

A movie poster for the film 'Brain Storm'. The central figure is a woman with long dark hair and bangs, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. She is wearing a dark jacket. The background is a dramatic, monochromatic red scene featuring a city skyline with a bridge over a river, and lightning bolts striking the sky. The overall mood is intense and ominous.

CAT GILBERT

A TAYLOR MORRISON PSYCHIC THRILLER

BRAIN STORM

BRAIN STORM

CAT GILBERT

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PROLOGUE

I LOOKED OUT over the debris field that used to be my dining room, more than a little appalled at the damage I'd managed to inflict. Heaven help me, there were actual dents in the walls from where I'd thrown the spoons, which had then bounced off and were now littered across the floor. I had gone through all the teaspoons of my everyday cheap-ware, as I liked to refer to it, and in a moment of pure insanity, moved on to the good silver service that I had inherited from my Grandmother. My thinking was that maybe the difference in metals would make a difference. But no. Didn't make a bit of difference at all.

There was one spoon left in the chest, and I eyed it carefully, debating whether to give it one more try or just skip the process and throw it across the room to join the others. The indecision was probably a good thing. My anger was apparently ratcheting down a bit. The morning had been a real roller coaster of emotions. It had started out fairly normal, and then that whole fear and panic thing came into play. That had evolved into desperation, which instigated the whole spoon idea and finally the anger, which resulted in the dents in the wall.

I was a little ashamed of the dents. I'd always prided myself on being able to keep a lid on my anger. I'd had a lot of practice at it. In my line of work, as a criminal investigator, it was imperative, as there was a lot to be angry about, and more times than not, negative consequences if you couldn't keep it under control. The trick was to channel it. Use it for good and all that. This time, though, I'd lost control, and it bothered me. What bothered me even more, was the fear that had nearly consumed me, before the anger had taken hold. Anger I could deal with. Fear was fatal and something I couldn't afford to let in. I knew that from experience. Just the thought of the morning's events sent a dangerous trickle down my spine, and I tamped it down quickly. How had it come to this? I had no idea, but I knew how it had begun. Or at least, I thought I did.

* * *

IT HAD ALL started a few months before. How many, I couldn't say, but it was

before I had moved into the condo. It wasn't one of those things that you really pay attention to. I mean, if someone asked you the last time you wore something blue, you'd be hard pressed to remember the exact date and time, right? How are you supposed to remember when something huge happens, when you don't realize that it's all that important at the time?

The first time which I was aware of, it had just been one of those quirky things. I had come home from the grocery store, and it had been doing that rainy sleet mix type of thing that you hate to have to go out in. The stuff that stings your face and manages to somehow get down the back of your coat no matter how much you bundle up. It doesn't happen that often in central Arkansas, but it does happen, and when it does, we are totally unprepared for it. They do fine with snow plows and sand, but people forget how to drive in those conditions, as infrequently as it happens, and only a few people, mostly skiers, have the proper clothing for it. Not being a skier, I was neither prepared, nor dressed properly, so I was understandably irritated when I remembered that I, unfortunately, couldn't pull into the garage as it was full of junk. Faced with no other option, I was forced to use the front door, which was taking the brunt of the storm.

Observing what seemed to be a slight lull of the onslaught, I decided to make a run for it. Clenching my keys between my teeth, I grabbed my purse, two bags of groceries, a megapack of toilet paper and pushed my way out past the steering wheel. Both hands full, I somehow managed to kick the car door closed while keeping the other leg under me and successfully made the mad dash to the front door.

Why I didn't leave the toilet paper in the car until later, I'll never know. That's one of those decisions you question after you get to the door and realize you don't have a hand free to use the keys and get inside. By then it's too late, and you just have to deal with it. I had just shifted the load and was reaching for the keys when somehow they fell onto the porch and into a puddle of watery ice.

There was no way I was going to set the bags down in that slush. Again, a decision that seemed reasonable at the time and in hindsight was incredibly stupid. It would have been so much simpler to at least put the toilet paper down. It was encased in plastic and stood a good chance of surviving the slush. But no. I did what any other person would have done in my situation. I jammed everything up against the door and tried to hold it there while reaching for my keys. This would have worked fine except for the fact that I needed arms about 12 inches longer, but with that 'never say die' attitude that rears its head at the most inopportune moments, I strained and wiggled, hoping to keep the bags up and somehow reach those keys at the same time. I was to the point of one last try, knowing I'd never reach them when suddenly the keys were in my hand. At

the time, I was a little surprised, but relief outweighed surprise, and I had pretty much managed to forget about it until the following week.

This time, I was after a jar of peanut butter. I store all the spare stuff on the top shelf of one of my wall cabinets and that particular day, I was in need of a fresh jar of peanut butter. I could see it from my vantage point - right there toward the front, but stretch and strain as I might, the jar danced around just at the end of my fingertips. Do I have a step stool just for such circumstances? Yes indeed. Did I stop and go get it? No, I did not. I mean it was clear in the other room in the storage closet. I had managed to get it up there without help from the step stool. I just knew I could reach it, but try as I might, it persisted in evading my scrambling fingers. Finally, on what I had decided was my last try before breaking down and getting the stool, it happened.

Standing on tiptoe, one foot coming completely off the floor in the effort, the jar was suddenly in my hand. I mean in my hand as if someone had slapped it in there. Like a baseball in the catcher's mitt. Startled, I jumped back and managed to drop the jar of peanut butter, which then hit the floor and pretty much exploded, leaving globs of greasy brown goo on just about everything, including my pant legs and shoes. I just stood there staring at it, not really seeing the mess. Instead, I was remembering the key incident and how they too, had practically jumped into my hand.

That's when the thought first flashed across my mind. I dismissed it almost as soon as I thought it, as it seemed utterly ridiculous. Unfortunately, the spark had been lit, and it started to smolder. I just couldn't shake the feeling that something weird was going on, but since there wasn't any explanation for it or, at least a logical one, the best choice seemed to try and put the whole thing out of my mind. Which worked great until this morning when my whole 'just forget about it' plan was laid to waste. The fact that something was definitely wrong hit me about the same time the coffee did.

* * *

IT BEGAN AS a normal morning. I was stopping for my regular coffee at my regular coffee shop. Everything was as it should be except, this morning, everyone else in the city had decided to stop for coffee too. The line was long, and I am not the most patient of people, especially when I haven't had my hit of

caffeine yet. There were seven people ahead of me in line. *Seven*. And the guy ordering was having a hard time deciding what to get.

Now who does that? Stands in line and hasn't figured out his order by the time he gets to the front? This guy. That's who. I wanted to smack him on the back of the head and knock some sense into him. I thought we were making progress until he couldn't decide whether or not he wanted whipped cream. I felt my eyes narrow into slits as I shot imaginary daggers at his back. *MAKE UP YOUR MIND!*

Finally, he opted for the cream. Bad choice. He ordered my drink - white chocolate mocha. It was my once-a-day treat and the perfect start to my work day. Full of flavor, yummy milky goodness and loaded with calories. Adding whipped cream was just redundant in my opinion, and here he had wasted a good 10 seconds making the wrong decision.

He turned around, and I decided to forgive him. Maybe. From the back, he looked like a normal guy, but from the front, there was a definite resemblance to Denzel. *The Denzel*. As he turned around, he caught me looking at him. I must have still looked irritated because he had the decency to look a little contrite. Well, okay then. Maybe I had been a little harsh in my condemnation. I could cut him some slack. If I had to stand in line, at least there was a view to be had. There is always a silver lining if you look hard enough.

Unfortunately, the silver lining effect dissipated pretty quickly. If possible, the next person in line was even slower. I was never going to get my coffee! I leaned over to get a better view and see what the hold up was. Ah ha. Jason, my regular barista, was missing! Some guy I'd never seen was there, and he was as confused as Denzel had been. No wonder the line was backed up.

They called out Denzel's order, and he stepped up to the counter and grabbed his drink. I could see the whipped cream swaying as it floated on top and had to admit maybe I was wrong. It looked pretty good. In fact, it looked real good. I could practically taste that whip cream and my mouth started to water. I decided that I deserved the same treat after having to wait in line so long and looked longingly at his cup as he slowly raised it to his lips for that first delicious sip. That's when it happened.

I remember standing there thinking that he had my coffee and wishing I could just get it and go and the next thing I knew, it was suddenly flying toward me. It was probably the stricken, horrified look on the man's face that clenched it. It was like the cup had been ripped from his hand. The thought, '*what did I do?*' barely had time to flash through my brain before the coffee impacted with what had been, up to that moment, my favorite coat, drenching it and my shirt with extremely hot coffee. But flash it did and panic started to rise in me, along

with the conviction that Denzel had nothing to do with this. I had done this. I just didn't know how. It was freaky. And it terrified me.

It was as if, for a second, time stood still. Everyone froze, like the proverbial herd of deer caught in headlights. I was sure I had whipped cream up my nose, and I knew for certain a large amount had made its way into my eyes. My nerves automatically registered the *Hot! Hot! Hot!* warning and I grabbed at my shirt, in a vain attempt to peel the soaked, steamy fabric away from my skin, while trying to wipe the whipped cream out of my eyes. I was busy flapping my shirt around trying to cool it off, my mind reeling with my recent revelation, when I glanced over at the guy whose coffee I was now wearing.

His previous 'I don't know what happened' look had changed to a calculating, accusing one. I stopped mid flap, confused. It didn't take a genius to know whether or not you threw coffee at someone, but from the accusing glare he was nailing me with, he had made the leap to blaming me. Somehow he knew. Almost before I did.

My gut clenched as instinct kicked in. This guy was trouble, and I had managed to put myself right in his sights. I felt my hands start to shake as I gripped my shirt, my heart pounding in my chest as adrenaline surged through me. Locked in his gaze, I couldn't seem to look away from him, so I had a ringside seat when the guy who had been in front of me in line, stepped over and popped Denzel a good one. Right in the kisser.

The sight of his head snapping back from what appeared to be a really strong right cross brought me back to reality. I watched him stagger, but kudos to him, he kept his feet. Whoever he was, this guy could take a punch. My rescuer was preparing to follow up with a left hook, and I quickly stepped into the danger zone between them. Everything in me was screaming to get away from there, but I couldn't very well leave, and let him get beaten up for something he didn't do. There was some sort of code, wasn't there?

"Whoa! Whoa there!" I had my hand splayed across the puncher's chest, trying to keep him at bay. "It was an accident!"

"That's right, buddy. It was an accident," Denzel chimed in.

I looked behind me, exasperated. He might have been talking to his attacker, but it was me he was looking at, the accusing look still on his face, mockery in his voice. I might have felt bad about him getting punched for something that technically, he didn't do, but he certainly wasn't helping to calm things down now. His attitude, along with the too familiar 'buddy' didn't go unnoticed by my defender. I felt his muscles bunch up under my restraining hand, ready to let fly with another punch and braced to hold him back.

"Back off!" I silently mouthed the words at Denzel, hoping he'd take the

hint. Apparently, he wasn't completely oblivious to his peril because he held up his hands and took a step backward in retreat.

"Please. It really was just an accident," I said, turning my attention back to my defender. "I appreciate what you're doing, but it's not necessary."

"It sure didn't look like an accident," he mumbled the words, glaring over my shoulder at Denzel. He was still simmering, but the pressure against my hand was easing. He was coming around. He looked down at the hand I was pressing against his chest, and I knew he could feel me shaking through the connection when he squinted one eye at me.

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Yes," I assured him, shaking my head like a bobble head doll. "I'm fine, really. Thank you for your help, but everything's under control."

He gave me another once over, shrugged, threw one last glare over my shoulder to my assailant and turned around to resume his place in line. Relieved, I took a deep breath. One down, one to go. I heard someone clear their throat behind me, and steeled myself for the next round as I turned to find Denzel staring holes through me.

"Care to explain what just happened here?" he growled out angrily. "You and I both know I didn't throw that coffee at you."

I hadn't imagined it. Somehow he knew I'd done it, and now he was waiting for an explanation I didn't have. Even if I did, I certainly wasn't going to give it to him. There was something about him that had my danger signals firing on all points. All I knew for sure was that I wanted to get away from him as fast as possible. I racked my brain for any semi-plausible excuse to throw at him, but nothing was coming to me. He took a step toward me, so I did the only thing I could think of and went on the offensive.

"Just what right have you got to be angry? I'm the one soaked with coffee!" I said, jabbing my finger at my stained clothes for emphasis.

I thought I came off sounding quite offended and insulted. The fact that my finger was jumping up and down from nerves was an added bonus to my damsel in angry distress bit, which is why I was somewhat surprised to see his brows lower, and his eyes narrow down to little pinpoints. He wasn't going for it.

"I'm the one who got hit if you'll remember!" He was practically stepping on my toes now, and I looked up at him, uncomfortable with him invading my space.

"You're right," I said apologetically, deciding to change tactics. "I got soaked, and you got hit." As I was looking point blank at his jaw line, I got a close-up view of the results of the hit he took. The blood had almost quit seeping from the cut on his lip, but I thought it a safe bet that he'd have some pretty

spectacular bruising tomorrow. I expected to feel worse about it, but this guy was creeping me out. I needed to get out of there. Fast. “I say we call it even and leave it at that.”

He wasn’t about to leave it at that and was about to say so when the manager stepped in with some towels effectively ending the conversation. Perfect timing. I grabbed up his offering and mopped off my face. Looking down, I could see my shirt and coat were candidates for the cleaners, if not the garbage. The manager had started talking to Denzel, asking questions about what had happened and I took the momentary diversion as a sign to make my exit. I quickly slipped out the door and all but ran across the parking lot to my car.

Relief swamped me as soon as the door shut, giving me a false sense of security. I hurriedly locked it and slumped over onto the wheel. Oh my gosh, what was going on? I felt myself cringe, convinced that I had somehow been responsible for the whole debacle. I had no idea how, but whatever was happening, it couldn’t be good. My mind immediately started hurling down some really scary paths, which wasn’t helping the situation at all. There was still way too much adrenaline in my system, and I was afraid the doubt and the questions coursing through my head could easily turn into confusion and panic without too much prodding. This was not the time to try and figure it out. I needed to stop and get a grip. I needed to concentrate on the here and now. I *needed* to get out of here.

Trying to shake off the fear, I managed to locate my keys and get the car started. I glanced into the rear view mirror as I pulled out of the lot, and caught sight of Denzel. He had come out of the coffee shop and was watching me. I couldn’t help but shiver as I pushed my foot to the floor and fled the scene.

I made the drive home in record time, constantly checking behind me in case Denzel had decided to get in his car and come after me. I was pretty good at picking up a tail, but still, my morning hadn’t gone so well. My confidence had definitely fallen a peg or two, and I was worried I might be missing something. I pulled into my underground parking space, gave it a once over to make sure no one was lurking in the shadows, and somehow managed to retain enough control not to run madly to the elevator. It was a small victory, but considering my state of mind, I’d take it.

Minutes later, I was safe behind a very solid, very locked door. Leaning against it in relief, the absurdity of the situation hit me, and I suddenly felt like a fool. I’m a trained professional. I had no doubt I could have handled Denzel without a problem, even if he had come after me, but I’d freaked out and let panic run amok. I shook my head, disgusted with myself. Whatever was going on, losing my head, if I hadn’t already actually done that, wasn’t going to help. I

didn't know what was happening, but I knew I could figure it out. When I did, I'd find a way to deal with it. I ran a still shaking hand through my hair and feeling the stiff bits of dried whipped cream decided a shower was the next course of action. Then I'd work on the problem at hand. Feeling a little better now that I had a plan, simple as it was, I headed off to the bathroom and a long hot shower.

* * *

IT'S A WONDERFUL feeling to be clean after being so utterly filthy. I guess it's a lot like not being able to appreciate the mountaintop unless you've been in the valley. Whatever the case, it was wonderful to be rid of the coffee and whipped cream, although I did have to wash my hair three times to get it clean. I wrapped my hair in a towel, slipped on a robe and headed to the kitchen for that cup of morning coffee I had yet to enjoy. I had some serious thinking to do, and coffee is essential for serious thinking. Or thinking at all, in my case. I measured out the beans, ground them up and started the machine.

Leaning back against the counter, I took several deep breaths, letting the aroma of brewing coffee flow through me. Okay, let's think about this. Maybe it's not so bad. Things happen all time. Things you can't really explain. I'm sure they've happened to pretty much everyone at one time or another. That one peculiar time when coincidence just seems too convenient an explanation. When you just KNOW something else is going on. I'd always had pretty severe bouts of déjà vu. Who hasn't? Then there are the dreams. The ones where you wake up and actually remember what happened, and you just know it isn't a dream, but some sort of warning? So you don't drive down that particular street on the way to work that day, or you make sure to remember to lock the doors that night. Weird, yes, but common. Everyone does it, so it doesn't make you different when it happens to you. Right? But then there's this. This thing of wanting someone's coffee one instant, only to find it flying toward you the next. That was just too weird for words.

Sighing, I opened the cabinet for my favorite cup, poured in the coffee, added extra cream, and took a long slow sip, savoring the richness and warmth. It didn't taste like my white chocolate mocha, but it was satisfying and regaining something of my morning ritual did make me feel better. The time had come to

face the music. Braced with my coffee, my fluffy robe, and my somewhat shaky resolve, I decided to finally drag that nagging voice that was whispering inside my head out into the open.

There were only three explanations I could think of for what had happened. One – the guy threw the coffee at me for some unknown reason. As I'd pretty much already come to the conclusion that he hadn't done that, I had to consider the second possibility. I could move objects with my mind. There. I said it. Silently, in my head, where no one could laugh. Except me. How could I even think such a thing? I didn't know of anyone who could do that. There was that picture of the kid bending the spoon in Tibet or something, but how real was that? And that was nothing like this. I was pretty certain I was out there on my own. Not a place I enjoy being mentally or physically.

What if it were true, though? What if I had become some sort of mental giant and could do all these fantastic things? On one hand, it might be kind of cool. The episode with the keys worked out quite well. The peanut butter and the coffee incidents, not so much.

Maybe it was time to move on to door number three, which I didn't even want to think about but it couldn't really be ignored. *What if I was imagining all this? What if I really had lost it?* My mind was starting to run away with itself and the myriad of possibilities. I could feel my heart start to race and noticed my hand was back to shaking as I raised my mug for another long sip. So much for a calm and collected approach.

Okay. I needed to get control of myself. I didn't even know if mind moving or whatever it was called, was really something someone could do, much less if I could really do it or not, but I was pretty sure I preferred that to checking myself into our local mental institution. I needed to find out if it was real or if I was just imagining it. I needed a test. Try to move something. But what? Looking down at the cup in my hand I decided that anything full of liquid was definitely out. Been there, done that. I took one last sip and poured what was left in the cup down the drain. Then I poured out the pot too, just to be on the safe side.

I grabbed a fork from the dishwasher and then replaced it immediately with a spoon. Recalling the coffee flying at me, the idea of accidentally stabbing myself with a fork was way too vivid. A spoon just seemed safer, although, on reflection, there's that pointy thing called a handle on the other end that could easily put an eye out. I hesitated for a second, but then I remembered the kid bending that spoon and the decision was made.

