggish fountain, there was no movement. We stood there stock still for at least a minute, but there was no sound other than the blurble of the fountain and our slow, measured breathing. “Okay,” Alex whispered. “Coast is—”

Alex’s cell phone rang, cutting through the silence like a tornado siren.

We ducked back into the stairwell, and Alex slammed the door behind us. “Well, if they didn’t hear the phone,” I said, “I’m sure they heard the door.”

Alex gave me a casual “fuck you” look, then held up an index finger for me to wait a second, and took the call. “Hello? Hey. Oh, well, I don’t know. I’m not at home.” His brow furrowed. “Shopping. Uh-huh. Looking at grills.”

Grills? Was the home center even open this late?

“Right, they’re on sale. Yup. I’m sure he’s fine. He’s perfectly capable of walking home from the station.” He rolled his eyes at me. “No, I’m not gonna go see if I can find him...well, maybe he let the battery run out...even if they did sell batteries here, I don’t know what model his phone is. Kath, would you stop? Leave a message on his land line and I’m sure he’ll call as soon as he gets...yeah, okay. So, I’m just gonna—”

I pointed at the phone and mouthed “Bobby.”

“—uh, so you guys figure out who did it yet, or what?”

I heard Kathy’s voice loud and clear saying, “You know I can’t talk about that here.”

“Well, what’s Bobby doing? He’s gotta be flipping out right about now.”

Kathy’s voice dropped down to a semi-audible rise and fall of words.

“Uh-huh. Well, uh, maybe I will go look for Web, and then I can ask him. The grill I want is out of stock. Okay-love you-goodbye.” He hung up, looked at me big-eyed, and said, “Bobby’s on his way back here. If we’re gonna look at those offices, we’ve got to do it right now.”

We opened the stairwell door and listened hard for footsteps, but only for a few seconds this time. “This is ridiculous,” I whispered. “We have nothing to gain by poking around for two minutes then running away again. All we’ll do is get ourselves caught.”

The sound of two voices wended up the weird acoustics of the sycamore stairwell. The cops were on the first floor. Hopefully they’d stay there.

We skirted the Denizens of the Sky and came around to the Admin door. It was ajar. Alex pressed his ear to the crack, then took a deep breath and hauled the door open. “And Bobby wants to talk to you,” he whispered.

“What’d I do now?”

“Nothing—he just thinks you might know why no one smelled the pepper spray. Pepper stinks, right? And if it got sprayed in an enclosed area like this....”

I was marginally familiar with pepper spray. I’d trained all of fifteen minutes—a year and a half ago—to minimize the likelihood of shooting myself in the face with it. “No, it doesn’t stink. It’s made of red pepper, not black.” I closed the Admin door behind us so we could stop

whispering. “I mean, it’s got a definite smell, but it’s mostly the propellant. Kind of like lighter fluid.”

I eased open the bathroom door and Alex and I peeked in to see if it was criss-crossed with crime scene tape. It wasn’t—but I imagine whoever gathered the evidence hadn’t seen that much blood residue in a while.

As I closed the door, a voice made me jump half-out of my skin. “Mr. Weber! You startled me.”

Bridget.

I think if it had been Marvin who’d come back to look around, he’d be dead on the floor of a coronary. But it was me and Alex, and we both had a few years before we were in danger of being startled to death.

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but it’s better to do it in person. The board of directors decided the Center will be closing temporarily, and so all of us—including me—are laid off. It’s indefinite, so we should start the unemployment paperwork right away....”

Her gaze fell to my gloved hand, and then my plastic-wrapped foot. She looked at me as if she’d just realized I wasn’t there for anything work-related.

I saw that the door to her office was shut, but the door to Luke’s office was open. I looked at her and realized that she wasn’t on the clock, either.

“What were you doing in there?” I asked.

“I don’t know what you’re impl—”

“You. You made the popcorn.”

Her bland, neutral expression slipped, and I caught a glimpse of fear in her eyes. Only for a second, though, because she turned and dove for the Admin door before I even registered that I was right about the popcorn.

Why on earth would she run from me over the stupid popcorn? She knew something, that was for sure, given the look I’d seen fleeting across her face. But what if it was more than that? What if she’d actually *done* something?