So the experiment began. The first spoon hadn't moved at all. I have to confess that it was a half-hearted attempt at best. Part of me wanted the power, so as not to be crazy and the other part wanted to be crazy with the provision that

a little pill would take care of it. Both parts of me were more scared than I like to admit, but either way, I needed to know for sure. So, determining to do my utmost, the tests began in earnest. One spoon quickly became five, then ten, as I took my frustrations out on each victim, convinced the failure lay in the spoon itself and not me. I was certain that if I just found the right spoon, it would work. I'd made my way through every spoon in the house until I was down to this one final spoon.

Now, it was decision time. Keep trying or give up. I looked over at the spoons laying silently on the floor and realized that, deep down, I was unprepared to admit to mental instability, so one of these spoons had to move, and move on its own. The alternative was simply unacceptable. Reaching out, I gently lifted the spoon from its nesting place and softly sat it on the table in front of me. Maybe, this time, it would work.

I braced my hands on each side of the spoon, lowered my head down until my chin was nearly on the tabletop and focused every ounce of my being on the silver gleaming only inches before me.

"Move," I whispered softly. "Move, move, move." I was practically chanting, hearing my voice tighten in frustration as I repeated the word time and again and still, not a shudder, not a quiver. Nothing. It just sat there, mocking me and my stupidity.

I jerked up, slamming the edge of the table with open palms, frustrated beyond belief and caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, hanging across from me on the wall. It stopped me in my tracks. My hair was sticking out all over my head, the towel I had wrapped it in earlier having fallen off. My eyes were big with a wild look that was definitely disconcerting and there was little, if any, color in my face. I looked crazy, which was only appropriate because what I was doing definitely fell into the 'crazy' category. All of which wouldn't have been so bad, except my experiment had failed and there was a real possibility that I had slipped over the edge and actually *was* crazy.

Nothing else could explain it. Something was wrong with me. I knew it deep down, had suspected it for a while, but I'd been trying my absolute best to avoid facing it. This morning had changed all that. I couldn't deny it any longer, but I couldn't explain it either. This spoon experiment certainly hadn't helped any. I'd been at it for hours, still had no answers, and to top it all off, now I had one vicious headache.

Exhausted, I laid my head on the table, the cool, smooth surface soothing against my cheek, and let out a deep breath that sounded dangerously close to a moan. I closed my eyes, confused and sad. What was happening to me? And why?

1

THE POUNDING ON the door brought me up in a panic. I must have fallen asleep or passed out. I don't know which. I jerked up, way too fast, made myself totally dizzy and nearly fell off the chair. Completely disoriented, I braced my hands on each side of the table, trying to get my balance, while my mind whirled trying to remember where I was and what had happened. My eyes finally stopped spinning around in my head and catching sight of the spoons, it all came roaring back to me.

Good grief. The dining room looked like a spoon cemetery. I had no idea of how long I'd been out, but at least my headache was down to a dull throbbing. The banging noise certainly wasn't helping, though, and I eased myself up and started shuffling toward the door. I felt like I had to be 100 years old. Everything was stiff and sore, which is what I deserved for sleeping on the table, of all things. I braced one hand on my back as I leaned against the door, trying to see through the peephole. I had a fleeting thought that maybe Denzel had found me, but the reality was far worse.

"Who is it?" I asked, stalling. My voice sounded raspy and was barely above a croak. I cleared my throat and repeated myself with much better results. I knew perfectly well who it was. I could clearly see her through the peephole. The threat of Denzel was nothing compared to the reality of Trinity when she was on a tear. She's my best friend, sometimes employer, and along with her grandmother, the closest thing to family I have. She's also one of the most respected and feared attorneys in town. They didn't call her 'The Pit Bull' for nothing. She could eat you up and spit you out without so much as a blink of an eye. And she had come for me.

"Open the door!" It was her lawyer voice she was using now. The one that said she wasn't going to stand for any more nonsense and to get the door open. Now. I had no idea how long she had been out there, but from the sound of her voice, it had been long enough. This was the last thing I needed, but I didn't have a choice. She wasn't going away. I opened the door just as she was gearing up for another round of pounding, stopping her arm in mid-recoil. She looked at me and froze, her eyes going big. Within seconds, she went from furious to laughing like a hyena, right there in the hallway in front of my door. I would have wondered what the joke was, except she was managing to point at me during her fit of laughter.

“Good, Trinity. Really nice. At least come inside and do this. I do have neighbors.”

“Oh my gosh, Taylor, have you seen yourself?” She staggered into the condo and leaned against the wall trying to catch her breath.

I wandered over to the mirror in the foyer and looked to see what was so funny. I’d seen myself earlier, and I couldn’t imagine I looked much different now. I was wrong. My eyes had gone from wild and crazed to glazed-over with bags big enough to pack most of the contents of my closet into them. Stress had tightened my lips and jaw together, and the remains of my headache had me squinting through little slits to see myself. I looked like death. Trinity was obviously amused at my hair which was still standing on end all over my head except that now, the right side was pressed flat against the side of my face. It must have happened when I was in a coma on the table. As if this wasn’t enough, I had a bright cherry red circle on my cheek where I had been lying on the table. Lovely. Just lovely. I turned back to Trinity, which was all she needed to dissolve in another fit of laughter. She was trying to say something.

“Yo.... you... your hair,” she stammered out, pointing again.

“What about it?” I tried to give the impression that there was nothing out of the ordinary, which only stoked the fires for Trinity, who was now doubled over with her hands braced on her knees. She had long ago dropped her purse on the floor along with her briefcase in an effort, I suppose, not to collapse onto the floor. As I watched her trying to get some air into her lungs between guffaws, I found myself smiling in spite of the day I’d had and the cloud hanging over my head. I was amazed to feel my nerves start to unwind, and things begin to come back into perspective. It’s hard to take yourself seriously when your best friend is about to require medical assistance from laughing so hard. Perhaps this wasn’t the end of the world as I knew it. I glanced again in the mirror and this time, was able to see some of the humor in the situation. Normally, I was fairly well groomed. In fact, I couldn’t recall a time I had ever looked like this, even straight out from surgery, when everyone looks awful, and your hair is a mess from those stunningly attractive head caps they put on you. Nope, this was definitely a first.

I noticed that Trinity had worked her way down to mostly sniffing among a few remaining snorts of laughter. If the opposing council could see her now, propped against the wall, with tears running down her face, they wouldn’t be so afraid of her.

“I’m sorry, Taylor,” she managed to choke out, as she pushed herself off from the wall and wiped at her face. “It’s really not that bad. I think it’s just that when you missed our lunch date, and I couldn’t reach you, I was really worried.

I canceled my last appointment because I thought you were dead or something and I was scared and angry, and then you opened the door and looked like... well, I don't know what, but nothing good."

She stopped to pick up her bags and headed for the kitchen, talking over her shoulder to me as I followed. "I guess I was so relieved to know you were all ..." Her voice faded out as she spied my handy work in the dining room. "Taylor, what is going on?" she demanded, all traces of humor gone. She pinned me with her lawyer, make them talk, glare. The change was so fast, all I could do was blink at her. "First, you stand me up for lunch and then you don't answer your phone. I rush over here thinking something horrible has happened, and you don't answer the door, and I stand out there pounding on it like some fool. When I am about ready to call the police, you finally show up and you look like you've been beaten up with an ugly stick and now here's your Grandma's good spoons all over the floor. I repeat," she spat out the words as she slowly started walking toward me with her hands on her hips and fire in her eye. "What is going on?"

"You phoned?" I asked, more than a little confused.

"Yes, I phoned. Both phones and repeatedly. Have you been here all day? Didn't you hear them?" She strode over to my home phone and snatched it up, listening for dial tone. "There's nothing wrong with this phone, so what is wrong with you? Why didn't you answer?"

Good question. I never heard the phones ringing. How was that even possible?

"What time is it?" I asked, preferring to change the subject than think about the ramifications of what she was saying.

"What?" Trinity checked her watch and gave me a questioning look along with the answer. "4:45. In the afternoon, if you haven't figured that out." At my blank look, it became obvious that I hadn't. "Are you telling me, you don't know what time it is? That you never heard the phone ring? Have you been here all day?"

"No," I replied. "Just most of the day and before you ask again, there is an explanation. Of sorts."

"What's that supposed to mean? There's either an explanation or there isn't. Which one is it?" We were in the kitchen now, and Trinity threw her stuff on the counter in exasperation and caught sight of my mess in the sink. "I can see you managed time for coffee. Have you eaten anything today?"

Come to think of it, no. Food would probably help get my brain going again. I sort of bobbled my head in answer to her question and opened the refrigerator, searching for the chunk of cheddar I kept on hand for just such emergencies.

"Look Trinity. It's been a weird day and I'm not sure I understand it, but I'm

okay. Just a little foggy, probably from my headache,” I started explaining as I grabbed a knife from the block.

“Probably from lack of food,” she corrected me, eyeing the knife in my hand.

Gee, it wasn’t like I was going to attack someone with it. Then again, catching a glimpse of my reflection in the toaster, I couldn’t really blame her for thinking I might be a little bonkers. Oh, if she only knew the whole story...

“Let’s make a deal,” I tried again, taking a bite out of the huge slice of cheese I had cut for myself. “I need to go take a shower. Obviously, I also need to do something with my hair and get some food. How about I get cleaned up, you order some dinner in, and I’ll tell you the whole sordid tale.”

She looked me in the eyes for several seconds. I could tell she was trying to determine my state of mind and if it was safe to let me in the bathroom by myself or not. To help sway her, I tossed the knife in the sink and leaned back against the counter to munch on my cheese, trying my best to look sane. I must have passed the test because she seemed to deflate a little, her facial muscles relaxing. I knew the signs. She was coming around.

“Sordid?” she questioned.

“Well no, not really. It was a figure of speech. But at the very least it’s bizarre. You love bizarre.”

“I do. I love bizarre.” She was caving. “You promise to tell me the WHOLE story and not leave anything out?”

“I promise,” I called out as I trotted off to the bathroom. “I’ll even tell you about Denzel.”

“Denzel? DENZEL? What?” I smiled to myself as I closed the door to her questions feeling pleased with having escaped the inquisitor and gaining time to compose my thoughts.

And just what is the story? I asked myself, as I looked in the mirror. I had no idea. The only thing I knew for sure was that whatever was going on, Trinity would be right there with me. She was a good friend. As the hot spray of the shower hit my sore back and muscles, it was a very comforting thought.

* * *

I CAME OUT of the bathroom feeling like a new woman. My hair had survived its fourth wash of the day, and the hot water had helped relieve my headache.

Trinity had set the table in the dining room. A quick glance at the table told me we were using the old mismatched flatware from the kitchen, although Grandma's good silver was conspicuously absent from the floor. I heard the doorbell announcing the arrival of dinner, and it was none too soon. I was starving, which I took as a positive sign that I was headed back to my normal self, whatever that might be.

"Well, you look better," Trinity said as she came through the door juggling a pizza box and a couple of take-out salads. Normally I avoided pizza and the morning after guilt like the plague, but tonight the smell coming from that box was enough to make me forego my salad and dig right in.

"So spill." She hadn't even let me get the first bite of pizza. Almost there, close enough to see the speckles on the pepperoni. I weighed my options and went ahead and took a big bite, and ended up on the receiving end of a steely-eyed glare as I slowly chewed it. I gave her the wait-a-minute finger sign and closed my eyes so I could enjoy that first bite in peace. I chased it down with a big swallow of ice-cold Diet Coke. Heaven. Absolute heaven.

I opened my eyes to see her poised with her fork over her salad watching me. Spill, she had said, so spill I did. I told her the whole story, including the magic keys, the flying coffee, and Denzel. Then I wrapped up explaining my far-from-scientific brain experiment during which I had failed to move a single spoon. Apart from throwing them across the room. She had listened in silence, quietly munching away on her salad until I got to the flying coffee part, when she shoved it aside and went for the pizza. I understood completely.

Dinner finished, we pushed our plates aside. Trinity placed her elbows on the table, propped her chin on her hands and took a deep breath. I braced for impact.

"Okay, let me get this straight. You've had this going on for a couple of months now and I'm just now hearing about it?" She was staring me right in the eye.

"I didn't think it was anything. Just weird stuff," I said, trying to defend my actions, which to tell the truth, I wasn't sure needed defending. "You don't tell me every time you have déjà vu, do you?"

This was definitely not the discussion I thought we'd be having. I was thinking more along the lines of "Are you nuts? Someone call Bellevue!" or something along those lines. I never dreamed she would be put out that I hadn't told her about the key thing.

"Look, there was really nothing to tell until today, and then I got so freaked out I wasn't thinking straight. I don't even know what happened most of the day. One minute I'm sitting there trying to move the spoons and the next minute you're pounding on the door and hours have gone by, and I have no clue where

the time went.”

“I’ll tell you where it went. Where it always goes. It’s just that you are usually aware of it. So you have no idea of what’s going on?”

“No, I don’t. I have no idea,” I said, getting up to make some coffee. Trinity trailed after me with the empty plates. “All I know is that I lost track of the time, never heard the phone and made coffee fly through the air.”

“Okay, I get it. You don’t know. You are dead on, though, about the bizarre part. So what do you think is going on?”

“That’s what I’m asking you. I obviously have no idea as evidenced by the spoon debacle.” I slammed a mug down onto the counter a little too hard and cringed. Maybe I wasn’t as far back to normal as I thought. Trinity ignored the mug slam and pulled the cream out of the refrigerator.

“Don’t dismiss the spoon thing. I think that was a good idea, although possibly poorly executed.” I rolled my eyes at this. How were you supposed to execute a spur of the moment spoon moving experiment? Give me a break. “You’re on target with eliminating the possibles, but it may not be that cut and dry.”

“What are you getting at here?”

“What I’m getting at here,” she repeated as she handed me the cream and picked up her purse, “is that you got freaked out and panicked today. I don’t blame you a bit. It would have freaked me out too, but you make your living investigating and researching, and you’re good at it. You don’t even know what this ability is called, or how to correctly test for it.”

I followed her through the condo toward the door, still holding the cream. She was actually leaving. I might be going insane, and she was leaving. So much for knowing Trinity would be right there beside me!

She paused at the door as if sensing my growing panic and pinned me against the wall with a sharply nailed index finger to my chest.

“You’re the one I come to for answers. It’s what you do, and you’re good at it. Whatever is happening here, you can handle it. Look at what you’ve gotten through this year! You’re strong Taylor. You’ve just forgotten that. Call me tomorrow and let me know what you’ve found out.” On that final note, she sailed right through the door, closing it firmly behind her.

I was stunned. Everything that had happened that day and all I could think of was that she had left me. Alone. In the condo. Didn’t she realize I was dangerous? I had just confided in her that I couldn’t be trusted in public places and thought I was going nuts. She had seen the *spoons*, for Pete’s sake and she just left me here all alone! I don’t know if it was the sound of the coffee dripping or the smell that finally snapped me out of my state of disbelief. I had been

standing there staring at the door for I don't know how long, probably with my mouth hanging open. The cream was dangling dangerously from my fingertips and in an effort not to drop it, I managed to crush the top of the carton.

Fine. Just fine. *You go get a good night's sleep Trinity, and I'll just sit here and go quietly insane*, I thought as I tripped back into the kitchen. I poured myself a huge cup of coffee, and threw the crushed carton of cream back into the refrigerator, slamming the door for effect. I grabbed up my mug and strode out of the kitchen, headed for my study and the computer that sat waiting on my desk.

2

BY THE TIME I hit my sixth website, I was a lot less angry with Trinity and a lot more annoyed with myself. Why hadn't I done this to begin with? Trinity was right. This is what I do. I research, I hunt down facts, I find the truth. Apparently just for other people. The moment I run into something I don't understand about myself, I start throwing spoons around.

I sighed and stood up, stretching my back. Glancing at my watch, I realized it was nearly midnight. Trinity had left a little after 6:00 so I'd been at it for about 6 hours. Time for a real break. That's one thing you learn fast doing computer research. If you don't take regular breaks to rest your eyes and stretch out your muscles, you severely limit the amount of time you can sit there working. I make a point to do just that every 15 minutes or so and then take longer breaks every few hours. Six hours was a long stint, and my back felt it as I made my way back to the kitchen. I emptied the coffee pot out into my mug and reached for the beans to start another one. As the coffee started dripping, I tried stretching out with some toe touchers. After about twenty, I was finally limber enough to actually touch my toes without too much effort. Hurrah for me! I abhor exercise, but consider it a necessary evil. Any completion of intent where exercise is concerned, I consider a reason for a mini-celebration.

Picking up my mug, I wandered over to the dining room. Spotting the pizza box still on the table, I went over to flip the lid and peruse the leftovers. Surely pizza was good after six hours. I mean it was still in the box. I started with picking off a couple of rounds of pepperoni and then gave up and grabbed a whole piece. I decided I'd munch standing up as I'd be sitting down again at the computer later. Looking at Trinity's half finished salad reminded me how angry I had been with her earlier, when she had abandoned me. Or rather, when I thought she had abandoned me. I should have known better. That I didn't, told me just how shaken up I had been.

Trinity Davis, tall, dark and gorgeous, was a force to be reckoned with. I had met her about six years ago when I landed in Little Rock on a case. I had been working a freelance investigation for a woman whose ex had run out on child support. His last known was Little Rock, and I had come here to search records and ask around to see if I could find any indication of where he had gone to. Trinity, being a criminal lawyer specializing in Family Law, was one of my first stops when I hit town. I had done my homework and knew she had gained a

reputation as being one of the most passionate and fierce prosecutors in town. My kind of lawyer. She was nothing like I had expected.

The tall, graceful black woman who stood up from behind the desk and took my hand was not the image of the woman nicknamed “Pitt Bull” that I had in my head. Beautiful and elegant, were words I would use to describe her. Scrappy and cute were words people had used to describe me. I barely topped 5’6, and Trinity all but towered over me, a good six feet tall, not counting the ridiculously high heels she sported on a regular basis. You could practically see the Southern warmth and charm oozing out of her, whereas aloof and distant were adjectives I’d heard used to describe me when people thought I wasn’t paying attention.

Her wardrobe was designer all the way, every nail buffed and polished, every hair in place. I stood there in my boots, jeans and leather jacket, my unruly, plain brown hair going every which way, my nails trimmed short and bare. I didn’t have time for manicures and hair salons. I was busy tracking wife abusers, child molesters, missing children and deadbeat exes who wouldn’t pay child support. This Amazon woman, sitting in her posh office, certainly didn’t fit the information I had on her, and I was halfway convinced that I made a mistake until she excused herself to take a call she had been waiting on. I listened in awe as she skewered whoever was on the other end, glad it wasn’t me.