My gut feeling was that she wouldn’t be running unless she had a damn good reason. If I accused her of killing Luke and I was wrong, though, I might as well kiss my health insurance goodbye. I hesitated, but when I remembered the way Jesse had looked at me through the window at the police station, I said, “Fuck it.” And I chased.

Alex and I both scrambled to get around the lunchroom table. Alex would normally have beaten me to the door, since he was in great shape, while I’d scaled back my activity level to sedate walking once George started visiting me with seizures. But Alex’s mental flowchart had already taken him past the “chase the running person” option to the “call the cops”

solution, and he was trying to take off after Bridget, maneuver around the table, and dial his phone all at the same time.

After only a brief hesitation to assess that I wouldn't collide with Alex, I darted the other way around the table and out the Admin door. Which way? The second floor was suddenly as full of hiding places as ever, and the motion of the gasping fountain drew my eyes toward the Denizens of the Sky. There was nowhere for her to run along that wall. The atrium? Nope, all clear. So, where?

A familiar noise gave her away, the rubber-on-hardwood basketball court sound of her sensible shoes on the floor—which was then promptly drowned out by Alex, who'd burst through the door behind me, yelling on his cell.

"Kath? Don't talk, just listen. Radio the cops at the Center and tell them to seal the exits. Right now."

Good plan in theory, but if the cops were near the main entrance, they'd never make it to the emergency exit in time. Bridget was already sprinting toward the stairs on the opposite face of the building.

"Come on," I called back to him, and I barreled toward the emergency exit. Maybe I felt responsible, because if Alex and I hadn't been messing around back there, Bridget would have set off the alarms by trying to sneak out that way. Or maybe I was a better security guard than I thought, and when I saw someone running, I felt obligated to at least attempt to chase her.

And, of course, there was the popcorn. I couldn't just let that go.

Bridget had shorter legs than I did, but she also had a few seconds of a head start. The door to the emergency stairwell slammed shut behind her as I rounded the bird wall, and while I ran full out to catch up, I prayed the plastic wrap that made weird, sticky, raspy sounds against the floor wouldn't come unwound from my shoes and trip me. The squeaky plastic sounds multiplied, and Alex, with his wrapped feet, overtook me. He bodyslammed the door, tore it open, and bellowed, "Go high."

I wanted to balk—but a dozen summers of touch football had trained me otherwise. In all likelihood, Bridget was heading down toward the parking lot to hop in her hybrid and drive as far as it would take her—pretty far, without stopping for gas, either. But things were happening so fast, when Alex called a play, I didn't question it; I ran.

He was faster than me, I told myself as I pounded up to the third floor. And stronger. And it wasn't as if my security training actually included anything like Jujitsu or Tai Kwan Do, or even knowing how to grab someone so they couldn't knee me in the balls.

The plastic wrap on my shoes dragged against the industrial rubberized treads of the stairs as I took them two by two, and swung around another banister. My hand was on my key ring to get me into the third floor—obviously, not thinking too straight, since a locked door was as far as I'd need to go before I could head down to Alex and catch the tail end of the action in the parking lot...and then I rounded a second banister and found Bridget hauling at the locked

door for the third floor. Her eyes met mine, then dropped to the keyring in my hand. “Unlock it,” she demanded.

“Tell me what’s going on.”

“Unlock the door. Now.” Her voice trembled. She’d never needed to tell me to do anything twice.

“Why would you make that sick popcorn on the morning the MAHPS guy was coming? Were you actually *trying* to screw up the grant? You were the one who was always bitching about the stink....”

The stink.

Easily strong enough to cover the telltale smell of pepper spray propellant.

As unlikely as it seemed, I was starting to really believe she’d actually swung that golf club. Why? I had no idea. I couldn’t seem to move past the part where she left Jesse Ray holding the bag—and if Alex thought I was pissed off about Luke trying to cash in on Jesse’s insurance, he hadn’t seen the half of it.

If I had my own Pepper Shot I would have sprayed first, filled myself in on the details later. Unfortunately, my main canister was somewhere in an evidence locker, and my backup was hanging from Alex’s belt. I could hardly try to take her down unarmed—for all I knew, a good whack to the head would be the end of me. And if Bridget was the killer, she had no problem aiming for the cranium.

But she didn’t know I knew, right? Maybe I could stall her until Bobby and his pals showed up. To buy myself a few more seconds, I played along, pulled my keyring and began to sift through the keys. Bridget said, “I knew you’d come through for me.” Really? Either she thought I was incredibly loyal, or remarkably amoral. Probably the second thing.

I recognized the shape of the key I was looking for right away, and deliberately picked a different one to jam into the keyhole and wiggle.

“Come on...” she whispered.

I rattled the key as if I really thought I’d had it right, then jammed another wrong key in. My hands were still surprisingly steady. “What happened?” I asked her as I wrestled with the key. The jingle of the keyring nearly drowned out our frantic whispers. “What’d Luke do to make you—”

“What do you mean? Weren’t you the one who left that letter in my office? Of course you were. You were the only one here. And it’s not as if anyone else cares about the Center.”

“You saw that?” I asked. Because I already knew George enjoyed rifling through Luke’s garbage, and maybe, if I got her to say a little more, I could figure out what the hell she was talking about. The tactic usually worked out for me when I blacked out at the dinner table, anyway.

“I’m glad you confided in me, Web.” She called me Web, not Dan. She even patted my shoulder as I picked out another key and fumbled it into the lock. “And I’m so, so sorry Mr. Jones was caught up in all of this. I never meant for that to happen.”

So she knew damn well Jesse was taking the rap. My face felt hot; it was probably redder than the cardinals in the Denizens of the Sky. I couldn’t control that, but I kept my voice passably calm. “So clear him. Tell Bobby what happened.”

“He won’t understand—not like you. It’s about family.”

Family? What family? Other than a painted turtle, Bridget lived alone. My pathetic brain scrambled to piece together what I knew. A letter. Family. Was it something to do with the benefit package? Because I was pretty sure Luke couldn’t have cut Bridget’s health insurance without losing his own.

I was trying so hard to fit the puzzle pieces together so I could exonerate Jesse that I drove the correct key home and turned it before I even realized I’d unlocked the door.

Chapter Twelve

“Thank you,” Bridget gasped. She elbowed me aside and took off toward the cross-section of the Illinois River. I caught my breath and lunged after her, but the plastic wrap on my shoe snagged the corner of the steel fire door. I staggered, pulled, and felt the plastic wrap stretch—and finally, tear.

Hopping on one foot, I unwound the remainder of the wrap. Might as well lose it. I was under no illusions that there’d be any hope of Alex and me getting away with our private field trip.

Bridget’s shoe rubber was squalling toward the atrium stairs—good. She would run right into the...wait a minute. If the cops went outside to secure the door, then the stairwell would be clear now. Damn it.

I took off after her. My footfalls sounded stupid, one foot wrapped, the other regular. Spiff-tap, spiff-tap, spiff-tap. I tried to ignore it and kept going.

When I rounded the top of the atrium stairway, my double shifts, late pill and lack of sleep caught up with me in a wave of vertigo. As public buildings go, the Faris Natural Sciences Center might be on the puny side. Still, I wasn’t eager to take a header down a three-story atrium. I grabbed the handrail, felt my latex glove pull at the burnished wood, and hurried my way down the stairs as fast as I could manage.

It occurred to me, as I absorbed the step-by-step dismay of falling farther and farther behind Bridget, that I should probably be thankful George hadn’t taken over during our ludicrous chase. Who knew where I’d wake up if he decided to cut in? And maybe “where” wasn’t even the issue; maybe it was “if.”

How was it possible she could outrun me—and where the heck did she think she could even go? “Bridget, wait!” I called out, but my voice sounded small in the vast open space. She was a whole flight ahead of me. Through the sycamore branches, I saw her pass the second floor and keep running toward the first. Good, that was good. There were cops down there. Cops who weren’t tired and wobbly and fighting with a tumor.

Except I didn’t really register that relief, even for a second. Bridget might be lots of things—stingy, high-strung, controlling—but she sure as hell wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t be heading for the front door. But where?

Loading dock? Rear fire exit? Basement?

I really hauled ass on the stretch between the second floor stairs and the first. A wall of arrowheads blurred by. I gained some distance on her, and rounded the final flight of stairs soon enough to see she wasn’t going for the front door. Instead, she took a sharp turn into the old food court.