This was more like the woman I had researched. I had the basics on her. Oldest of two children, she had been raised in the all too common family unit of an abusive father and an overworked mother trying to keep what was left of her family together. When Trinity was 12, her mother died, and her Dad had taken off. She and her brother had gone to live with her Grandmother, who took on extra work in order to support the extra mouths. I saw the same story often in my line of work. Good people ending up in low-income housing, scraping by with low-paying jobs, life a never ending struggle, stuck in a never ending cycle of barely surviving.

The difference here was that Trinity had clawed her way out. A brilliant and determined student, she had ended up with a full scholarship, graduating top of her class and landing a position with one of the most prestigious law firms in the state. Her high profile cases and the high fees she brought into the firm gave her the standing and the freedom she needed to follow her real passion. Never forgetting her childhood, she went after those who abused; white or black, man or woman, rich or poor, it didn’t matter. And if you hurt a child? Well, Heaven help you, because once she got her teeth into you, you were caught and caught good. Her record proved it.

As with most research, though, you never know the whole story, until you talk to the people. Records are just that – records. Facts can be misleading. A

good investigator talks to people to get a sense of what's happening. What motivates people. What makes them tick. You have to keep an open mind and learn to listen. Sometimes, the pieces all fall into place. Other times, it just comes down to following your gut instinct.

As it happens, I have exceptional instincts. They were telling me that Trinity Davis was just what I needed to get my job done, and they'd been dead on the money. Becoming good friends was an added bonus. Becoming a part of her extended family even more so.

I finished my pizza and closed up the lid. Carrying it and the wilted salads to the garbage can in the kitchen, I thanked God that I had Trinity in my life. She had persuaded me to come and do investigative work for her in Little Rock. I had accepted on the condition I could still freelance cases on occasion. She agreed and the rest, as they say, was history.

We had supported each other over the years in good times and bad. Trinity had been there when I met a great guy named Keith, stood by me when I married him and held me together when he was killed a year later in a traffic accident. I celebrated when Trinity was named Lawyer of the Year, spent the holidays with her family, and cried with her when Kevin, her brother, was killed in a drive-by shooting.

I filled my cup with fresh coffee, added my cream and headed back to the study. I owed Trinity an apology. I had been furious with her for leaving, but she knew me and knew I needed to find my own way through this mess. The one thing we both had learned over the past six years and all the pain and loss we had both endured, was that you had to be strong for yourself. Friends could support you, but in the end, it all comes down to you.

I sat down at the computer with a new determination. Whatever was happening, whatever was going on, I would survive it and move on. I had forgotten that. Trinity had reminded me.

3

“TELEKINESIS,” I BLURTED out when Trinity picked up her phone.

“I give,” she laughed, sounding relieved, “telekinesis who?”

“Telekinesis me. Or not. Maybe. I’ll explain it later. You free for lunch?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? No way am I missing this. By the way,” she paused, and I knew what was coming, “I’m glad you survived the night. Taylor, I was really worried.”

I figured she had been, which was why I called her at home, first thing in the morning. In our relationship, Trinity is the fiery, passionate avenger, while I am the cool, logical one. Last night, I turned the tables, and our roles were reversed. I had scared her. Shoot, I’d scared myself and thrown her into alien territory. She may have known walking away was the right thing to do last night, but I knew she hadn’t liked it any more than I did and had probably stayed up all night worrying if she’d done the right thing.

I assured her I was fine, or if not fine, at least I was doing better. We made plans to meet at 11:30 at our favorite barbecue joint on Cantrell. It was a little early, but we would have a good chance of getting our food before the line was out the door.

I had managed to catch a couple of hours of sleep in the wee hours. After a fast inspection in the mirror while brushing my teeth I came to the conclusion that another shower wasn’t called for after the endless scrubbings yesterday. A little work on some hair lumps with my trusty flatiron, which is the best thing ever invented, and I was ready for the day.

I needed to stop by and try to get some information from some possible witnesses on a case Trinity was working on so I hopped up into my Expedition and headed out. I wanted to stop and get my daily dose of coffee, but as I started to pull into the parking lot, the whole ordeal from the day before flashed through my brain and decided against it. I had no desire to re-visit the scene of the crime and really didn’t want to run into anyone who had been there to witness the whole debacle. Especially Denzel. Better not to risk it. It’s not like there weren’t a dozen other coffee shops within a few blocks to choose from. I merged back into traffic and headed over to a place over on Chenal Parkway to get my caffeine in a cup before heading south into the I-30 area and my objective for the morning.

It felt good to be back at work. After what I had learned the night before in my research, I felt fairly confident that there wouldn't be any surprises today, but I was keeping my guard up anyhow and ordered at the drive-thru. Better to keep a few panes of glass between the other customers and me. At least until after I had my first cup of joe.

I turned onto Shackleford and then merged onto 430 right in front of a black BMW 325i. Normally, I wouldn't have been able to tell you one BMW model from another. I wasn't a car person at all, but in my line of work, I needed to know one make from another. I had the basics down pretty good, but it wasn't until I met Keith and his absolute adoration of the German sports car line, that I learned the difference between a 300 series and a 500 series. I now recognized the car without any problem, because that was what Keith drove. He said that was BMW's smallest sedan. Four doors, with an engine that roared and handling like a race car. It was his way of having a sensible business car while fulfilling his sports car needs. He loved that car, and I loved to see the joy on his face when he drove it. It was the car he was driving when he went off the I-30 Bridge into the Arkansas River. Every time I saw one, it brought it all back.

We had been in the middle of a severe weather alert. Tornado watches were in effect, and violent storms were passing through the area. Keith was heading back into town when a monster weather cell broke loose with a torrential downpour. He had lost control of the car on the bridge, a fact I still had trouble reconciling, and had crashed over the guardrail. With the storms, the Arkansas River was swollen and the current deadly. A witness reported the car had gone over, but with the flooding waters, rescue attempts were delayed and before I could begin to contemplate the possibility that he might be gone, the rescue mission status was changed to one of recovery. The search went on for weeks, the banks and river combed for miles down river. Neither the car nor Keith's body had ever been recovered. The river had taken them. If not for the witness who saw the accident and the marks on the guard rail, I would have never known what had happened. He would have just vanished.

I had a hard time not breaking down every time I saw a BMW for months after that. The black BMW 325i is a very popular car in Little Rock, and they seemed to be everywhere. I knew Keith was gone, but still, each time I saw the car, my breath caught and I looked, searching for the driver's face. Now, over a year after his death, I had quit searching, but still... I always noticed the car, and I always remembered, the car a constant reminder. This was the second or third one I'd seen this morning and the day was still early.

Maybe it was because of that and the emotional roller coaster yesterday, but I found myself slipping into the past. The feeling of loss and loneliness that

assaults you when your guard is down. Keith and I hadn't been together for that long, but we had been so close. I had been working hard, minding my own business and suddenly, one day, there he was, right out of the blue. I had my career, good friends, dated when I felt like it or had time, which truthfully wasn't often. I was happy, and things were going great.

If he hadn't happened into the picture, I would have never known the difference. But he had. It's amazing how everything changes. How, although hard, life gets easier. Dreams become bigger, and the routine of life takes on new meaning when you find someone to share it with. Oh, I had Trinity, and she was and is so important, but it's not the same as the person you know you'll be with for life. The person you work with to accomplish something together. Keith understood my need to help people, to stick up for the little guy, to stop the bullies in life. To the outside world, I was cool, confident, logical. Keith knew me better than that. He held me when I failed, and cried for the child I was too late to save. Rejoiced with me in the little victories like discovering a clue that reopened a case that had been considered hopeless. He knew how I doubted myself, my ability to make sense of the mess, my fear of being too late to make a difference. He knew the Taylor that I kept hidden from the world and loved me anyway. My dreams, my fears, my needs. Things even Trinity didn't know about. Now he was gone. Ripped out of my life almost as fast as he appeared in it.

I was left to pick up the pieces. That meant dealing with yesterday on my own, and I had to admit, I hadn't done a very good job of it. I had fallen apart, badly, and scared Trinity in the process. Keith was gone, and I had to handle this one on my own. Trinity would be there to help. No, she wasn't Keith. No one was, but at least, I wasn't alone in this.

Resolved, I pushed the pedal down and took a last glance in the rear view at the BMW as I sped down 430 to the I-30 interchange and my first appointment.

4

“SO WHAT YOU’RE saying, after spending all night researching, is that you still don’t know the answer? Have I got that right?”

Trinity forked up a chunk of pork along with some lettuce. We had both gotten pulled pork salads. Honestly, I don’t know why we bother with the salad part, or rather, why I did. Trinity was into eating healthy, and she wore it well. On the occasion that she did drop off the healthy wagon, she tried to counteract it with eating something nourishing along with it. Like salads with pizza. Salad with pulled pork. I just didn’t see the point. Lettuce was just more calories and a waste of space in this case. The smoked pork was spiced perfectly and so tender it was hard to keep on your fork. Unlike Trinity, I had eaten most of mine off the top and left the lettuce sitting there.

“That pretty much sums it up.” I had managed to pull up quite a bit of information on the internet. My first discovery being that my possible ‘mind moving’ skill was technically called telekinesis, a form of psychokinesis. Although I feel my label was more descriptive, I found the term psycho was appropriate or at least in my case I thought it was.

Uri Geller was perhaps the best known person who appeared to have the ability. He was the guy I remembered seeing on television. He did indeed bend spoons with his mind, but he wasn’t from Tibet, and he could never replicate his ability in a scientific setting. Science fiction literature and movies were rife with talented people who threw things around at will, but whether or not it was a real ability, remained to be proven. Many claim to have it, and there’re even videos of them passing the ‘spinning the pencil on the bottle’ test on the web, but I found just as much information refuting the test results, saying air movement from heating and cooling systems does the same thing. After hours of combing the far reaches of the internet, all I had to show for it was the name, some history and the fact that there is no proof telekinesis exists. But there was no proof it didn’t exist either.

“I’m in the same boat as yesterday,” I confirmed, rooting around in the lettuce hunting for more pork. “Either I have telekinesis, or I’m crazy.”

“Or the guy threw the coffee on you. The keys could be just coincidence.” Her comment brought my gaze up in disbelief, distracting me from my pork search, but she was completely serious.

I wished he *had* thrown the coffee at me. How neat and tidy would that be?

But that's not what happened. I hadn't imagined the look of horror on his face when it happened or the anger that followed when he was blamed. I also hadn't imagined the calculating gaze he'd leveled at me or the feeling I'd had that he knew what was going on. I wasn't sure where or if he fit into the picture, but I knew he hadn't thrown the coffee. I had so totally crossed that possibility off the list that it never even occurred to me that Trinity was still hanging onto it.

"That's not what happened. Why would some guy I've never seen before, throw coffee at me?" It wasn't so much the words as the tone of my voice that set her off. Even to me, I had sounded incredulous that she would even think such a thing, and I winced as soon as the words were out of my mouth.

"I have no idea," she shot back, obviously offended, "but what's the likelihood of you suddenly developing telekinesis? You're good, Taylor, but you are not infallible. You may have read the whole thing wrong. I'm just saying, there could be something there. It is the most likely explanation."

Snap and ow! Where had that come from? In all the years I had worked with and known Trinity, she had never doubted my judgement. Oh, we have more than our share of disagreements, but where my work is concerned, she has always trusted me. Now, not only was she questioning my judgement, she was downright insulting me. I know I'm not infallible, but really, who needs their best friend pointing it out. I may have been out of things yesterday, but I was back on top today. Okay, maybe not on top, but way better than I had been.

Confused, I just sat there staring at her, nursing my wounded pride, while she glared back at me. She was more than offended. She was downright angry. There was something more going on, and I racked my brain trying to sort through the possible excuses that were rushing through my mind, when suddenly, comprehension dawned. I snapped my mouth shut and sat back, finally understanding.

She might have said it was the most likely explanation, but what she really meant was it was the explanation she could accept. Good friend that she was, she'd rather think the coffee incident was the result of a vindictive stalker than think that I was losing my mind, or had developed some sort of weird super power that there was no proof actually even existed. It did sound pretty far out there, even to me and I had experienced it firsthand. She hadn't been there, hadn't seen what happened. As hard as this was for me to contemplate, it had to be nearly impossible for her. She was desperate for a logical explanation, and I was usually the one to give it to her. I felt my heart sink because I was fairly certain that this time, logic had little if anything to do with it. I was going to disappoint her if that's what she was looking for and I just had to hope she could forgive me for it.

“OK. I agree. There might be something there,” I hedged, choosing to use her words, as they were obtuse enough for my purpose. It wasn’t exactly a lie. True, my idea of how he might be involved was completely different from hers, but there wasn’t any point in bringing it up and getting into a bigger argument. I weighed my guilt over the small deception and decided I could live with it. I gave her a small smile, hoping to reassure her. “I’ll look into it.”

From the cocky look she threw me, it was obvious she thought she had just solved the whole mystery. I knew better, but she was happy for now, and there was no reason to rain on her parade until I had honed in on what was really going on. My working theory was that if you couldn’t find an obvious answer right off the bat, the best thing to do was start eliminating the alternatives until you could pin it down. Finding out where Denzel fit into this be a good start.

On a better footing, now that I had agreed to take a better look at Denzel, I thought it prudent to change the subject. I filled her in on the latest information I had obtained on our current case and then Trinity and I made plans for dinner at her grandmother’s after church on Sunday.

Trinity’s grandmother, or Mama D, as she was known to those of us who loved her, had pretty much adopted me into the family when I started working with Trinity. She always made sure I had at least one home cooked meal a week and was the only person I knew that could tell you what to do without you realizing she was doing it. I was convinced Trinity got her tricky lawyer ways from Mama D, but Trinity didn’t see it. Good as Trinity was, Mama D could wrap her around her little finger, and Trinity always thought it was her own idea. It was a joy to behold when it was happening to someone else. I couldn’t complain, though. Mama D had what I called ‘wise ways’. She would impart her wisdom and leave it to you to accept it or not, happy to help pick up the pieces when you chose wrongly.

When Trinity had graduated law school and started making some decent money, one of the first things she had done was get Mama D a house all her own. Nothing fancy. Mama D wouldn’t like that. But a cute little house. Neat and tidy with a nice front porch and a swing out front, it was close enough to the old neighborhood that Mama D could visit with her friends, but far enough away to put the memories of barely scraping by and living on welfare behind them. Back then, her brother, Kevin was still alive. He and Trinity had planted trees and bushes and painted the house a pretty pale yellow with black shutters and a red door. Mama D had retired from her multiple jobs and spent her days gardening, gossiping and feeding other people. Namely me, who, she was convinced, was wasting away to nothing but skin and bones although, in my opinion, I could easily drop 5 to 10 pounds and still look quite healthy. Sunday

dinner was her opportunity to ply me with fabulous temptations, and I was totally happy to give her a free hand. I wasn't much for cooking and didn't give much thought to food, so I could easily make up for the calorie onslaught the following week and be ready for the next Mama D meal.

I assured Trinity I would be there with bells on and headed back to my car, leaving her obsessing over some candlesticks she had spotted in the shop window next to the restaurant. By the time I got the car door open and was settled inside, my mind was already on my next stop, and I had pretty much put the whole telekinesis thing on the back burner.

5

MY APPOINTMENT EARLIER in the morning with the witness had turned up some interesting information. I was working on finding a divorced father, who had taken a hike on his child support and alimony. Trinity became involved when dear old dad skipped. Ignore a court order and it becomes a crime. A divorce lawyer may get your money, but a criminal lawyer will get your rear thrown in jail.

Trinity works on enough big money cases that she can afford to do some pro bono work, and this was one of those cases. If you can't afford to put food on the table, you sure can't afford an investigator to find the bum. I can't afford to work for free, so Trinity pays me the same for the pro bono work as she does for the big money cases, it just comes out of her pocket. In return, I try to keep expenses down, which was why I was headed back to my condo to make some calls rather than heading to Atlanta myself.

I was back out on Cantrell heading into the downtown area when I noticed the black BMW two cars back in the next lane. That made, what? Four of them this morning. Arkansas doesn't require a front plate, so there was no way of telling whether this was the same car or not, but being in my line of work, you learn to pay attention. I didn't know if I was being super sensitive and noticing the car more because of my emotional attachment or if I had picked up a tail, but I like to play it safe. Safety first, that's my motto. I cranked the Ford over to the left lane and caught the on-ramp to I-30.

The car behind me stayed to the right but the BMW cut left and followed me onto the highway. I sped up and cut right, just making the 630 exit heading west. It would take me past the Children's Hospital, and onto Chenal Parkway. Little Rock is not a small town, but it's not large either. If it's not rush hour, the only place you can count on bad traffic was the Chenal Parkway/Bowman area. I needed traffic to lose the tail and hopefully come back behind to get a plate. I glanced back, and sure enough, he was with me on 630. As I passed the University exit and the zoo, I went over who might be following me. I had one active case right now, which I had started the leg work on this morning. If I was right, I had picked up the tail first thing, before I had interviewed anyone. If Trinity hadn't told anyone I was working the case, meaning Max Drummond, the husband's lawyer, then I didn't see how the BMW tied into the case. I used my Bluetooth to call Trinity.

“What’s up? I’m at the check-out.”

“Did you tell anyone I was on the case yet? Drummond maybe?” I changed lanes and signaled for the exit at Baptist Hospital and watched as the Beamer moved into position three cars back to follow.

“What? Let that jerk know I had an investigator hunting his client? You know better than that. Why? What’s going on?” I had her full attention now as I passed the exit without slowing, the Beamer right behind me.

“I have a tail. Black BMW 325i – no front plate. I’m on 630 crossing 430 now onto Financial.”

“Head back to me!” Trinity practically screamed in my ear. “I’ll get his plate when you drive by. I’m heading to the car now.”

I looked down at her number on my screen and frowned at her through the phone. This seemed a bad idea to me on many levels. First of all, if it was a tail, how stupid would the guy have to be to not figure out I was making a big circle. I was betting as soon as I headed back onto Cantrell, he’d pull off. Second, and more importantly, I hated getting Trinity involved. I was low profile and kept to the shadows. Very few people knew me, or what I did and that worked well for me. Trinity was anything but low profile. She was regularly in the news, in the paper or at some function. If someone were interested in me, I could hide, but Trinity stood out like a sore thumb.

That being said unless I called the police or managed to lose him and sneak up behind him, my chances of getting his plate were slim to none. I could always stop at a light and run back and confront him, but that was a good way to get shot, and I tried to avoid putting myself in those situations as much as possible.

“No,” I told Trinity, making my decision. “You head my way. I’ll head into the bookstore. You come into the parking lot from the Parkway entrance and park on the end facing the exit. Call me when you’re in place and I’ll leave and pull out that way so you can see the plate if he follows me out.”

Trinity agreed and said she was on her way. I came off the highway onto the Parkway and within minutes, was in the bookstore parking lot. I drove around, taking my time to find a space big enough for the Expedition. I had the extended length on it, so I was bigger and higher than most anything else on the road making me easy to see. The size and big V-8 engine meant I paid at the pump, but it was a comfort to know I could also run over almost anything I needed to and live to tell about it. Not that I ran over things on purpose. It was just good to know I could. The Tank, which is what I affectionately called my vehicle of choice, was my personal security blanket.