My feet pounded across the grating that surrounded the sycamore, the mesh where kids dropped pennies—where Bridget had dropped that golf club. It had to have been her, because why would she need to cover up the smell of the pepper spray unless she’d been the one to spray it? And once she’d done that much, blasting her colleague in the face, there were only so many ways the encounter could end.

She could have left Luke rolling around on the floor, called the EMT, and claimed the stress had caused her mental breakdown.

Or, she could grab that damn golf club off the wall and finish Luke before he had a chance to ruin her career in museum administration.

Old Faris, New Faris loomed to my right. Isaac Faris held up his nugget of lead and regarded it with his creepy, glassy-eyed stare. Beyond that, on the wall behind a scale model of Main Street, the five framed newspapers documenting the tornado’s destruction lurked, and in the center paper, Alex held me while both of us bawled. The fucking tornado display was big enough as it was—it didn’t need to be expanded.

And then I realized—as much as I wanted my family off that wall, Bridget wanted hers to stay. But Luke had been negotiating with MAHPS to ditch the Isaac Faris diorama to keep some Native American scandal quiet. “Bridget!”

A door slammed behind the Middle School science project display, and a Play-Doh model of a molecule popped off its foamcore board and shattered on the floor.

I’d never ventured into the old food court restaurants—I didn’t even know if I had a key that fit. But when I grabbed the doorknob and pulled, the door swung open so fast it wrenched my shoulder, and I ducked into a cramped kitchen that had a bunch of daily special signs from 1998 stacked against the wall, and cobwebs as thick as party streamers draped from the ceilings. It also had a door on the far wall that led outside.

The lock wasn’t even a museum quality lock. It was a deadbolt. The work of a fast food manager who hadn’t fried fries back there for a dozen years or more? I dunno, but somehow, I

couldn't bring myself to be surprised. The real shocker would've been if something in that building were actually up to code.

Bridget lunged for the door and turned the deadbolt—and it didn't move. Stuck, and good. "Help me," she hissed.

"Bridget...."

She motioned impatiently. "Open the door."

I stayed right where I was, beside a rack of dusty warming lights, grabbed my phone out of my pocket and hit my cousin's memory dial. "It's not about you." Shit. I'd meant to act like I was on her side—or at least as neutral as tap water—but I was frayed so thin I couldn't stifle myself. "If you were the only one affected by this whole mess, I probably wouldn't care. I don't know what that says about me. But this isn't just about you anymore."

"Web, please—"

"I can't let Jesse take the fall for you. I won't."

Alex answered his phone and yelled, "Where are you?" into it.

"I found her in the food court. And there's a door on the north side of the building, an old service entrance. Send the cops there."

Bridget cast around for something to free herself with. She came up with a whole lot of nothing, until she spotted an old fire extinguisher—and ripped it right off the wall. I strongly suspected it no longer held a charge, but I backed up and shielded my eyes anyway. She didn't aim it at me, though. She started pounding the deadbolt latch with it, as if a hard enough whack might unstick it.

Considering how much damage she'd been able to do with a golf club, I decided I'd better make sure I stayed well out of range of that fire extinguisher. After the fourth or fifth hit, there was a pronounced change of pitch in the sound of the canister striking the lock. Bridget dropped the fire extinguisher, twisted the latch and flung the door open.

And there was Alex, arms outstretched, in full tackle mode. Bridget went into a half-crouch as if she thought she could give him the slip—hell, maybe she could—but then a cruiser screeched around the corner. Bobby swung out of the driver's seat, and another big cop, Paul Sutter, from the passenger's. Bridget sagged against the doorframe and shook her head.

There was yelling, all kinds of yelling, jumbled up and chaotic. Bobby was hollering, "Don't move!" while Paul bellowed, "Keep your hands where we can see 'em!" They didn't even sound like themselves to me. The worst I'd ever heard from Paul was, "Stop messing with that donut."

But Bridget didn't look very surprised. Maybe she remembered Bobby and Paul as horny high school sophomores. Or maybe she was in shock. Whatever the reason, her eyes were dead calm when she ignored their hollering, turned back to me, and said, "Isaac Faris did not keep slaves."

So it was the thing with the Kickapoo Nation after all. In a way, it made sense. For Bridget, the forward-thinking, hybrid-driving, gay-tolerant intellectual, one of the only labels she wouldn't be able to live with was "descendent of a slave owner."

Chapter Thirteen

Alex made the plastic wrap and latex gloves quietly disappear, we followed the squad car to the station, and so far no one had thought to ask us what the hell we were doing poking around at a crime scene. Because I worked there? Because Alex was married to a police officer? Or maybe because we'd backed Bridget into a corner and she had no other choice but to tell her side of the story.

Normally, the slavery claims would have been substantiated or dismissed by digging up a few records. In Faris, though, most public records only went back fifteen years. The spot where the old courthouse used to be was now Pat's Diner. It looked like the slavery thing was going to be the least of Bridget's worries...though I suspected maybe that label still felt more repulsive to her than "murderer."

If I'd been expecting Jesse to roll out of the meeting room bruised and tattered and blinking against the light, I was disappointed. He ambled out with his hands jammed in his jeans pockets and gave me a shy smile. Dimples. Oh man.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

He sidled up next to me and spoke low so that only I could hear. "I'm fine. They didn't get to the waterboarding yet."

I needed to touch Jesse to make sure he was real. I had to make sure that his trip over the Illinois border hadn't spiraled totally out of control and gone from a super-intense four-day job to a lawsuit to a murder charge. And maybe I wanted to prove to myself that I hadn't just dreamt him up while I was sleepwalking.

He drove us back to my place. His thigh felt solid under my palm, warm. His jeans had that velvety washed-a-million-times texture, with a couple of bumps where the fabric was starting to fray but hadn't quite formed a hole yet. "Careful," he said. "You might distract someone."

"Now you know what it's been like for me all week."

We made it as far as the driveway. Before he could even unfasten his seatbelt, I grabbed his face and kissed him by the light of the motion-sensor floodlamp on the side of the garage. He groped for me and got an arm almost around my waist before his seatbelt snapped him back against the seat. Fumble, release. Then hands on me again, pulling me close, crushing my mouth to his.

I grabbed harder, found a handful of hair. He slid his fingers down the back of my khakis. I moaned into his mouth.

He turned his head, and with his mouth against my cheek, said, “We should go upstairs.”

I dragged my hand down his chest, over his belt buckle. “No. Now.” I couldn’t squeeze my hand down his pants, not from the angle we were sitting at, but I could feel everything through that threadbare denim. A brush of my fingertips and he started to get hard.

His breath hissed in. “You’re gonna get me in trouble yet.”

“Nah. This is private property.” I ran my hand back up, slipped it under his jean jacket and flannel shirts so that the only thing between us was that T-shirt of mine he’d borrowed. My fingers brushed his nipple. It was already stiff. I played my fingertips over it again.

Jesse shoved the T-shirt up so I could touch him skin to skin—smooth. Hot. I rolled his nipple, pinched it, and he threw his head back and gasped. I ran my tongue down his neck. It tasted faintly like salt.

He jammed his hand between the seat and the door and cranked the seat back a few inches. His knees fell open, and then I found an even better angle. I stroked him through his jeans, and felt the length, the shape of his dick, right through the fabric. I bent lower and mouthed his nipple while I stroked him off, and the rasp of Jesse’s breathing filled the cab. His belt buckle was tricky to undo in the cramped space, but I managed.

The front of his jeans felt steamy when I wedged my hand inside and pulled out his hard-on. I jockeyed for position to get my mouth around it, but he moved too. He pulled a crinkly plastic thing out of his pocket.

“For a blow job?” I said. “C’mon.”

“Don’t worry. It’s cherry flavored. Kinda like red licorice.”

I dipped my head down and got a lick in. Salt and pickup truck and pre-come and cock. He jostled me back. “Play fair, now.”

“You don’t need to wear a condom for a blow job.”

For a second there I thought he’d cite best practices, but instead he just said, “It’s the right thing to do. For now. Later on...we’ll figure it out.”

Later on? Like later on tonight, or what? I hated to torture myself by thinking he was willing to have a try at a relationship that involved an eight-hour round trip commute, especially when there were plenty of married truckers who were perfectly happy to keep him company a lot closer to home—but I had to admit, that was what it sounded like. Or maybe I was just giddy from Alex calling him my boyfriend.