As innocently as I could, I gathered up my bag and headed into the bookstore. I managed to turn at the display at the door in time to catch the BMW

glide past, out of the corner of my eye. Satisfied I wasn't imagining things, I headed in and then straight to the left to the attached snack shop, where I could get a cup of coffee and keep an eye on the parking lot at the same time without looking suspicious. Within minutes, my phone rang.

"I'm here" Trinity was breathless, a hint of excitement in her voice. I frowned at the phone again, not pleased. Someone was enjoying this way too much.

"I know. I see you," I replied. "He's here, parked by the toy store facing west. I'm coming out the coffee shop door now." I grabbed a discarded newspaper and took it and my coffee through the door and out into the sunshine, hoping my tail wouldn't get suspicious at the fast in and out.

I jumped up into the driver's seat, secured the coffee and fastened my seat belt. I hadn't decided yet on the plan for after Trinity got the plate number, but I knew it involved losing this guy. I took a deep breath, pulled out of the parking spot and rolled past Trinity to the exit. Glancing in the rearview, I watched the BMW slide into place two cars behind me.

"Got him!" Trinity yelled into my earpiece. "What do I do now? This is so much fun! I can't believe I pay you to do stuff like this!"

For crying out loud! What was wrong with her?

"Trinity, you don't pay me to be followed," I informed her, keeping my eyes out for the BMW. I wanted to make sure he was following me and hadn't noticed Trinity. I caught sight of him changing lanes, three cars back. So far, so good. "You pay me to do research, sit for hours on a computer, make phone calls and talk to people. This is not part of the job. This is something else. This is dangerous."

Silence met me on the other end of the line. I thought we'd lost the connection for a second, but then she came on. "You're right. What was I thinking? Someone is following you. That can't be good. What do we do now?"

"Just give me the plate and then get back to your office. I'm going to lose this guy, and then I'll have the plates run and call you. You okay?"

"I'm good. Be careful. And don't forget to call me."

I felt better as soon as we hung up knowing that Trinity was out of the picture. If I was being followed, I needed to find out why and quickly. Knowledge was everything. Ignorance could get you killed.

* * *

IN THE END, I decided the easiest way to lose the tail was to go to the police station. It's someplace I would normally go and what tail is going to risk being made at the police station? Not this one, I hoped, and sure enough, I watched as he rolled right past the entrance while I parked the Tank.

I grabbed the coffee, seeing no sense in letting it go to waste, and hustled myself inside. I know a lot of the guys at Little Rock PD and doing the type of work I do gets me in the door. The fact that I stay out of trouble, do a decent job, try not to break the law and am on their side of putting the bad ones away, means they help me whenever they can.

"Jonas in?" I called out and got three hands all pointing to the back of the station and along with a couple of grunts. Little Rock has more than its fair share of crime, and the station was a busy place. With a recent high-profile murder, I knew the timing wasn't good for me to show up, but then again, I was a citizen, they were the police, and I had a plate number.

I shoved through the door and headed back toward the offices where Jonas was likely to be. I knew most of the force by sight, but Jonas and I had touched base on a couple of cases, and I was comfortable working with him. Technically a detective, Jonas Hill was the type of cop you wanted around when things went bad. Big, and by that I mean BIG, black and mean looking. Jonas looked like he could take care of himself and any trouble that came along. The first time I met him was on a case where the father had kidnapped his own daughter. The Dad had been abusing the girl, and the Mother had sole custody. Dad decided to take matters into his own hands, which in turn had instigated an Amber alert and a three state hunt. Trinity had filed the criminal papers on dear old Dad, so I was asked in when the kidnapping occurred. Jonas made the mistaken assumption I was working for the defense at first, and until we got it straightened out, we had some bad moments. Once he found out I was on his side of the investigation, things settled right down. We ended up working quite well together. Jonas had good instincts, and I tried to keep out of his way as much as possible. I think he liked me. At the very least he tolerated me. He had been there when Keith was killed, keeping me informed and explaining the process. He was one of the good guys. Big and scary, but a good guy. Which I tried to remind myself of, when he scowled up at me.

"What?" He glanced up when I entered his office and immediately went back to writing the report on his desk. He was busy, and I decided to cut right to the chase, sure he would appreciate it.

"I need a plate run."

"Why?" He quit writing and sat with the pen poised above the paper, waiting.

"I picked up a tail today. Black BMW 325i." That got his attention. He looked up, meeting my eyes with a questioning look. Having worked on Keith's case, he knew the car make and model. Knew that it was never found. I was sure he noticed it each time he saw one, just like I did. My request to run a plate on that particular car and one that was tailing me no less, had him raising his eyebrows.

He pulled out a request sheet and motioned for me to sit down. I filled him in on the details while he wrote out the information. After he had gotten the ball rolling, he leaned back in his chair and looked me in the eye.

"Tell me what's going on," he demanded. "What cases you working on."

"Just one. For Trinity Davis. A child support case. Everything else is wrapped up unless someone got out lately I don't know about."

He snorted at this. Like I said, I fly pretty far under the radar and like it that way, for this very reason. The bad guys don't need to know who got the goods on them. Just that the goods have been got, and they are in trouble. I could count the number of people who knew what I did on one hand. A revenge scenario was highly unlikely, and Jonas knew it.

"How come you're twitchy?"

"I'm not twitchy," I said, hoping to avoid the interrogation I saw heading my way.

"Yeah, You are," he insisted. "What aren't you telling me?"

Like I said, instincts. Jonas has them oozing out of his skin. He leaned back in his chair, stretching his tee shirt tight across his chest and closed one eye, pinning me down with the other. On some guys that look would probably come off as a flirt or showing off. On Jonas however, it is the 'I am big and tough, and I know you're withholding information, don't make me hurt you look'. He did it well.

"I had a bad day yesterday. An altercation down at the coffee shop by the condo. Spilled coffee, accusations, that type of thing." I might have to talk, but I didn't have to tell him everything. "And no, I don't know the guy. I didn't get a name, and I don't see that it has anything to do with this. I just don't like confrontations and it rattled me a little."

I was saved from having to provide any further explanation by the return of the officer with the information on the plates, which he handed to Jonas.

"Stolen." Jonas slapped the form down on the desk. "When did you lose him?"

"Just now, when I turned in here. He drove by out front." Jonas rose and pulled open his drawer to get his gun.

"Stay here," he ordered. Holstering his gun, he called out for some assistance

and four other officers followed him out the door.

Twenty minutes later he was back, none the wiser and not any too happy about it. There had been no sign of the car. I could leave, but was to let him know if I was followed again or noticed anything strange. He was putting out an all-points bulletin and would have a car drive by the condo tonight on a regular basis.

Great, I thought as I headed out the door. Doesn't that put you at ease? Could be a long night and it's not like I had gotten much sleep the night before. I needed to call Trinity and let her know what was going on. I also needed to tell her to watch her back. I didn't know why I was tailed, but Trinity had been with me, and there was a possibility she may have picked up a tail too. She needed to pay attention. I headed home, taking some comfort in the thought that Jonas was on the case and keeping an eye on things, all the while knowing that I would spend the night up watching for the phantom BMW.

6

I GLANCED UP as the door happily chimed that another customer had entered. There had been a steady stream of coffee drinkers all morning, but so far, Denzel hadn't shown up. Frustrated, I went back to the newspaper, I'd been reading. This was my third day on stake out, and I was on about my fifth cup of coffee of the morning. I was going to have to make a break for the bathroom soon and hope that Denzel didn't show up while I was occupied.

Things had been quiet since my eventful day on Tuesday. I had headed home from the police station and called Trinity, somehow convincing her to keep an eye out without scaring her to death. After I checked the locks and set the alarm, I'd made myself a cheese omelet and a big pot of coffee and prepared for the long night ahead. Looking out the window, I caught sight of the patrol car as he drove slowly by, ensuring that for that night, at least, the bad people knew this street was being watched.

Frustrated with the loss of a day to work on the case, I had settled in on the sofa to go over plans for the next day. At some point, I must have fallen asleep, because I woke up the next morning to the ringing of my cell phone. It was Jonas calling to tell me they had found the car, and it had been wiped clean of prints. Another bad sign. I checked in with Trinity, hit the shower and then headed out for the first day of stake out at my coffee shop. Since the coffee incident, I had avoided going there, but with the lack of any other leads, I had hopes that Denzel would return to the scene of the crime, and I could get some information. It was a long shot, but for now, it was all I had.

It was now Friday, and I had shown up the previous two days, coming early, staying late into the morning, and still no Denzel. I had talked to the manager, who was very concerned when I came in. He still felt bad about what happened and gave me a free latte for all my trouble that I gladly accepted, but that was about all I got from him. No, he hadn't seen the man back in the shop since it happened. No, he didn't remember him from before. No, he didn't see where he had gone, or a car or anything else that might have been helpful. Armed with that knowledge, it seemed doubtful that Denzel would show, but I decided to give it a few days since I didn't have anything else pending. Plus there was the coffee aspect of it. How often do you get to sit and drink coffee all morning and write it off as a business expense?

My cell rang. It was the private investigator I had hired in Atlanta to check

on my missing nonpaying papa. Bingo! My hunch had paid off. I had talked to some of the “guys” dear old Dad used to hang with. Sometimes you got more information from friends than from family. In this case, the ex-wife was angry, and everything she told me was colored with it. I couldn’t blame her, but it’s the little things that often break a case, and when someone is angry, it affects what they say. So I like to talk to other “witnesses”. I call them that because there’s not really a name for them. I need information, so they could be informants, but that has a negative sound to it, so I call them witnesses. They didn’t see a crime, but they did see a life and what they saw is what I needed to know.

My meeting on Tuesday morning was with a drinking buddy of the Dad. Turns out they loved to play darts and drink Guinness. I coupled that with a comment from a previous interview stating that the Dad was a huge Braves fan. I’ve found that white middle/upper-class offenders have a tendency to run to someplace familiar while lower income offenders either stick around the area and lay low or go to ground and vanish into thin air. I put two and two together, hoped they added up to four and risked Trinity’s money on an investigator in Atlanta. I’d e-mailed him a photo to flash around in bars or pubs that had darts and sold Guinness. The guy had had enough time on the lam to find a neighborhood bar if that’s where he was. My gamble paid off. I told the investigator to stay put, and I’d call him later with instructions. I needed to let Trinity know he’d been located and arrange for the paperwork for the police to pick him up. Smiling with satisfaction, I checked my watch and decided enough was enough. I’d hit the bathroom and hit the road.

I had just stood up to stretch my weary coffee laden bones when I saw him. Denzel was here, but not in the coffee shop. He was getting into a car parked in the lot, a little east of the front door. He wasn’t parked where I would park. There were plenty of spaces up near the doors of the stores, but he was parked two to three rows out near a handful of other cars, which more than likely belonged to the employees. From my vantage point, I couldn’t get the make of the car, but it looked like he wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon, as he seemed to be settling in. I turned away, not wanting him to look up and find me watching him, and started picking up my mess. Okay, let’s think about this. Denzel is here, but not drinking coffee. He hadn’t come in all morning. He’s not shopping, he didn’t have a bag, and he’s not in a store. He’s sitting out there in his car.

I could just go out there and ask him what he was doing, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to like the answer. Instead, I headed into the bathroom and placed a call to Jonas. Then I remembered the five coffees and why I was heading into the bathroom in the first place and decided to take care of business while the opportunity was there. Once Jonas got here, who knew when I would get another

chance.

As I was washing up, I couldn't help but wonder if the whole time I had been waiting for Denzel, he'd been watching me? Maybe Denzel, the coffee, and the BMW that was tailing me were connected. But how? I checked my watch again. Five minutes had gone by since I had called Jonas. My guess was, in about another 5-10 minutes we'd have a good chance of getting some answers.

I headed out of the bathroom, stopped at the counter and ordered another coffee. Settling back into my seat, I arranged my newspaper, took a big sip of latte and waited for the show to begin.

I didn't have to wait for long. I glanced up to see Jonas turn into the parking lot and glide slowly into a space a few cars down from the shop. I could easily see him through the front window as he did a quick check in the rearview mirror and then gave me a nod from his seat behind the wheel. He'd seen him.

Watching him unbuckle his seatbelt, I suddenly had chills run down my spine. Something was going on. I quickly looked around the shop to see if anyone was moving in a threatening manner, someone who might be hooked up with Denzel. Nothing was out of place, no one stood out. As I watched Jonas reach for his door, though, my heart started to pound, and I felt the adrenaline begin to surge through me. Something was wrong. Something was WAY wrong. I leaped to my feet, ran toward the door and watched in horror as Denzel's car door opened and I saw the gun.

"Get down!" I shouted the warning, not knowing if Jonas could hear me through the glass, but it didn't matter. He could see me and my panic, and he was ducking down even as he turned to see where the danger lay. I flung the door open and saw the gun level at Jonas. He was moving fast to shelter, but I knew it would be too late. Denzel had a clear shot.

"No!" I screamed, as I surged toward the car and the gun, my hands outstretched, not thinking of anything but stopping Denzel from killing Jonas. I'd barely taken two steps out of the shop when suddenly, the car door flew inward, knocking the gun upward just as the shot rang out, crushing Denzel between the seat and door frame. I barely had registered the sound of glass shattering behind me when Jonas hit me, taking me down in a flying tackle that knocked the breath right out of me. We hit hard, my head bouncing off the walkway and I laid there stunned, unable to breathe, trapped under his weight. I heard the squeal of tires through my gasps for air and had to assume it was Denzel making a break for it, as I couldn't see through Jonas' chest.

At that point, I really didn't care, as long as he was gone. I was too busy trying to get some air moving through my lungs. Jonas was apparently in better shape than I was because suddenly he was up and running. With his weight

suddenly gone, air blissfully surged into me, and I rolled over to see him racing past the parked cars, gun drawn, in pursuit. He never stood a chance. Human versus car, the human loses every time, no matter the contest. The truth of that statement didn't make it any easier to accept, and I watched in frustration as Denzel careened onto the street and within seconds disappeared from sight.

Jonas gave me a hard stare as he ran back to his car and reached through the window for the radio. I really couldn't blame him. At best, this had been a complete mess. One that could have easily ended in disaster. I slowly got to my feet, brushing the parking lot dirt off my hands and clothes. Looking around me, I realized how lucky we'd been. The store window behind me had a bullet hole near the top. The glass was cracked and shattered, but thankfully, was still in place.

I was scraped and dirty. My head hurt and was bleeding from the contact with the concrete, and my clothes were a bit torn up, but that was to be expected when you got thrown around by a guy the size of Jonas, I guess. All in all, not too bad, all things considered. I could already hear the sirens as cars were dispatched in pursuit of Denzel, others screaming toward us in response to the distress call. My eyes finally came to rest on Jonas, who was standing at his car, hands resting on the hood, watching me, clearly unhappy.

Surprised, I found myself shaking a little. The thought that I had nearly gotten Jonas killed had my throat closing up and I felt a little dizzy. I took a deep breath and decided I needed to sit back down.

"Put your head between your knees and breathe deep." It was Jonas whispering in my ear, squatting down next to me. I felt his huge hand on the back of my neck pushing my head forward.

"I'm sorry, Jonas, I'm so sorry," I mumbled as I tried to take in air.

"Stay here. Don't talk to anyone. I'll be back," he said tersely. The weight of his hand disappeared from my neck, but it was the gentle squeeze of his hand on my shoulder as he moved away, was almost my undoing.

The cavalry arrived, and I could hear Jonas issuing orders and securing the area. The deep breathing helped, and I raised my head up to see what was going on. The police were moving people into groups and working around me, taping off the area in front of the shop. The people from inside the shop were clustered by the door, and I saw the manager motioning to me. When he realized I wasn't getting up, he slowly opened the door and skittered through, keeping an eye on the police and the shattered window that was still somehow managing to stay in place. Bending down, he handed me a coffee.

"Here," he said. "I thought you might need this." He shoved it into my hand and hurried back inside before he was told to by the police officer, who was

headed in our direction. I took a sip of the coffee and realized he had rescued my latte from the table where I had left it. Caffeine was probably the last thing I needed, but I did feel better with the familiar feel of the cup in my hand. I slowly stood up and finding myself much steadier, moved over to my car, which was now inside the taped off crime scene area. Leaning against the car door, I watched as Jonas took control of the situation, directing the responding officers and doing his job so efficiently and calmly, that it was difficult to remember that just a short time ago, someone had been trying to kill him. I shivered at the memory of how close it had been and took another sip of coffee, trying to shake it off. He'd been kept occupied as the police arrived, but I knew eventually, Jonas would work his way around to me. He would have questions, and I needed to have some answers regarding Denzel. Ones he'd believe. I needed to be calm, cool and convincing when my time came. Unfortunately for me, I didn't have to wait long.

* * *

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, we were back inside the coffee shop, sitting at my old table and I was feeling a little better. He was sitting across from me and asking for the umpteenth time what I knew about Denzel. I had filled him in on everything except my suspicions about having telekinetic abilities, which were seeming more far fetched by the minute. In the light of current events, it was obvious that Denzel and I had some sort of connection, although I had no idea what that might be. The fact that he was following me and had been waving a gun around didn't bode well. I had to admit that the most likely scenario was that Denzel had actually thrown the coffee at me, although at the time, it sure hadn't seemed like it. Why, was anyone's guess and what I needed to find out. The upside, if that was the case, was this telekinesis thing could be laid to rest.

I had called Trinity to come and pick me up, as my car was going to be here until they cleared the scene, and she was due any minute. As relieved as I was that Jonas was all right, I was, quite frankly, tired of the inquisition and wished she would hurry up and get here, so I could leave.

"Hey!" Jonas snapped his fingers in front of my eyes. "Pay attention. Answer the question."

I focused back on Jonas and blinked hard, feeling another headache coming

on. Snorting, Jonas stood up motioning for someone behind me to come over. To my surprise, it was an EMT.

“Check her out. She took a pretty good hit to the head when we dove for cover.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my head,” I retorted, not wanting to delay my departure longer than necessary.

“Then there’s something wrong with your eyes because they’re rolling around in your head,” Jonas shot back.

Frowning, I followed the EMT’s instruction and attempted to follow his penlight around. Unfortunately, Trinity chose that minute to make an entrance, and before I knew it, she was hovering over me, demanding to know what had happened. Seeing I was unable to field her questions and comply with the EMT’s instructions at the same time, Jonas stepped in and took hold of her arm, in an attempt to remove her from the area.

Jonas didn’t know it yet, but he had just made a huge mistake. Trinity had never talked about it much, but you didn’t need to be a genius to know her father hadn’t just used his fists on her mother. I suspected Trinity had taken her share of beatings, and I knew for a fact that she blamed her father for her mother’s death. She’d never seen her father again after that night, and she didn’t want me to look for him. In Trinity’s mind, she had put it all behind her, and it was a closed book. But she hadn’t. Not really. It bled over into her life, every day.