I kissed him while he rolled the condom on, and wondered if he could taste himself in my kiss—and if he did, whether he realized what we were missing out on. See, I like dick. I like it to taste like dick, not cherry licorice. My guess was, if he was all about sinewy arms, gas station attendants, baseball caps and truck stop flings, he liked dick, too. Unfortunately, he didn’t like it enough to ease up on his rules and regulations and let me get any more than that

first initial taste. He kept his elbow in my solar plexus, and didn't let up until the condom was firmly in place.

Fine. If he insisted on wearing a rubber, we'd do it his way. After all, he *had* said, "For now." I supposed I could put up with an oral condom until we got around to detailed negotiations.

I wet that stupid pink condom up and down then took it deep to show off my cocksucking skills even through the sheath, deep enough that I could tease his balls with the tip of my tongue while his latex-wrapped dick was down my throat. Jesse sifted his fingers through my hair, and he breathed. Every flick, every suck—every trick I had up my sleeve—was rewarded with a breathy gasp. The sound of him getting all hot and bothered had me straining against my underwear, and I jammed a hand down my own pants to adjust. "Yeah," he whispered, "do that." He was more of a sexy breather than a dirty talker, so I figured he must really want me to jack it for him while I sucked him off.

I shoved my pants down and exposed myself, and suddenly the tawdriness of what we were doing out there really hit home. I hadn't realized how vulnerable it would feel, doing it like that in a truck, and totally sober. The motion sensor lamp had turned itself back off. It was dark, well after midnight. We were all the way up the driveway. No one would see.

But what if my next door neighbor decided to take out his trash and wondered why the truck was rocking? What if Alex needed his toolbox from the garage? Or what if...?

Crap. I forgot her name. My cousin's wife. The cop. Shit.

What if she saw?

Jesse's fingertips worked my scalp. He traced the shape of my ear like it was something precious; he learned the line of my jaw. I felt his thighs clench under my chest, and then the tremble of him holding his muscles taut while sweet release beckoned.

I slowed down. I admit it—I can be a bitch sometimes.

He let out his breath carefully. It shook.

I whacked myself off a little harder, and hummed against his shaft. Jesse sighed and stroked my face. Was there enough space, I wondered, to maneuver around and ride him? Probably not face to face, but if I sat in his lap with my back to him.... I'd need lube, of course. He probably had some—he seemed prepared.

Then I could talk to him, without having to look him in the eye. I could say whatever dirty, filthy things George wanted me to say, all the nasty things I wanted to do with him, that I'd been thinking about from one end of the museum to the other. Make him come really, really hard. Blow his mind.

His fingers grazed my throat, and he sighed again and said, "This is beautiful. I wish we could stay like this forever."

Romance—oh, fuck me. It stabbed me square in the chest, and then I was racing to the finish. I sucked hard, jacked hard, and wedged my free hand between his legs so I could give his balls a good going-over.

Jesse's hips started bucking up to meet my mouth. He breathed one word, "Web," and then his back arched, and he went rigid.

I'd been climbing, and the sound of my name in that single desperate breath did it for me. My balls clenched up and I came—one pulse, then another, and a third, shooting my nut on the dashboard, the console. Maybe the windshield.

I lay my head in his lap, and now it was both of us breathing deep. In a couple of minutes our panting ebbed, started to even out. He kept on stroking my cheek, switching from his fingertips to his knuckles, and back again.

The motion sensor light flicked on. I sat up quickly. The yard looked empty, but after a few seconds, a raccoon on the neighbor's garbage can got sick of holding still and went back to trying to pry off the lid.

I gave a nervous laugh. Jesse smiled. He took a wad of paper napkins out of the glove box, handed a couple to me, and wiped himself off. "Now can we go upstairs?"

Upstairs. Where I lived...above Alex and...God damn it.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "Let's go."

He followed me upstairs and hung his coat on the back of my kitchen chair. His posture was awkward, as if now that we weren't under pressure to be anywhere but together, he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

I flipped open my notebook. The last page I'd written on was missing. I went back a few sheets. *Pick up Kathy's dry cleaning*. Kathy. Right. I pulled off the pen cap with my teeth and wrote, *Me—Jesse—driveway*.

"For someone who's not in school, you sure do consult that homework pad a lot."

"It's just...notes."

"Uh huh. You keeping track of how many times we do the deed?"

I felt my cheeks get hot. "No."

He pulled out a chair and straddled it backward, then rested his elbows on the back. "C'mon. You can tell me. I might even be flattered."

"It's not like that...really." Or was it? I remembered my favorite sentence on the sheet that I'd thrown away. *Kissed Jesse*. "It's George. Sometimes I forget stuff I meant to remember."

He nodded. “So George—inoperable, or what?”

Shit. I really didn’t want to have the conversation, not now, not while I was still rubbery-kneed from shooting my load...but I supposed it was bound to happen sooner or later. “Not exactly.”

“So it’s operable. But what else—dangerous?”

“Brain surgery isn’t exactly a walk in the park.”

He smiled at me. Dimples. God. “I figured as much. But you know what I mean, they always give you some kind of odds, right? So what are the chances? Did they say taking out the tumor would mess you up worse?”

“They don’t know.” I didn’t exactly look at him as I said it, since that wasn’t entirely true. Because of the location, my language and motor skills were most likely safe. All three neurologists had said so.

“If you had it out, would the sleepwalking stop?”

Probably. I shrugged.

He rested his chin on his forearms and considered me. “But you don’t want to do it. How come?”

“You trying to make me change my mind?”

“I’m not exactly qualified to give advice. I might know guts, but I’m no neurosurgeon. I’m curious about you, want to know more. That’s all.”

I turned around so I was talking at the wall, because that was easier than watching him look at me. “Because the part where it’s sitting is the part where my long-term memory lives. And it’s not as if they can prod those bundles of neurons and get a preview of what might come along for the ride when they’re scooping out George. It could be something stupid, like the combination to my bike lock or some reruns of Gilligan’s Island. Or it might be something important.”

We were quiet for several minutes. The sound of the dishwasher clattered up through the floorboards. Finally, Jesse said, “Like your folks.”

“You know about that.”

“I saw that newspaper in Old Faris, New Faris. Dan Weber’s a common enough name, but then you add in cousin Alex, and what’re the odds?”

I nodded.

The dishwasher downstairs chugged.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do—’cos no one knows but you—but it seems to me that if your folks were still around, they’d probably be pretty pissed off at you for living with seizures and sleepwalking just to hold on to their memory. That’s just how parents are.”

There were three beers in the fridge. I got us two of them, to have something to do with my hands. I stared into the fridge a long time, and tried to imagine Aunt Noreen telling Alex to keep a tumor so he didn’t forget what she’d bought him for his twelfth birthday. Obviously, I couldn’t.

But what if the surgery ended up erasing all of Aunt Noreen? Every last memory of her?

I sighed. I still couldn’t see her telling Alex not to have it removed.

When I turned back to the table, Jesse was gone. I found him in the living room on his cell phone. “You get home all right? Uncle Frank’s still there? Okay, then. You can tell me about it later. I’m still over in Faris, so don’t wait up for me.”

He listened. I heard traces of a voice on the other end.

“Well, ah, no. The job turned out to be a bust—just as well you didn’t come home for it—and I don’t think they’re getting that grant. Thing is...” he glanced at me, suddenly sheepish. “I met this guy.”

The voice on the other end rose. Surprise? Dismay? Hard to say.

“Web. Dan Weber.” Muted questions. “Twenty-four. He works at the Center. Listen...you can grill me about it when I get home, okay? All right. Bye.”

I realized I was still standing there with two beers. I put one down next to Jesse. He popped the top, tipped it back, and drained half the can.

“You called your dad at...” I checked my watch. “Almost one in the morning?”

“He’s not an early-to-bed, early-to-rise kind of guy.”

“And you just told him about me.”

“Uh huh. He tends to notice if I don’t come home.”

I took a few long swallows and tried to catch up to Jesse. I couldn’t. He was a quicker beer drinker, despite his lack of frat party experience. “You live at home.”

He grinned. “So do you, pretty much. S’okay. It’s a huge old farmhouse, too big for just him. Even with the two of us, sometimes we rattle around in that place without crossing paths all day.”

“So...do I get to see this place sometime?” I sounded casual, I hoped. Anything but desperate, I pleaded with the powers that be. Anything but that.

Jesse brightened. “Serious?”

I nodded.

He laughed out loud, then took another long swallow of beer. “Mr. Web, you’re one brave soul.”

Me? I had an image of an old hillbilly standing at the head of the gravel driveway with a corncob pipe clenched in his teeth and a smoking double-barrel shotgun in his hands. “Is your dad, uh...scary?”