Simply put, Trinity had a problem with men and that problem was, when she looked at a man, she saw her father. It didn’t help that her job reminded her daily of the seamy side of family life, and the horrible things people can do to each other. As a result, she hated most men and trusted none of them, the exception, of course, being her little brother, who in her eyes could do no wrong. She had somehow managed to tolerate Keith, for my sake, but it was always a rocky relationship between them. Normally she just ignored them, but occasionally, she came across one that set her off. And Jonas set her off. Not only was he a man, but he was a big, good-looking black man, with a badge and a gun and he wasn’t intimidated by her. I had a feeling that what was to follow wasn’t going to be pretty, and I was dead on the money.

I chose to ignore the raised voices and heated discussion that little move precipitated, content to let them fight it out. Woe to him that gets between Trinity and her quest for knowledge. Add in concern for a friend, her intense dislike of men and the fact that he actually had the audacity to touch her, and Jonas had more to worry about than getting shot at.

I had finished my on-site exam, received my diagnosis of concussion and they were still going at it. I settled back into the chair cushions to watch,

inordinately happy that they were going at each other instead of me. It was the most entertainment I'd had all day.

"What are you smiling at?" Trinity snapped, as she headed my way, having finished with Jonas. "Sitting there enjoying the show?"

Oops. "Hey, I have a concussion. Don't yell at me." I looked over to see Jonas talking to the EMT. "You have to admit, it was quite a display," I couldn't resist adding.

"I don't have to admit anything except he's a pain in the posterior. If he so much as dares to put his hands on me again, I'll..."

"You'll what?" Jonas inquired, cutting her off as he joined us. "Instead of making a scene here, why don't you take Taylor over to Baptist to finish getting checked out."

He turned to me, ignoring Trinity's glare. "I'll catch up with you later, maybe tonight. And," he added, leaning down close to me, "in case I didn't say it in all the excitement. Thank you." With that, he kissed me on the cheek, threw a scornful look at Trinity, who was standing there with her mouth hanging open, and walked away.

I managed not to crack a smile while we walked to Trinity's car, although I could hear her muttering under her breath the whole time. I decided to keep silent and just look out the windows on the short trip over to Baptist Health Care, one of two main hospitals in the area, the other being St. Vincent's. We checked in at the emergency room, thankful that there seemed to be a minimum of injuries in the middle of the day. Hopeful of a short wait, I grabbed up a Hollywood rag and paged through while Trinity occupied herself on her cell phone. I had filled her in on the situation in Atlanta earlier while waiting for Denzel and she was busy now with finalizing arrangements for the Atlanta police to pick up our boy and send him home where he belonged. Justice served. What a happy thought in an otherwise dismal day.

7

“HOW CAN YOU read that drivel?” Trinity snapped her phone closed and crossed one long leg over the other, her toe bouncing up and down with nervous energy.

I just gave a shrug and went back to perusing my rag. They’d already taken my insurance information and then my vitals. Now it was just a matter of filling the time until they had an open room. Within minutes, I heard my name and made a point of throwing the magazine in Trinity’s lap as I headed back. She might talk big, but I’d seen her flip one open a time or two.

I followed the nurse through the big doors and down the hallway to the nurse’s station and the mini exam rooms clustered around it. Ushered into my own personal cubby hole, I hopped up on the table while the nurse pulled the curtain partially closed and ordered me to get into the flimsy hospital gown she tossed down on the exam table next to me. Then she informed me the doctor would be with me in a minute and sailed out of my enclosure, pulling the curtain closed behind her. I eyed the gown for a second before deciding there was no need to change. I mean, I had a head injury. Why did I need to take off my clothes? Instead, I amused myself for a few minutes looking in the drawers of the little stand next to the table. Nothing good in there. I flopped back on the table and stared at the ceiling wondering how long a doctor’s minute actually was. The sound of the nurse pulling the curtain back startled me, and I nearly fell off the table.

“Sorry to wake you.” She smiled as she apologized, not at all concerned that a head trauma patient had been out like a light. I guess it’s common practice for patients to drop off in the ‘minute’ it takes for the doctor to get around to them. “I wanted to let you know we hadn’t forgotten about you. The doctor’s just finishing up on a hand fracture and he’ll be right in.” Suddenly she frowned, catching sight of the hospital gown still lying on the exam table next to me.

“Ouch,” I said, hoping to distract her from the gown. I didn’t want a fight, but I had no intention of putting that thing on. “That sounds painful. How’d he do that?”

“Slammed it in a car door. You’d be surprised how often that happens.” She eyed the gown and then me. “You’re not going to put that on, are you?”

I shook my head and for a minute I thought she was going to try to insist. Something in my eyes must have convinced her otherwise, or else she’d had a

really long day already, because she just heaved a sigh, rolled her eyes and left, pulling the curtain closed again behind her.

I'd like to blame it on the blow to my head, but it took a few minutes for her words to sink in. One second I was sitting there thinking how much it must hurt to slam a car door on your hand and the next, I was reliving that morning in the coffee shop. Jonas was pulling up, the gun was pointed at Jonas, suddenly the door slammed. The gun went off, flying from the hand holding it. The hand that was caught in the door. What were the odds? I mean really. What *were* the odds? The investigator in me had seen too many long shots pay off to ignore a chance like this. However unlikely it might be, I had to check it out.

Slipping silently off of the table, I stuck my head out of the curtains for a look see. Many of the exam tables were empty and those that had occupants, had the curtains pulled closed, just like mine were. Thankful I had stuck to my guns about the gown thing, I crept along the closed curtains with no idea where to go. I reached the nurse's station and was relieved to see that it was empty except for a single nurse I hadn't seen before. I needed to move fast before anyone else showed up. Rushing up to the desk, I leaned over to get her attention.

"Can you help me? I'm looking for my friend. He came in with a broken hand. Slammed it in the car door?" I silently prayed I had given enough information that she wouldn't ask me his name. Somehow I didn't think Denzel was his real name.

"Down that hall, first door to the left. The casting room." She pointed to her left, past the exam rooms, in the opposite direction from the waiting room doors. At least I was between him and the most immediate exit.

Smiling a thanks, I headed straight for the hall, hoping that I would be out of her line of sight before I got to the casting room door. As luck would have it, the door was set back in a small alcove that I was happy to duck into. Leaning in toward the door, I could make out two voices inside. I had just decided my best approach to finding out who was in the room, was to drop back out of sight and keep watch, when the door suddenly opened, and I found myself standing nose to nose with the doctor.

I barely had time to register that the patient on the table behind him was, in fact, Denzel, before he jumped up and came charging at the door. He hit the doctor from behind in a vicious tackle that drove him into me and sent the three of us sailing across the hall, only to be slammed to a stop when we hit the far wall. Falling into a heap, Denzel kicked and punched until he managed to break free of the tangled mess of bodies and took off down the hall toward the exit. Dazed, I tried to follow, only to find my knees giving way as I went down on all fours. Looking up, I saw the ER doors already starting to close behind him,

nurses and patients staring in confusion, frozen into immobility. I could feel blood running down my face, and glancing over, saw the doctor was unconscious next to me on the floor. Struggling to get to my feet, I managed to rise halfway before I collapsed back onto the cold tile of the floor, the closed ER doors the last thing I saw before the darkness took me.

* * *

I CAME TO completely disoriented, which seemed to be becoming a real habit with me as of late. My last cognizant thought had been that I needed to go after Denzel, and bolting upright in an attempt to do just that, I found myself instantly tangled in sheets and IV tubing, my efforts to pursue completely thwarted by the raised bed rails and a wildly spinning room. Finally realizing where I was and that I was going nowhere, I laid back down on the hospital bed, exhausted by my return to reality, with the sincere hope that the dizziness would pass if I just closed my eyes and didn't move.

"Are you dead?" The question filtered in through the swirling currents. It was Trinity, who was in the room and had apparently witnessed my flailing about if the amusement in her voice was any indication. I choose not to answer since she was well aware I wasn't dead, and I was trying hard not to toss my cookies. Finally, things settled into a somewhat steadier level, and I slowly opened my eyes to find her looming over me in the semi-darkness of the room.

"If you knew how close I was to throwing up, you'd back up a bit," I replied. She immediately disappeared from sight, which I found somewhat disconcerting, even in my newly awakened state.

Trinity intercepted my hand as it went toward my left eye. "It's swollen shut, that's why you can't see," she explained as she moved around the bed and pressed the call button for the nurse. "You also have a concussion, but you'll be relieved to know that whatever's going on with you, it isn't from a brain tumor. They did an MRI, and there's nothing there."

I shrugged, accepting the information. I hadn't really thought about that possibility, but Trinity obviously had and was worried about it.

"Leave that alone," she ordered, swatting at my hand as I tried again to check out the damage, sounding and acting eerily like Mama D. The nurse popped her head in, saw that I was awake and disappeared again, on her way to report into

the doctor, no doubt.

“How long have I been out?” I asked, finally noticing that Trinity had changed clothes.

“Two days. And before you ask any more questions, just let me say don’t.” She held her hand up in front of her, giving the universal “stop” sign. “The only way they let me in here was to swear I would not talk about anything that went on and that you wouldn’t either.”

The words were barely out of her mouth when the door flew open, and the nurse returned with the doctor. I caught a glimpse of a blue uniform outside the door before it swung closed. The stationing of a guard outside my door told me a lot of things, not the least of which was that Denzel was still at large, and they considered me to be a target.

The doctor proceeded to poke and prod and generally irritate me. After confirming a major concussion, a laceration above the swollen eye that required a number of stitches, and an assortment of various other bumps, bruises, aches and pains, of which I was already more than aware of, he finally left me in peace. The nurse checked my stats, wrote in the chart, shot something into the IV tube and finally followed the doctor out the door. Exhausted from the exam and from what I suspected was painkiller in the IV, I laid back, closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep. The last thought in my head being where Denzel might have disappeared to and just how soon our paths would cross again.

* * *

THE WONDERFUL AROMA of coffee woke me up the next morning. Trinity was gone, and Jonas now sat in the nearest chair, juggling a huge cup of coffee while trying to thumb through a file.

“I hope you brought some of that for me, or you can get out right now,” I threatened.

“Good, you’re awake. We need to talk.”

“No,” I replied, looking around with my good eye, for another coffee, which seemed to be missing. “We need to get coffee.” I thumbed the call button. Maybe the nurse could get me some coffee. My head was killing me, and I was sure that coffee would help.

Within seconds a nurse that I hadn’t seen before popped in. I put in my

request for coffee, which she promptly ignored, much to Jonas' amusement, instead slapping the blood pressure cuff on my arm.

"As you probably surmised, this guy, 'Denzel', as you refer to him, got away clean," Jonas filled me in, as the nurse pumped up the cuff. "Trinity saw him, along with several others, when he came barreling through the ER doors. He knocked a guy down, jumped a set of seats and was gone before anyone knew what was going on.

"Well, that's great news," I said irritably, throwing the nurse a dirty look as she pumped the cuff up a second time. I mouthed the word "coffee" at her, but she was busy looking at the monitor on the cuff.

"No, the great news is the hospital has security cameras in that hallway, and we have him on tape. It also appears that in addition to breaking his hand when the car door slammed, our boy got cut, which the doctor also treated. We got DNA off the gauze used to clean the wound and lifted several good prints from the exam room. It will take a while on the DNA, but hopefully, the prints will give us an ID."

That was good news. Better than I had hoped for. The nurse had finally finished taking my BP and was making notes in my chart. My head pounding, I asked again for coffee, only to be told that breakfast was on its way. As she left the room, I saw the guard again, stationed outside the door and frowned, hurting my swollen eye in the process.

"What's with the uniform, Jonas?" I asked, although I already had a pretty good idea.

"Look. We saw the attack on the security tapes. It was brutal. The doctor has two broken ribs, a concussion, and a broken leg. As for you, you're lucky to be alive. You took the brunt of the impact. Our perp tangled up with the doctor, and most of his injuries were from being kicked and punched while *Denzel* was trying to get away." Jonas stopped to take a big swig of coffee. "Frankly, watching you go down that last time, it looked like you were a goner. You got lucky. Combine that with the shooting in the morning and the guard outside isn't hard to understand."

The door opened, and an orderly came in with my breakfast tray. I wasn't quite ready for food, but the covered cup on the tray certainly caught my interest. I snatched the paper cover off only to find a cup of hot water and a tea bag. How was anyone supposed to get well here without coffee?

Jonas snorted. I had a funny feeling he was laughing at me, and I glared at him. What kind of person brought coffee into the hospital and drank it in front of another person? That's what I wanted to know. I eyed his coffee cup and saw the startled look on his face just as Trinity sailed through the door.

“Taylor!” she shouted, startling me.

“What!” I shouted back, grabbing my head as the sound echoed through my brain, compounding my headache. Pain meds. Where were the pain meds?

“Stop it,” she ordered, her eyes widening in a silent warning.

Stop what? I gave her a wide-eyed look right back. What was with her? All I wanted was some coffee. Jonas had some, and I saw no reason why I couldn’t have some too. She just stood there looking at me, lips pursed, one eyebrow cocked, waiting for me to figure it out.

Realization of what had nearly happened finally dawned on me. It must have shown on my face because Trinity let out a very unladylike snort, which I took as a derisive comment on my mental acuity. Not that I could blame her. We had just nearly had a repeat of the coffee house incident right there in the hospital room. The fact that it had happened again was bad enough. That Trinity had known what was happening before I did was even worse. She, who sat firmly in the ‘refusing to believe it column’, had seen it the minute she came in the room, and Jonas obviously had felt something happening. I had just about managed to convince myself that everything had just been a weird coincidence and now this. The day just couldn’t get any better.

I didn’t dare look at Jonas as Trinity strode over to the bed and threw her briefcase onto my lap. Ouch. She might have seen and believed, but she sure wasn’t happy about it. Swinging a huge purse from her shoulder, she dropped it down on the end of the bed, reached in and came out with a large thermos. Shoving my breakfast tray out of the way, she slapped the thermos down on the bed stand in front of me, grabbed the cup from the tray, dumped the water down the sink and slammed the cup back down on the tray. The minute she opened the thermos, the rich smell of freshly made coffee filled the room. God love her! Coffee! I immediately forgave her for nearly crippling me with that briefcase. She poured a healthy dose and handed me the cup. I chanced a look at Jonas as I took a big sip. He was staring at me.

“Ah,” I said with a moan, trying to make light of the situation. “Just what the doctor ordered.” Trinity retrieved her briefcase from my lap and headed over to the other chair.

I decided the best thing to do was ignore what had happened, or had nearly happened, and try to get Jonas’ mind back on the business at hand.

“Jonas was just explaining the guard at the door,” I informed Trinity. “However, I think you have it wrong, Jonas.”

“Really?” He tossed back the last of his coffee, looked at the cup and then back at me. His little finger was tapping a beat against the now empty cup. I opted not to fill the silence, instead trying to look innocent, waiting for the shoe

to drop. I couldn't be sure but from the sound of things Trinity had completely stopped breathing.

"How do you figure that?" He said it so softly, I barely heard it, but I wrapped both hands around it like a lifeline. He was letting it go. With any luck, he had decided that he'd imagined the whole thing with the coffee.

"I don't think he's after me. I mean, he shot at you, not me," I explained, trying hard not to babble as relief surged through me. He raised a questioning eyebrow, but didn't say anything, so I plunged ahead. "At the hospital, he hit the doctor, not me. From what you told me, the doctor received most of the blows and kicks when he was trying to get away. I think I just got caught in the crossfire."

"Actually," Jonas said, rising to leave " I'm not wrong. You're right that he shot at me and that he didn't attack you directly at the hospital. After reviewing the tape numerous times, I'm even willing to say that it appears he was trying to avoid kicking or punching you during his effort to escape, but rest assured, Taylor. He is after you. He just wants you in one piece. So you, and everyone who cares about you," he said pointedly as he swung his gaze around to Trinity, "need to be aware and exercise extreme caution." He crossed to the door and tossed his empty cup into the trash. Turning around he gave us one last look.

"Ladies, I am aware that something is going on here between the two of you. Whatever it is, if I find out it has something to do with this case, and you've withheld information, I'm going to be VERY unhappy with both of you."

With that last admonishment, he left the room, letting the door close quietly behind him. Within seconds, Trinity was on her feet, pacing back and forth across the room.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it! What were you thinking?" she hissed at me. She was in full lawyer mode, but we were both aware of the officer on the other side of the door, not to mention the possibility of Jonas coming back unannounced.

"Just what do you think you saw, Trinity?" I asked, unwilling to admit to what we had both seen and Jonas now suspected.

"Don't play that game with me, Taylor. You know what happened here, you just don't want to admit it." She gave up the pacing and came to stand by the side of the bed with her hands on her hips. "If I hadn't come in, you'd be wearing Jonas's coffee. I repeat, what were you thinking!"

"I wasn't thinking!" I answered back in a hushed whisper. "I just wanted coffee! It's just like the last time!"

"Well, you were right about one thing. The spoon experiment was stupid. You should have just used coffee. Apparently you're really good at that. Then

we would have known right away.” She looked at me waiting for a response, and I had none. I mean, what was there to say? My silence took the wind right out of her sails.

“Oh my gosh,” Trinity moaned as she collapsed onto the bed, the grim reality hitting her. “It’s true. You’ve got that thing. That Telekinesis.”

I wasn’t any happier about it than she was. As much as I wanted her to be wrong, I couldn’t avoid the facts. It had happened too many times, for me to deny it any longer. The look on Jonas’ face as he felt the coffee being pulled from his grasp and the fact that Trinity had known immediately what was happening, the minute she walked in the door was the proverbial nail in the coffin. I didn’t know why, or how, but I knew deep down it was true. Maybe I had known all along. Now that I had accepted it, my mind started putting the pieces together and warning alarms began going off.

“You’re right, Trinity,” I whispered. “I do have it. But that’s not the worst thing.”

She looked at me expectantly, and I watched as realization dawned in her eyes even as I answered her unspoken question.

“The worst thing is that Denzel knows I have it too.”

8

TRINITY SOON LEFT for court, promising to return later in the day. I was left to try to fit the rest of the puzzle together. Thinking back, I remembered Denzel's anger at the coffee shop and his accusation that he and I both "*knew*" he didn't throw the coffee at me. At the time, I thought it was just something he said to convince me he didn't throw it on purpose, but looking back now, his statement made more sense if he already knew about the telekinesis. How could that be? How could he have known before I did?

By lunch time, my head was spinning with questions. I was relieved and actually somewhat hungry when the lunch tray finally arrived. The food smelled good, but my stomach rebelled once it was staring up at me, so I ended up shoving the tray away and being tormented by the smell until they came and took it away. At one o'clock the doctor came in, and I got the all clear to take some slow walks down the hall once the nurse got me unhooked from all the machines.

I had hoped walking would help clear my head, but I was weaker than I expected and between trying to keep my gown closed and the guard following me at a snail's pace down the hall, I quickly decided I would restrict my walking to the room. Exhausted, I climbed back into bed, delighted to find the nurses had taken advantage of my absence to freshen the room and change the sheets. Getting some rest, would have been a good idea, but I was having trouble turning off my brain.