“Him? Nah, he’s had a few years to figure out that meeting the ‘perfect girl’ won’t change me. He’s pretty mellow about it nowadays.” Jesse finished his beer, and smiled to himself. “Now, the Roadkill Circus in the sitting room—that’s another story.”

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About the Author

Jordan Castillo Price is a native of Western New York who's lived in the Midwest for over twenty years. She thinks it's fun to visit museums and historical markers. Really.

And she *has* touched the coral and pet the ray at the Mississippi River Museum.

About this Story

When I first moved to Wisconsin, one of the first nuggets of local history I learned was that a nearby village had been obliterated by a tornado 15 years prior. It's one of those things people never stop talking about. I met a guy at a yard sale who turned out to be the Fire Chief of the village, and he immediately launched into a story about how the garage caved in and none of the emergency vehicles could get out.

Much of the history of "Faris" is borrowed from areas throughout the Driftless Region: Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota. There was a tornado. There was a lead rush. Other aspects of the story are products of my imagination. The Kickapoo Nation has no lawsuits pending that I'm aware of, and the Rock River beaver is totally fictional...though there is a pretty impressive taxidermy beaver at a nearby state park I visited from time to time for inspiration.

With all the interviews, field trips and general complexity involved in *Sleepwalker*, this novella was a long time in the making—over a year—and since I started writing it, the slow process of health care reform has finally begun in this country. Less than three months ago, the **Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act** was signed into law by President Obama. My hope is that, in time, fewer people in this country will feel trapped in their jobs or marriages for the sole reason that they can't retain health coverage any other way.

Recommended Reads

Readers who liked *Sleepwalker* also enjoyed the following mysterious thrillers by Jordan Castillo Price:

AMONG THE LIVING (PSYCOP #1)

Victor Bayne, the psychic half a PsyCop team, is a gay medium who's more concerned with flying under the radar than in making waves.

He hooks up with handsome Jacob Marks, a non-psychic (or "Stiff") from an adjacent precinct at his ex-partner's retirement party and it seems like his dubious luck has taken a turn for the better. But then a serial killer with a gruesome M.O. surfaces--and no one can agree what he looks like.

Solving murders is a snap when you can ask the victims whodunit, but this killer's not leaving any spirits behind.

THE VOICE

Most people find it tragic if they've got no one to kiss on New Year's Eve, but Martin's calendar revolves around Halloween.

Martin and Dave have been best friends since high school, and still Dave doesn't seem to understand that Martin has very particular taste in men...though that doesn't stop Dave from trying. He announces that not only has he scored tickets to the city's hottest haunted house, *Night Terrors*, but he's also dug up the perfect blind date.

Martin tells himself not to get too excited, because the *Night Terrors* excursion is bound to be anticlimactic. Little does he know what's lurking in the shadows.

SYMPATHY

It took Anthony Potosi years to recover from the accident that claimed his father's life, and doctors told him he'd never walk again. He proved them wrong. Now he's back at the landscaping business, Potosi and Sons, he shares with his two older brothers—but they seem more interested in getting Anthony to sell out his share than in celebrating his recovery.

The oil-and-water relationship between Anthony and his brothers is hardly new. Even when they were kids, Sal and Chip delighted in terrorizing their baby brother with stories like "The Hook."

Now Anthony towers over his brothers...but he's still the youngest. When the new owner of the Hook House calls in an order, they take a little too much satisfaction in sending him to face his old fears. And learning to open up again to trust, desire—and maybe even love—is far scarier than The Hook.

VERDANT

Watercooler gossip reveals that everyone in Colin's office gets lucky before they embark on yet another day of files, faxes, and covert games of solitaire. Everyone but Colin, that is.

Colin's live-in boyfriend Rand is creative, gorgeous, and entirely too self-sufficient. Colin can hardly remember the last time they did anything fun together, let alone got down and dirty before his daily commute.

Colin is sure he's about to face another morning brag session when he gets to the office, but instead he finds the building eerily deserted. The radio has been taken over by the Emergency Broadcast System, and Colin must rush back to make sure nothing's happened to Rand.

Luckily, Rand is okay. Even better than okay. And he's been dying for Colin to get home.

Beautiful • Mysterious • Bizarre

fiction by Jordan Castillo Price

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