If I was right, Denzel somehow already knew about me having TK, as they call it. He knew, and he'd been following me. It might not have been a coincidence that he was at my particular coffee haunt, but I thought it pretty safe to assume that the altercation with the coffee hadn't been in his plans. I wracked my brain trying to remember if I had seen him there before, but it was all a muddle, either from the blows I had taken or I just simply didn't remember. If he was watching me back then, it stood to reason that it was probably him tailing me in the BMW too. If Jonas was right and Denzel was after me, then why just watch me? And why shoot at Jonas?

As if my mind had conjured him, Jonas came sailing through the door.

"You're looking better," he stated after a quick glance. Magically a cup of coffee appeared in his hand. "A peace offering for this morning. I should have brought you one then. I just didn't realize what an addict you are."

“All is forgiven,” I assured him, grabbing the cup from his hand before anything weird could happen. “The important thing is you brought one now. Any news on the prints or DNA?”

I may not have figured much out, but I had come to the conclusion that I needed to tell Jonas the whole truth, as it seemed relevant to the case and was prepared to launch into a full confession, but his reply stopped me in my tracks.

“No. Nothing on either, but we do have some new evidence.” He settled into the chair next to the hospital bed and leaned over close. “We had a report of a body in the river under the I-40 bridge this morning.” He stopped abruptly as I tensed up, belatedly realizing what he’d said. “No. No, it’s not about Keith. I’m sorry.”

Even after all this time, every time they found a body, I went back to the night of the accident. The endless hours as they searched for him. The pain when they gave up hope of finding him. I don’t know what difference finding his body would make to me now. I knew he was gone, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. Every time they found someone in the water, I found myself at the morgue, waiting for an identification. Maybe I needed a body to put it behind me. I don’t know, but it certainly wasn’t Jonas’ fault. I should have been able to handle it by now. I waved off his apology and waited for him to go on.

“Okay, well, anyway, we located the body. Fortunately, it hadn’t been in the water long and based on your description and the video footage we caught of him, I’d say your boy, Denzel, met with a rather painful end sometime early this morning.”

What? Denzel was dead? Jonas’ words were cutting through the fog that wrapped around me when he mentioned the body. I looked up confused, to see Jonas watching me closely. “In case, you’re wondering, it looks like foul play, and he’s connected to you. I’d say you’re pretty fortunate that the guard can verify your whereabouts for the past 24 hours, or we’d be having this discussion at the station.”

“Are you kidding me?” I was horrified that he would even think such a thing. “What possible motive would I have for killing Denzel? I don’t even know him.”

“We just have your word for that. We know you’ve been involved in at least three altercations with him. Possibly more, if we can put him in a black BMW. You hunt him down in the hospital, he spots you and takes off and now he’s dead. Add that to the fact that you’re keeping secrets, and that would put you right at the top of the suspect list.” Anger rolled off him in waves, and I could feel my own anger rise in response.

“I can’t believe you’re saying this. First of all, he threw the coffee at me. I didn’t attack him. Second, he shot at you, and I saved you, and finally, I didn’t

hunt him down. I thought there was a highly unlikely possibility that the man who had just tried to kill you was in the hospital after the nurse told me about the guy with a busted hand and I decided to check it out. I didn't open the door. I didn't threaten him. I didn't do anything! He ran because he knew I would report him."

Our raised voices had alarmed the floor nurse who was hurrying into the room. Not caring about having an audience, Jonas stood and braced himself on the bed, leaning over me.

"And just how did you save my life?" he whispered. "Did you slam the door on his hand?"

I gasped, my eyes wide with shock. I had meant that I had warned him, distracted Denzel at the pivotal moment. The thought that I had somehow managed to slam the car door had never entered my mind. It had, however, popped into his. Was Jonas right? Did I slam the door? The realization that it might be possible sent shock waves coursing through me. Oh dear Lord, what is going on? If I had slammed the door without realizing it, what else had I done that I didn't know about?

My questions hung in the air, unasked and unanswered, as the nurse escorted Jonas from the room.

9

TWO DAYS LATER I was a free woman. Released from the hospital, I was still somewhat shaky on my feet, but the swelling had gone down enough that I could see out of my left eye again. My bruises had faded from the violent black and blue to lovely green and yellow tones that only served to punctuate the dark circles under my eyes, but I was happy to be gone from the sterile confines of the hospital and on my way to Mama D's to finish out my recovery.

The first time I had stepped into the house that Trinity had bought for her grandmother, I knew it was more than a house. It was a home. A real home. The sparkling windows and scrubbed floor were softened with cushioned rugs and sheer curtains billowed with the air from the open windows. Pots of flowers dotted the tables and sat nestled in corners, giving the house a fragrant breath of life and color. As cozy as it was, though, it wasn't the decor that made it a home. It was Mama D. From Trinity's stories, the love of Mama D had always been there, in good times and bad, no matter the circumstances. Without Mama D there, it would have just been another house.

I felt a pang of remorse for the parents I could barely remember and the family I would never have. Killed in a plane crash when I was seven, I remembered my parents only in bits and pieces of time. Sometimes I would catch a scent in the air that would stir my senses and take me back in time to memories otherwise forgotten. I might not have remembered a lot from back then, but what memories I had were good ones. Of laughter and love and a house full of joy.

Unfortunately, most of my childhood memories were of after the accident. I'd gone to live with my father's sister, Vivian, a woman I had never even heard of, much less met. She was a young, single woman focused on her career. She had no idea what to do with me, but there were no other options, no other family existed. That Vivian had appeared on the scene was nothing short of a miracle. If she hadn't taken me in, I would have ended up a ward of the state.

To say it was a rocky relationship would be an understatement. Aunt Vivian had a firm set of rules and a firmer hand with punishment when those rules were broken. I had learned over time and some rather painful lessons, when to question and when to keep quiet, fearful but grateful to have a place to call home.

However lacking her parenting skills, she did have the funds to ensure that I

never lacked for anything. I was sent to the best schools, had the best clothes, and went to the best places. She had given me everything she had, except the time and the love that I so desperately needed. The older I became, the less time we spent together, each of us going our own direction. By the time I went off to college, we had become strangers. I never saw her again after that. Didn't really even hear from her except for the obligatory and stilted phone calls on holidays and birthdays.

Time passed, and then when I was 20, I got the phone call. Aunt Vivian was gone. She'd suffered a massive coronary, and there had been nothing they could do. I flew back to arrange the funeral. Sold the house and most of the furniture, and donated her personal items to charity. There was nothing there I really wanted that belonged to her. I didn't want to be reminded of my time there. The exception was my Grandmother's silver service. That belonged to me. I packed it in my suitcase and left, closing the door on the house and the memories it held. For the first time in my life, I was completely on my own, with no one to answer to. No one to judge me. Just me. Completely alone.

Five years later, I had gone to dinner with Trinity and found a new family. Mama D had taken me into the fold, and I had found a place to belong. A good place, full of laughter, acceptance and love. Now, as we pulled up to Mama D's, I knew I had two to three days ahead of me of constant hovering, home-cooked meals and lots of tender loving care. I could hardly wait.

* * *

IT WAS RIGHT after breakfast on my second day there that Mama D led Jonas Hill into the kitchen.

"This man says he knows you and needs to have a word," Mama D announced. "Is that so?"

Mama D looked ready to toss Jonas out on his ear if I indicated that he wasn't welcome, the thought of which, had me smiling as I assured her that I did indeed know him. She got him settled at the table with a cup of coffee and one of her famous homemade cinnamon rolls, before heading out to the garden to give us some privacy.

I hadn't seen Jonas since our blow up at the hospital several days earlier. The guard he had posted at my door had disappeared sometime the next day. I wasn't

concerned. No matter how angry Jonas was with me, I knew he would never have called off the guard if he thought there was any danger. I had filled Trinity in on what had happened with Jonas, and she was as confused and frustrated as I was about what was happening. I'd had a lot of time to think about things while in the hospital. I still didn't have any answers, but I thought I had a better grasp on things.

"I hope you're here to tell me some good news," I started in while he lifted the roll, plate and all to his nose and inhaled deeply.

"Yes, and no," he replied, finally taking a bite out of the roll. "We've just identified your friend Denzel from his prints. Records indicate he's one Marcus Adams out of Omaha." Jonas frowned as he stopped to take a sip of coffee. "I don't know about you, but Marcus didn't impress me as having come in off the farm. I found him to be a little more uptown."

I nodded my agreement, wondering where this was going. The last time we'd talked about Denzel, er, Marcus it hadn't gone well and I had decided to keep quiet until I saw where Jonas was heading.

"That's the good news. Bad news is, all we have is a name and a location. Nothing else." He finished off the roll and stood up. Strolling over to the window, he watched Mama D working the garden, obviously waiting for me to say something.

"A dead-end?" I asked, not just a little confused. Jonas was good at his job, and I had no doubt that if there were information to be had, he would have found it.

"A big one. We have an identification, which I am almost certain is false, and a body, and that's pretty much it."

I digested this while Jonas toured the kitchen and headed into the living room. Picking up my coffee, I followed him, mulling over the implications of Jonas's news in my head. Everyone has a past. Everyone leaves a paper trail. The fact that Marcus didn't meant he had friends in high places. Someone who could make him disappear. I felt my muscles tense, as my gaze flew to the window, and the street beyond. Marcus Adams wasn't working alone. Someone else was out there.

Picking up a Christmas photo taken a few years ago, Jonas held it up to me, chuckling, "Don't you ever feel funny being the only white child in a black family?"

"No, I don't, and shame on you for saying such a thing," I chided, taking the photo from him. He might have been joking, but it still bothered me, his tease being a reminder that prejudice still existed. He looked at the photo and saw the color. I looked at it, and all I saw was love. I had come for Christmas dinner and

afterward we had set up the camera and taken a group photo. It had been a happier time then before Kevin had been killed. Before I had met Keith and lost him. We hadn't known what the future held, but we had endured. We had supported each other through staggering heartache and loss and formed a bond that would last a lifetime.

Looking at the photo now, I realized this family of mine was in danger now. Marcus Adams worked for someone, and now Marcus was dead. If Marcus had been after me, I was willing to bet there was someone else already in place to step into his recently vacated shoes. Well great. Just great.

Jonas watched the emotions play over my face and reached out to take the photo from my hands.

"I'll drive you home," he said softly. I nodded and headed out to the garden to say my goodbyes.

10

JONAS NOT ONLY drove me home, but he came in and searched the place too. As he was looking in closets and under the bed, I found myself more and more concerned. Just in case he hadn't noticed, I informed him his paranoia was freaking me out, which didn't stop him from going out to check the balcony.

When he finally left, after ordering me to lock the door and set the alarm, I couldn't have been more relieved. As nice as it was to be mothered and pampered by Mama D, there really was no place like home. Surprised at the thought, I headed into the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee.

After Keith died, I was sure I would never have that feeling again. That wherever I lived, at the end of the day, it would always be a 'place', not a home. I was even more convinced when I sold the house that Keith and I had bought right after the wedding. We had furnished it ourselves, enjoying picking out the furniture together. I had lasted nearly six months after the funeral before I couldn't stand being in the house for another minute without him. Every room held a memory, every piece of furniture a story. I sold the house and everything in it. I would never forget him, but the sadness of the empty house tore at my heart every time I opened the door.

I had moved into the city, bought a brand new condo and new furniture, determined to make a new home with new memories. However, regardless of my intent, my new place had remained just that. A new place. Until now. This was the first time I had come through the door, relieved to be here. Maybe it was all the turmoil of the past week or the hospital stay, or maybe a new sense of awareness came along with the Telekinesis thing. Whatever the reason, I thought, as I took my cup of coffee and snuggled into my sofa, I was glad. I had finally come home.

* * *

THE RINGING OF the phone brought me up with a jolt. I'd fallen asleep on the sofa, and now, the blaring of the phone was having a definite impact on my

ability to wake up enough to coordinate getting off the sofa and locate where I had laid the cordless phone.

“Yeah?” I mumbled when I finally found the phone, which was unaccountably sitting in its charging base where it should have been. Go figure.

“I’m coming over with dinner and a plan.” It was Trinity and from the sound of the background noise, she was in her car.

Glancing out the window, I saw the lengthened shadows and realized I must have been out for quite some time. As I watched, a patrol car slid slowly by and parked just up the street from the building. Hm. Interesting.

“Are you listening to me? Hello? Hello?”

“Yes, I’m listening.” I may not have been totally focused on the subject at hand, my mind still on the patrol car sitting outside, but I had the gist of it. “You’re coming over with dinner and a plan.”

“That’s right. I’ll be there in 10. You have stuff to drink?”

I abandoned my post at the window and wondered over to the refrigerator to peruse the contents. “I have Diet Coke, water, and week old tea.”

“Coke is good, I’m bringing pizza. See you in a few.”

Pizza again? That was a first. Not that I was complaining. She hung up, and I tossed the phone on the counter while I dumped the tea down the drain. Any good southerner knows, tea is best fresh. Nothing worse tasting than old iced tea, unless it’s tea from a metal dispenser. Yuck.

Another peek out the window let me know the patrol car was still there, and I decided to give Jonas a ring to check it out. Picking up my cell I discovered I had slept through a couple of calls and a voice mail. Second time that had happened. This falling asleep thing was getting to be a habit. I could excuse it this time because I had a concussion, after all, but still, I had never slept through calls before, and it bothered me that I had. Of course, a lot of things were bothering me lately. Not the least of which was this whole business with Marcus and the police now stationed outside.

I listened to a voice mail from Jonas proving my suspicions were right about the patrol car. That was his handiwork. I shook myself as a feeling of unease tensed the muscles in my back. Jonas was worried, and that worried me. The second caller had blocked his number and didn’t leave a message. It wasn’t all that unusual, probably a wrong number, but something to let Jonas know about, just in case. Looking around, I noticed the shadows deepening in the condo and flipping on a light, made my way around until I had checked all the windows and made sure they were locked up tight and the alarm was on. So much for feeling safe and secure.

By the time Trinity arrived with the pizza, I had managed to splash some

water on my face and run a brush through my hair. I actually looked half way presentable or so I thought before I opened the door to Trinity.

“You look awful,” she informed me, balancing the pizza box and a large bag while kicking the door shut with her foot. “You should have stayed at Gram’s a few more days. I can’t believe you just up and left like that.”

“I didn’t just up and leave. I needed to get home and get some sense of normal back into my life. Besides, Mama D was spoiling me rotten.” I didn’t see the need to explain my rapid departure to Mama D, or Trinity either, for that matter. If there was indeed someone after me, my presence was the only real danger to either of them. Watching Trinity disappear around the corner, I reasoned that she was safe enough for the time being. It was still relatively early, the police were keeping an eye on the place, and I didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to try anything when I wasn’t alone and an easy mark. Just to be on the safe side, though, I double-checked the lock on the door and reset the alarm before I followed her and the scent of pepperoni into the kitchen.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked while pulling the soda from the fridge and grabbing a couple of glasses. I hoped it wasn’t salad. I wasn’t in the mood for healthy.

“That’s the plan,” she answered cryptically. “I’ll explain after dinner.”

Oh boy. She was up to something. Maybe salad would have been the lesser evil. I had slept through lunch and by the time we had gotten plates and napkins on the table, I was ready to dig in. Trinity told me about her day and filled me in on the progress on our Atlanta felon, as we munched away.

I had barely finished my last piece when she swept away a clear spot and heaved her big bag up onto the table with a flourish and stupid grin on her face. I covered my eyes with one hand, half afraid to look at what she was up to.

“Aren’t you curious as to my plan?” she asked as she began digging around in the bag. I watched as she put a glass bowl, a roll of aluminum foil, a box of straws and other items out on the table and had to admit that I was, in fact, curious.

“Okay, we’re all set,” she declared as she threw the empty bag onto the floor and sat back down. “I just have to make the wheel.”

This should be good, I thought, having no idea what she was going to use to make a wheel. The answer became apparent when she ripped off a piece of foil and started folding it into a square and triangles.

“Trinity, I hate to break it to you, but wheels are round.” I knew it would irritate her, but I just couldn’t help myself. She was so intent concentrating on that foil.

“Ha, ha, ha, Miss Know it all. This is a psi wheel, and it’s supposed to be this

way.” She had finished with her folding and grabbed a can of play-doh that had been hidden behind a big bottle and some of the other items. Tearing a plug of doh out of the can, she slapped it on the table, and then stuck a straight pin in it, pointed straight up.

“You know that’s dangerous, right?” I said, amused. “Someone could lose an eye.”

“Someone better not,” she snapped back, obviously not as amused as I was. Before I knew it, she was unfolding the piece of foil that she’d just spent 5 minutes carefully folding up. Then she sat the foil on the straight pin, exactly in the middle, turned the glass bowl upside-down and plopped it down on the table, covering the foil completely.

Satisfied, she stood back, hands on her hips and looked at me.

“Okay, Yoda, do your thing. Make it spin,” she ordered, circling her finger in the air for effect.

Yoda? I looked at the bowl, and the foil suspended on the pin inside and realized what she was doing. Trinity wanted me to make it spin around. With my mind. She had indeed made a psi wheel, and making it spin was one of the tests for confirming Telekinesis. Trinity had obviously been doing some homework on the websites I had given her. After my torture with the spoons, I hadn’t even thought about doing any of the so-called tests that were listed, but apparently Trinity had other ideas.

“Come on, Taylor. Concentrate! You’re not even trying.” She shuffled around behind me and leaned down. “Use the force,” she whispered in her best Obi Won imitation. I probably could have held it together, but when she started in with the heavy breathing, I lost it. Before I knew it, we were both convulsed with laughter and struggling to catch some air.

“This was your plan, Trinity?” I asked, wiping tears from my face. “Testing my so called abilities?”

“No.” She was sprawled in her chair with her arms holding her stomach. “My plan was to see you laugh. Things have gotten pretty intense lately.”

I nodded agreement while feeling my cheekbones, which were sore and taking another swipe at my own eyes, flopped back in my own chair exhausted.

“Well, your plan worked, and I feel much better now. My face hurts, but I feel better.”

“Good.” Trinity started picking up the testing materials and stuffing them back in the bag. “Now, maybe you can explain the police surveillance outside then?”

Oops. I raised my eyebrows innocently at her, but she wasn’t buying it.

“Don’t even go there, Taylor. I may not be the investigator you are or have

psychic powers, but I can put two and two together and get four. Gram said Jonas came by, and you left with him. I figured something was up, and it wasn't good. The police car out front confirmed it, although I don't know what good he is doing sitting out in the street."

"He's a deterrent," I explained needlessly since she knew exactly why he was there. "Jonas came by Mama D's this morning to tell me there's no background history on Denzel."

"No background history?" Trinity stopped as the implications hit her. "Who's this guy working for?"

"My question exactly. His name was supposedly Marcus Adams, and he hailed from Omaha. That's all there is on him," I said as I headed into the kitchen with the trash and to put some coffee on.

Trinity was right on my heels.

"So this Marcus fellow was following you, right? Keeping an eye on you. Then you grab his coffee, and suddenly everything escalates."

"Right," I confirmed, pulling down a couple of mugs. Trinity was no dummy. She had already figured this out. "The turning point was the coffee incident."

We stood silently for a moment watching the coffee drip, each of us lost in thought. Finally, I broke the silence.

"I have to tell Jonas about the Telekinesis. Somehow it's at the center of this, and he doesn't stand a chance of finding out what's going on without knowing the whole story."

Trinity nodded her silent agreement. I looked at the phone, dreading the prospect of telling Jonas that what he suspected, might actually be true. If Trinity had done her homework, and apparently she had, considering the psi wheel, then she knew there was no proof that anyone actually had Telekinesis. If word got out that I did, or even thought I did, things were going to change, big time. The more people who knew about it, the more likely it was that word would get out, and life would end as I knew it. Problem was, I wasn't too sure that hadn't already happened. Sighing audibly, I resigned myself to the inevitable, picked up the phone and made the call.

11

“WHAT ARE YOU doing here?” Jonas demanded as I ushered him into the living room. His words were directed at Trinity, who responded as any attorney would.

“I’m her *laww-yyer*.” She dragged out the lawyer part, implying Jonas might be having trouble keeping up.

“I wasn’t aware she needed a lawyer,” he snapped back, not missing a beat. Turning around, he fixed me with a glare. “Do you *need* a lawyer?”

“Hey!” I could be as assertive as the next person. “Leave me out of this. If you two want to go a round, don’t let me stop you. Just tell me when you’re finished and we can get down to business.”

Trinity sat back down in the chair she had leapt up from when Jonas had entered and started in on her.

“He started it,” she mumbled under her breath.

I heard it, and so did Jonas, who snorted loudly and took a seat as far from Trinity as he could get. The tension was so thick in the room you could cut it with a knife. They were both perched on the edge of their seats, looking like they were ready to spring up and do battle should the occasion arise. Whatever was going on here, was more than professional dislike. Either they hated each other for some reason unknown to me, or ... hell had indeed frozen over and Jonas, the dedicated cop with no time or desire for a social life and Trinity, man-hating she-devil, were attracted to each other. Heaven help me. Like I didn’t have enough on my plate already.

“Okay, kids. Settle down.” I felt the need to set some ground rules before things went any further. The last thing I needed was a war between the two of them while trying to deal with everything else.

“Jonas, Trinity is here as my friend, not as my lawyer, and Trinity, I invited Jonas here, so let’s all try to be civilized.” I gave them both the eye until Trinity leaned back and Jonas pulled out his notepad and pen and indicated he was ready to do business. “Jonas, I would prefer you wait to take notes until I tell you why I called. I believe it may have something to do with what’s been happening, but I would prefer to keep it as private as possible. Just hear me out and then we can all decide on what to do next.”

“Fine.” Jonas tossed the pad and pen onto the table in front of him. “Tell me. I’m all ears.”

Not exactly friendly, but not overtly hostile either. I glanced over at Trinity as she nodded encouragement and began to tell my story.

An hour later, I was finished. I'd told him everything and now sat braced, waiting to see what happened next.

"I knew it," Jonas exclaimed, slapping his thighs in excitement. "*I knew it!*" Jumping up, he began to pace the room. "I knew you two were keeping something from me and that thing in the hospital? You nearly took my coffee! Just like you did with Marcus."

"Wait a minute. You believe her?" Trinity was watching him tour the room, as was I. I had expected a reaction, but certainly not this one.

"Lady, I'm from the swamps of Louisiana. There's not much I haven't seen, and most of it can't be explained. My own Grandmother had the sight. So yes, in answer to your question, I do believe her." His pacing came to stop right in front of me, and I looked up to see him towering over my head.

"However, this does put an interesting spin on things," he said, looking down at me like I was some sort of specimen on display. Not a good feeling and one that I was sure I was going to experience more and more in the future. The feeling of claustrophobia was nearly overwhelming. I could actually feel my heartbeat pulsing in my veins as an unbearable heat began to climb up my neck. Almost instantly a fine sheet of sweat cloaked my skin, and the instinct to flee was overwhelming.

"I need a coffee." I abruptly announced and managed to wiggle around Jonas, who didn't bother to move, and hightailed it into the kitchen. I only had a minute to catch my breath before Jonas and Trinity came through the door behind me.

"Guys, I need some space here for a minute," I said waving them off. "Just give me a couple of seconds."

Surprisingly, they did an about face and headed back into the living room without saying a word. The kitchen instantly felt larger, and I felt my pulse rate slow down along with my breathing. Was that a panic attack? I'd never had one before, so I didn't know for sure, but whatever it was, I knew I didn't want it to happen again. My hands were a little shaky, and it felt like my hair was standing on end, but as I ran my hand over my head, everything felt normal. I picked up the coffee to pour a cup, and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps now might be a good time to switch to decaf. Then again, nothing like that had happened before, and I always hit the caffeine heavy. Shaking my head, I made my way back into the living room, only to find Jonas and Trinity sitting on the sofa, side by side, watching me.

"What?" I looked behind me but didn't see anything. "What?" I asked again,

a little more firmly.

“You didn’t feel that?” Trinity asked, incredulous.

“Feel what?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

Jonas mumbled something under his breath.

“Watch your language,” Trinity snapped, jabbing him a good one with her elbow.

I hadn’t heard what he’d said, but Trinity obviously had and she didn’t approve. Mama D had strict rules on cursing and after being smacked for breaking them on numerous occasions, they had been engrained bone deep on Trinity for all eternity. Even so, I had never heard her call anyone else down on it.

He glared at her and promptly vacated his seat. He passed by the chairs and went instead to lean against the window sill, putting himself well outside her range. Trinity was glaring right back at him, and he turned his back on her, focusing his attention out the window, ignoring her as she blew out a heavy sigh and looked to me for support. I wasn’t sure what to do. Jonas was obviously rattled and Trinity, normally the epitome of professionalism, had just nearly broken his ribs. One minute they had at least been civil to each other and now they were at each other’s throats, the truce over practically before it had even begun. Something had obviously happened to set them off. I may have missed it, but whatever it was they had definitely picked up on it, and it had shaken them both.

At a loss, I glanced from Trinity to Jonas and saw him suddenly stiffen, setting off my inner alarm. Something was wrong. In an instant, he was moving, drawing his gun as he whirled around, but he was too late. The lights went out, just as the front door was kicked open.

They were on us before we knew what was happening. Backlit from the emergency lights in the outside hallway, I could make out four of them, rushing toward us. I had an instant of indecision, then hurled my hot coffee in their direction, and dove to the floor as blue light streaked across the room. Tasers. They aimed for Jonas and missed, catching the chair he was behind instead. I heard a gun go off and prayed it was Jonas that had fired.

One of the intruders grabbed Trinity and as she fought back, backhand her, knocking her onto the floor. As he drew back his fist to strike her again, I flung myself across the living room and into him, sending him sprawling. Jonas and two men were locked in a mass of flailing fists and kicking feet. For an instant, it looked like Jonas was winning, but as one man rolled away, I saw a glint of light bounce off the gun that appeared in his hand as he took aim at Jonas. Someone grabbed my leg and began dragging me across the room towards the door.

Trinity was screaming, and I watched in horror as the man rose from the floor behind her, a knife clutched in his hand. It was too late. There was nothing I could do to help either of them as I was being dragged, kicking from the room.

“Nooooo!” My desperate scream was drowned out by an explosion. The windows shattered, and I watched, transfixed, as shards of glass went flying through the condo, mere inches above my face. Cries of pain echoed off the walls as the deadly missiles found their mark, the metallic smell of blood filling the air. The hands gripping my leg fell away as an eerie silence settled over the room. I laid still, paralyzed by fear, terrified that Jonas and Trinity might be gone. Then I heard it, barely audible above the sound of my own breathing. Someone was there, moving quietly through the room. I waited, not moving, as he moved closer, weighing my options.

“Don’t hurt me, I’m on your side,” his voice quietly whispered in my ear, distorted and raspy.

Unable to see, I could sense him moving away into the darkness. Disoriented, I tried to shake off the confusion in my brain and concentrate, struggling to make sense of his words. My arms and legs felt strange, and I had trouble catching my breath. Panic began to take hold as I listened intently for clues as to where Trinity and Jonas were. The silence was deafening, and my heart began to hammer in my chest. I started to roll over, intent on making my way to Trinity, only to find I couldn’t move. My arms and legs were unresponsive, leaving me pinned on my back to the floor. My breath came out in ragged gasps as I realized how defenseless I was.

“Stop it,” his voice hissed out from the darkness and then suddenly he was back, hovering over me. “You’re safe. Try to calm down.”

Safe? My body began to shake uncontrollably, and I felt the wetness of tears on my face. Where were Jonas and Trinity? Were they safe? I struggled to ask, but couldn’t seem to make my mouth work right, my lips unable to form the words. *Oh God, help me!* I prayed as the man moved closer.

“You’ve been tasered. Do you understand me?” he whispered impatiently.

He reached over to brush the hair from my face, and I inwardly flinched, my brain refusing to accept that he was trying to help me. Tasered? That would explain why I couldn’t move, couldn’t talk. The blare of sirens in the distance began to filter through the haze of panic surrounding me, and I could just make out the sound of Trinity crying softly somewhere behind me. She was alive. Relief poured through me at the realization. *Thank you, thank you.*

“Trinity’s okay. Taylor, do you hear me?” It was Jonas, his big hand closed on my shoulder, giving me the reassurance I so desperately needed. “You need to calm down. You’re all right. Everything is okay.”

“I need to get her out of here,” the man next to me interrupted, and I realized with a shock he was talking about me. “You can’t protect her. I can. It’s what I’m trained for.” I felt him shift position as the sound of sirens neared. “You and the girl coming or not, makes no difference to me, but I’m leaving.”

Suddenly, I was flung up over his shoulder and without hesitation, he began moving to the door. He was taking me! “Jonas!” I silently screamed, still unable to form words, “Stop him!”

“We’re coming,” Jonas snapped out. Suddenly he was there beside me, and I felt the flutter of Trinity’s hand on my back as we moved to the doorway.

“Stay to the shadows,” came the command, and with that, we melted into the darkness, fleeing into the night.

* * *

WHAT SEEMED LIKE an eternity later, I was flopped onto the ground behind some bushes. The feeling was beginning to come back into my limbs, and although I was a long way from moving around, I definitely felt the impact. My abductor suddenly loomed over me, grabbed my chin and turned my face to look at him.

“Stay here and stay quiet,” he ordered, and then he and Jonas disappeared beyond the brush. Trinity crawled over, and curling into a ball, huddled close to me, shivering.

She was going into shock. Even in my confused state, I knew enough first aid to realize that but there was nothing I could do to help her. At least, for the time being, we seemed to be safe. I concentrated on trying to move and found, much to my relief, that with a lot of effort, I could move my arms and legs. The more I moved them, the easier it became, and within minutes, I managed to roll over. Using my elbows to drag myself, I managed to move enough to see through the bushes just in time to catch the sight of flames erupting from what was once my kitchen window. I watched in disbelief as, within seconds, the whole condo was engulfed, lit up like a beacon in the night.

My involuntary gasp alerted Trinity, and she crawled over to join me. Turning to look at her, I could see flecks of blood on her face reflecting the firelight and the tears in her eyes.

“What is going on?” she whispered, her eyes on the flames.

I didn't bother to answer, as the scream of the fire alarms suddenly tore through the night and I found my attention focused on the exit doors, willing my neighbors out of the building. It seemed an eternity before the doors finally opened, and people began making their way out to safety.

The sound of sirens joined with the fire alarms and the wash of blue and red lights against the buildings announced the arrival of police and fire crews. We watched in silence as the police attempted to sort out the distraught homeowners that were now pouring into the parking lot as the fire took hold and began to spread.

Movement caught my eye at the back of the building, and I held my breath as two bodies separated from the crowd and started to make their way in our direction. Blankets covering their heads, I couldn't be sure that it was Jonas and company, and decided to play it safe. Motioning to Trinity, we backed into the bushes as far as possible and waited. The two stopped on the far side of the bushes and stood watching the fire for a moment.

"It looks clear. Put these on and cover up your heads," the man ordered, dropping the blankets to us. "Taylor, can you walk?"

"I have no idea," I replied automatically, thrilled that I could form words again. Talking was one thing, walking something else altogether. The way my legs felt, I was pretty sure I would nose plant as soon as I tried, but was more than willing to give it a go.

"Trinity, help her up and see if you can keep her standing. It can't look like anyone has been injured, or we'll invite help we don't want."

I managed to get into a sitting position, and we covered ourselves as much as we could with the blankets. Looking into Trinity's eyes, I could see the doubt and fear that I was sure was mirrored in my own. She nodded at me and together we began to rise. We somehow got to a standing position, but that was as far as my legs were willing to go. Teetering on what felt like a pair of stilts, I clung to Trinity for support.

"She can't walk," Trinity's voice trembled. "What do I do?"

Within seconds, my abductor was around the bushes and pulled me into his side. With his arm around my waist, he took my weight off my legs and started moving slowly forward. Trinity followed him and before long, we became a group of displaced survivors, joining others as we moved through the parking lot.

"Do you have a plan, or are you just going to drag me around all night?" I asked none too nicely. "If you squeeze me any tighter, I won't be able to breathe."

"Would you rather I let you fall on the ground?" He had a point, but still, I

needed some down time. It felt like my ribs were being crushed. “We’re headed to my van, but we have to go slow to not draw attention. If we run, someone might get suspicious.” He said it like he was talking to a two-year-old.

“Really?” I gasped, my patience and air running thin. “Then I’m going to need to stop for a minute to get some air.”

He paused and turned me into his chest, putting both arms around me. He smelled of smoke and sweat, but he was a solid surface, and my nerves were shot more than I wanted to admit. I watched the firemen over his shoulder as they geared up to enter the building, looking for anyone still inside, while others trained plumes of water on the building. I had a perfect view of the condos and the flames that consumed them and feared they would be too late to save much of anything. Tears sprang to my eyes as I thought of what had happened, how close we had come to being killed, how my home was gone, along with a lot of other people’s homes. How it was all my fault. They had come after me and were willing to kill innocent people to get me. Shivers ran down my spine as the burden of guilt overwhelmed me, and I felt his arms tighten around me as if he could sense my lack of strength to go on.

“Did you have to set it on fire?” I asked quietly, not wanting my voice to carry to other groups huddled nearby. “All these people. What if someone’s still in there?”

“I didn’t.” His words were quiet, but his voice was tight. I had felt the jerk that had gone through him at my words and the tension that still remained there. “The fire was well under way when we got back to your place. We did pull the alarms though and helped get people out. That’s what took so long.”

He was acting as if I’d insulted him and maybe I had. So far, all he’d done was risk his life to help us, carry me out of the building, drag me through the parking lot, and was standing here now holding me up, so I didn’t fall on my face, but that didn’t automatically make him my new best friend. I believed him, though. First because he did seem hurt that I thought he had done it, and second, because Jonas had been with him and I knew Jonas would have stopped him from risking so many lives.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, feeling maybe I owed him that much.

“It’s all right,” came the whisper in my ear. “Can you move now?”

I nodded, and he lowered me slowly until my full weight was back on my feet and surprisingly, they held. I took a tentative step and then another. If we moved slow, I was fairly certain I could manage. He kept an arm around me, and we started off again.

Jonas and Trinity had waited for us, and we joined them, moving as a group away from the fire and the light it gave off. As the darkness closed around us, I

had the fleeting idea that this must have been what Lot and his family felt like as they fled the city of Gomorrah in the Old Testament. But unlike Lot's wife, I accepted my fate. Life had changed in an instant, just as I had feared.

It happened because of me and what I was, but I was not the one who had done this tonight. I kept reminding myself of that as we made our way to the van. I was not the guilty party, but someone out there was. The need for justice that had always guided my life guided me now. The guilty were out there. I would find them, and they would pay. It was what I did. It was who I was. So I kept my eyes forward and kept walking.

12

ONE OF THE great things about Little Rock is that you can be out of the city within minutes and out in the middle of nowhere before you realize it. As modern as the city is, the backwoods are never far away. As soon as we had settled in the van, we headed west, and within minutes, we had left the lights of Little Rock behind.

The ride had been quiet, everyone entrenched in their own thoughts, as we made our way around the winding hills and back country roads. No one had appeared to notice us as we made our escape, as I thought of it, for lack of a better term or explanation, all attention being focused on the fire.

Trinity was asleep on the seat next to me. She had pretty much collapsed by the time we got to the van, shock having set in completely. Jonas had wrapped her in the blankets and secured her with the seatbelt. The shivering that had gripped her stopped, and she appeared to be sleeping peacefully, which I was extremely grateful for. My mind was reeling with the impact that tonight's events would have on everyone's life, including my own. I was anxious to sit down with our rescuer, as I now referred to him, deciding he had graduated from my first impression as an abductor and find out exactly what he knew. It was obvious, he knew more than we did and frankly, I found the fact somewhat scary.

Watching him as he drove, I still had no idea who he was or what he looked like. Having seen him only in the dark and the shadows, I only had the suggestion of size, and features. Nothing solid. Jonas was giving him the once over too, and the tension between them radiated through the van. Jonas may have played along with our new friend's suggestions, but he didn't trust him.

I could barely look at Jonas without my heart tearing in two. The implications of what he had done tonight were horrible. There were dead people back there, police work to be done. Jonas had inside knowledge of what had happened and yet he was here with us. He had turned his back on his profession and his oath to uphold the law. Maybe the police didn't know he was involved. Didn't know he'd been at the condo. But I was afraid it really wouldn't matter in the long run. Jonas knew he had been there. He knew he had left the scene and covered up evidence. Being a man of integrity, I had no idea how Jonas was going to reconcile things, or even if he could. I just knew that when I looked at him, my soul bled, because what he had done, he had done for me. So many lives changed and for what? I turned my head to stare into the darkness outside

the window. It was easier than looking at these people, whose lives I had just ruined.

* * *

THE VAN SLOWED, and we pulled onto a dirt track. As we bounced over the ruts and dips, I looked out the back window to see curtains of tree branches swing back into place, effectively hiding our passage. As we rolled to a stop, the dark outline of a house was just barely visible through the van window.

“Take the women inside,” the driver ordered Jonas. “I’ll move the van into the barn.”

The hair stood up on the back of my neck as the tension between them escalated, and I held my breath as Jonas weighed his options, ready to move quickly, should he decide to take charge.

“Is there a problem?” It wasn’t a question. It was a challenge. I braced myself as I looked to Jonas for some clue as how to proceed. Seconds ticked by as they sized each other up. Finally, Jonas made his decision.

“No problem,” he said, never losing eye contact with the other man.

“I thought you had sorted this out earlier tonight. Before it was too late,” the driver said, as Jonas opened his door and got out.

“Let’s get something straight,” Jonas said, as he leaned back into the van. “Should I decide differently, it will never be too late.”

The driver nodded slowly at Jonas. “Understood.”

Jonas softly closed the door and made his way around the van to get Trinity. I reached over and unbuckled her as the side door slid open. I helped him slide her out and then, still moving slowly, managed to get out my own door. We stumbled up the dark, rickety steps as the van sped off behind us.

The main door didn’t open directly into the cabin. Instead, we found ourselves standing in a small, apparently windowless room, as it went pitch black when I closed the creaky door behind us.

“Huh,” Jonas grunted. “Taylor, feel around and find the other door. I can pretty much guarantee it’s not on the wall opposite the one we just came through.”

I groped my way along the wall from the door I had just closed and sure enough, found another door handle on the adjoining wall. It turned easily and

opened quietly into the cabin, which was dimly lit. We passed through, and Jonas kicked the door shut with one foot while shifting Trinity in his arms. I found a light switch and flicked it on, flooding the main room with bright light.

Jonas deposited Trinity on the sofa, and she immediately curled into the fetal position still sound asleep. He reached over and took her pulse, nodding to me when he had finished that she was okay.

“What was that business with the door?” I asked as he came to his feet. I’d seen similar entrances at gun ranges, to keep the noise level down, but this was no gun range and the area between the doors much larger than the simple setup at the range.

“Double door, keeps the light from escaping. You always have one door closed before you open the other. Plenty of room to defend from. Windows are blacked out too,” he said, pointing to the nearest wall. “From the outside, this place looks deserted. Someone was either thinking ahead, or they’re up to no good.”

Jonas’s words were still echoing in my head when the door swooshed open behind me and our missing partner in crime sailed into the room.

“Okay, now that things have calmed down, I want some answers,” I demanded, advancing on him. “Just who are you?”

My voice had risen with each word and by the time I reached him, I was practically yelling. He never had a chance to answer because Trinity suddenly popped up from the sofa startling us all. There was fear in her eyes, and she was ready to run.

“I’m sorry, Trinity, ” I apologized, realizing I’d scared her out of her sleep. “Everything’s okay. We’re all right. I didn’t mean to yell. I’m just tired, and it’s been a rough night. I’m sorry.”

“I know you are. I’m tired too.” She got up and headed toward the table, clutching the blankets around her, the ends dragging on the floor. Jonas watched her totter towards a chair, ready to catch her if she went down, but she made it without incident. Arranging her blankets around her like royal robes, she turned to Jonas.

“I want to apologize for my behavior. I would have hoped I could have handled myself better in this type of situation, but obviously, I couldn’t,” she sniffed out. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

All three of us just stared at her. There she sat, bloody and battered, one eye turning black and her clothes in shreds. She was lucky to be alive, and she was apologizing for not handling it better. Heaven help me, I started to laugh.

Trinity looked horrified, and the men worried as my laughter started to sound strange, even to me. Apparently, Trinity wasn’t the only one suffering from

shock. I got it under control and tried to shake it off.

"I'm okay," I said, trying to reassure them. I wasn't successful if their expressions were any indication. Not that I could blame them. I wasn't all that confident myself. I looked at Trinity and the spots of blood on her face and tried to get my priorities in order

"We could probably use a first aid kit if you have one," I said, directing my words to our unknown host. "Some food would probably be a good idea too. Then we can talk."

"I agree," he replied, earning a raised eyebrow from Jonas, who received one right back in return. "There's food in the kitchen. I'll fetch the first aid kit from the storage room." He paused at the doorway of what I had to assume was the storage room and turned to me. "Taylor, to answer your question? My name is Mac, and I'm your Watcher."

With that he disappeared into the other room, leaving us staring at the empty space where he had been standing, stunned speechless.

"What's a Watcher?" Trinity finally asked, giving voice to my exact thoughts. I didn't know, but before the night was through, I was going to find out.

* * *

IT TURNED OUT the kitchen was very well stocked. After washing off at the sink, I cut myself a large chunk of cheddar to snack on as I rummaged the refrigerator and cabinets, throwing together enough stuff to keep us munching away for a while. Taking out an armful of Diet Coke, Cokes, and bottled water, Jonas shook his head in amazement.

"All the comforts of home," he mumbled, and I had to agree.

Whoever this guy was, he had seemed to anticipate our arrival, or at the very least, mine, as most of my favorite foods had been stocked. A *Watcher* he'd called himself and not just any *Watcher* at that. He was mine. I wasn't sure I liked the implications of that and kept a close eye on him when he returned with the medical supplies. Jonas caught my look and went to oversee Trinity's first aid treatment.

I carried the armloads of food to the table and went back for plates and utensils. By the time I had wrestled everything to the table, Trinity was patched

up and knocking down some painkillers. Jonas disappeared and returned with an ice pack, which he dropped onto Trinity's face with instructions to keep it there. She looked like she'd been beaten half to death, but the grin on her face as I popped the top on a Diet Coke for her, let me know she was feeling the effects of the codeine.

"You need to eat something," I ordered, shoving a plate of food in front of her. "What's the extent of her damages?" I asked Mac, who had done most of the patching.

"Except for the black eye from getting smacked around, along with various other bruises, she's doing pretty well. There're a lot of tiny glass cuts, but nothing major."

Relieved, I looked at Jonas, who had also been extremely lucky. The gun I had heard go off had missed him completely. He'd taken some good hits and would be bruised and sore, but aside from that and the glass cuts he too had suffered, he would be good as new in a few days. I had taken inventory and discovered that apart from a few bruises from being dragged around by the leg, I was in pretty good shape, especially considering the events of the past week. At least physically. I had a sinking feeling that mentally and emotionally, I wasn't doing all that well.

I pushed my plate aside, feeling somewhat revived and ready to get down to business. I might not want to hear it, but I needed to know what was going on, and I was willing to bet that Mac had some answers.

"So, someone tell me what happened tonight," I started in, looking from Jonas to Mac.

"You can start with what happened at my place. Who were those guys and what did they want."

"That's simple," Mac replied, taking a sip of water, which he had opted for over soda. "They wanted you, and they planned on killing Jonas and Trinity and whoever else got in their way to get you."

"Why? What would they possibly want with me?"

"Come on now. You know exactly why they wanted you. We all know why. It's your power," he said, sending shivers down my spine. I looked over at Trinity who looked as spooked as I felt. "Good news is, they need you alive. Which is why they used tasers on you. They had hoped to put you down so you couldn't use your power against them. They underestimated you."

"I didn't use my power," I said, shaking my head in denial. "I was helpless. I couldn't even move. I knocked the guy away from Trinity, and that must have been when they hit me with the taser. I couldn't do anything after that."

"They tasered you the minute they came through the door, Taylor," Jonas

said. "You went down so fast, I thought they'd killed you.

"That's impossible. I remember hitting the guy attacking Trinity."

"You did hit him," Mac said, "but with your mind. You never moved from where they dropped you when they came through the door."

"Same thing with the guy with the gun. He had me dead in his sights. I was a goner. Then something hit him, and the shot went wild," Jonas added. "Knowing what I know now, I have to assume it was you."

"What about the explosion?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Explosion?" Jonas looked at me confused. "There's wasn't any explosion."

"She means the windows." Mac looked at me, assessing, and I braced myself, knowing I wasn't going to like what was coming. "The windows didn't explode. They imploded. The glass flew into the room, not away from it." He paused, watching me, letting his words sink in. "You saved two lives tonight. That's the thing to remember."

His words struck me to my core. He thought I had broken the windows. No, that was wrong. He didn't just think it. He knew it. Was convinced of it. But how? How could I do such a thing? My mind flashed back to the keys, the peanut butter, the coffee. There had been no planning, no thought to any of it. It had all just happened. He was right. Somehow, I had done it. I had sent the deadly shards of glass, flying into the room. I may have saved two lives, but how many did I kill? I looked at Mac, the question written in my eyes.

"Yes," he answered, waving Jonas to be quiet as he moved to stop him. "I will not lie to you. Not now, not ever. So, I'm not lying when I tell you that I wouldn't have gotten there in time. That if you hadn't done it, both Jonas and Trinity would be dead now, and you would have been taken. What you did was self-defense."

"He's right, Taylor." Trinity reached across the table, her icepack falling to the floor. "If you hadn't stopped them, Jonas and I would both have been killed. You fought for us and protected us. That's why we're still here." The tears were flowing down her face, her voice tight with emotion. "You did what you had to do."

"I didn't *do* anything, Trinity. I didn't think at all," I whispered, turning away. "I just reacted. I have no control over this thing. I could have killed you both."

"But you didn't." Jonas leaned over to pick up the ice pack and put it back on Trinity's face. "Trinity and I barely have any cuts at all. You stopped them, and that's the important thing. I'm just sorry I didn't do it. Which reminds me," he said, turning on Mac, "where were you? Aren't you supposed to be her 'Watcher,' whatever that means?"

“I am her Watcher, and I was busy with the three waiting outside. Who do you think cut the power? I knew you were inside and thought you could take care of things until I could get there. Apparently I was wrong.”

“It would have helped to have a little advance warning. Was there some reason you couldn’t do that?”

Jonas sounded like he was working up a good head of steam, but I couldn’t get my mind off what Mac had said. Three men outside, four inside. They had sent seven men to take me, and assuming that Mac had killed the three outside, and I had no reason to assume otherwise, seven men were now dead. Who were these people and why were they so desperate to get to me, that they were willing to lose so many? What about now? Surely they would try again and when they did, was anyone here safe? My mind flitted from one scenario to another, each one ending in disaster.

“Taylor, stop.” Mac had his hand out, stopping Jonas from continuing in his tirade, focused completely on me. “Everything is all right. Just relax.”

“Relax? Mac, seven men are dead because of me and I . . .” Mac grabbed me and jerked me out of the chair, giving me a good shake, causing Jonas and Trinity to jump up from the table sending their chairs flying backward, ready to defend me.

“Taylor, listen to me.” His words were calm but demanding as he swung me around, putting me between him and the others. “What you’re feeling now is raw emotion, and you’re sending it all over the room. The power you have is based on emotion. They’re linked and feed off each other. It works if you’re focused. If not, the more emotional you are, the less control you have. Are you understanding what I’m saying?”

“Let go of...” My words froze, his gaze locked on mine, willing me to understand. As shocked as I was at being grabbed and thrown around like a rag doll, his words somehow got through to me. Was he right? I couldn’t move the spoons, but I’d wanted to. Or had I? If I was honest with myself, I wanted to fail as much as I wanted to succeed on that one. As for spinning the wheel? I couldn’t have cared less about that, but boy did I want the coffee Marcus had been holding, and I was nearly in tears from the frustration of not being able to reach those stinking keys. Images flashed through my brain, and I knew he was right. Every time something had happened, an emotion had been attached to it, a strong emotion, focused on an end result. Tonight had been no different. Terror, panic, anger - it didn’t matter.

I had sat at the table, just seconds ago, getting more and more upset, increasingly panicked by the second. If Mac hadn’t stopped me, what would have happened?

He saw it on my face, the moment I knew and relaxed his grip on my shoulders.

“You okay, now?” he asked, setting my feet back on the floor.

I gave him a nod as I smoothed my clothes back into place. He nodded to Jonas and they went about collecting the chairs, quietly putting them back at the table. Everyone seemed afraid to say anything as we sat back down and the silence soon became deafening. It was Trinity, who finally broke the tension.

“Well, okay. That clears things up. Now we know you have to stay calm, Taylor. No more big emotional upheavals.” She reached over to grab my arm. “Unless of course, we’re being attacked or something, and then, by all means, get emotional.”

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling somewhat relieved that everyone hadn’t run from the room when they discovered I was nothing short of a ticking time bomb. “Let’s go back to where we were before I started freaking out.”

“Oh, that would be where Jonas was about to hit Mac for saying he was a wimp.”

“I didn’t say that.” He gave Jonas a look of chagrin. “I might have implied it, though, and I apologize for that. I failed to do my job tonight, and you all nearly died because of it. You got no warning, Jonas, because I had no warning. They hit before I expected them. Way before.”

“What happened to the guard out front?” Jonas asked after a moment. I had completely forgotten about the guard, but now I remembered that Jonas had been looking out the window right before we were attacked. The missing guard must have been what alerted him. I closed my eyes, dreading the answer.

“He’s okay. I got there in time. He’s probably at home with an ice pack on his head, even as we speak. And no,” he added at Jonas’ questioning look, “he didn’t see me. No one did. At least, no one who matters now.”

What was that supposed to mean? No one that matters *now*? I cocked an eyebrow up in question at Mac, who met my gaze dead on.

“The guy who set the fire. He must have been outside, and I missed him. He saw me when Jonas and I went back in. He doesn’t matter anymore.”

Just like that, he didn’t matter anymore. Mac had killed him. Well, he might not matter to Mac, but he mattered to me. A total of eight now, that had come for me. All dead. Somehow it didn’t help knowing that it could have been us. Dead was dead. Killing was killing. Tonight I had done more than my share of it. Mac might be able to toss that off, but I had a feeling it would haunt me for quite a time to come.

I reminded myself that at least the police guard was still alive. There was that at least, along with Jonas and Trinity. The thought helped me get my head

together and focus on the question that had been nagging at me all evening.

“Who are these people, Mac? For that matter, who are you?”

“Yes, Mac,” added Trinity, bringing her chair up closer to rest her elbows on the table. She gave him her lawyer look, and I knew she was back on track as she leaned across the table, “Just who are you?”

It was definitely Mac’s turn on the hot seat as three sets of eyes all turned on him, waiting for answers. Not quite as big a man as Jonas, Mac was still a good size. After all, Jonas was just short of huge, at least, to me. Mac had to be coming in at closer to 6’2 or so, and there wasn’t a distinguishing thing about him if you discounted his air of confidence. He wasn’t handsome, but not ugly either. Just a regular, attractive guy. Brown hair, brown eyes. His clothes were clean and comfortable looking and disguised his body well. If he hadn’t pulled me up against him when I couldn’t walk, I would never have guessed there was a rock solid body under the loose shirt. He came off as easy going and laid back, which everyone at the table knew wasn’t the case. So far Mac had been professional, efficient and deadly. Where he came from, I had no idea, but apparently, I was the reason he was here, and after tonight, I was fairly sure I was glad he was on our side. That didn’t make me any less curious about where he came from and what he was doing here. Mac had answers, and I had plenty of questions.

“Where would you like me to start?” he asked me.

“How about at the beginning,” Jonas answered. “When we have questions, we’ll ask them.”

“Oh you’ll have questions, Jonas, and I’ll answer what I can, but I’ll tell you now, most of what you want to know, I’m not at liberty to tell you.”

“Ah, you’re government.” Jonas reached across the table to grab and crack open another can of Coke. “Why do I think this is a bad thing?”

“A few years ago, it would have been a bad thing. The people I work for have learned a few things, though. That’s why they’re more interested in protecting Taylor than using her as a lab rat.”

Lab Rat? That certainly got my attention. When Mac looked over at me and winked, I felt somewhat better, although not completely relieved. If I hadn’t already conjured up a picture in my mind of being caged and studied in some hidden far away horror chamber, it would have been easier.

“Taylor, you’ve done the research.” Did he know that for a fact, or was he guessing? I was starting to get creeped out with the idea that he’d been *watching* me. “You know there’s never been a shred of scientific evidence that TK exists, yet we all know that in fact, it does. They know it too. The problem is it can’t be duplicated in the lab. Something happens, maybe the people feel pressured, or

frightened, but whatever it is, it's like hitting a light switch. It just doesn't work anymore. It's gone. Sometimes it comes back. Sometimes it doesn't. The one thing they know for sure is that their method of testing doesn't work."

"So what are they doing now?" Trinity chimed in. "Monitoring these people? Invading their privacy?"

Yeah, what about that? He was talking about people having a choice, but to my way of thinking, I hadn't had one. They sent Mac in to watch me without so much as a by your leave. The violation of my privacy bothered me almost as much as the concept of being a *lab rat* did.

"In a way, yes," he answered. "They pick likely candidates. Keep tabs on them and if there're any positive indications, they assign a Watcher to them. Like me. Most of the time, nothing ever happens, and the people just go about their lives. Other times, their ability develops, and the organization I work for makes contact when they feel the time is right and things proceed from there."

"How do things proceed from there?" I prodded.

"That depends on the Client, Taylor. If they want to try to develop their ability, there's someone to help them. If they want to forget about it, that's okay too. We've already figured out it has to be the Client's choice. Take away the choice and you lose the ability."

"If that's the way it works, why are those nut-jobs after Taylor? Why did they try to kill us tonight?" Trinity was up and pacing the floor. "If what you're saying is true, their behavior doesn't make any sense."

"You're right, Trinity. It doesn't make sense. *If* they believed what I just told you, but they don't. They think they can force the power, learn about it and use it. They really don't care about who they hurt or what they have to do to get it. Imagine what Taylor could do, if she didn't have any morals, if there was nothing to stop her. It's a scary thought, and it's what they're thinking. I don't know of anyone who's had Taylor's amount of ability, and she doesn't even know what she can do yet. No one does. But you can bet right now, there are people sitting around a table somewhere, just like us, thinking about all the things they could do, if they could only get their hands on her. People who are willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish that."

Well, wasn't that just the icing on the cake. And here I didn't think I could feel any worse. How had my life gotten so screwed up in such a short time? To top it off, it wasn't just my life. Things had changed for everyone. Trinity might not realize the ramifications yet, but I was pretty sure Jonas did.

"Do we know who these people are?" Jonas asked quietly, confirming my suspicions. He knew what was happening. I could tell from the resignation in his voice.

“Some of them, but, no, we don’t know them all. The more people who find out what she can do, the more danger she’s in.”

“What about Marcus? Where does he fit into all this?”

Mac hesitated in his answer, and I knew things were suddenly about to get worse.

“Marcus was one of us,” he finally answered. “My guess is he was working for someone in the organization that’s either selling information or selling actual clients to the highest bidder.”

“Are you kidding me?” Trinity came up out of her chair, livid with anger. “He was one of you, and you expect us to trust you now? Oh no. No, no, no. Who are you working for? Are there people waiting to knock down that door and drag Taylor away, or are you just going to open it and invite them in?” She was shooting daggers at Mac as she paced, throwing off the effects of the painkillers. This was Trinity on a tear, and I didn’t have the strength to stop her. Fortunately, Jonas did. I don’t know what he said after he finally cornered her, but at least she was coming back to the table. She was still shooting daggers, but the yelling had stopped.

“Actually, that’s a good question, and one I’m interested in as well,” said Jonas, after he got Trinity seated again. “Where do you stand in this?”

I buried my head in my hands on the table. I really didn’t think I could take any more, and frankly, I was scared to hear his answer. He had just said that Marcus was working for someone in his organization. He could be just as easily doing the same thing. His actions tonight didn’t mean anything.

“Taylor.” I snapped my eyes open to meet Mac’s gaze, and I knew my suspicions were obvious to him.

“I am not Marcus, and I will not betray you. I can’t make you believe me, but I can tell you this. I am here to protect you. That’s my job, and I am very good at it. I am willing to die to protect you, and I am willing to kill for you. They will not take you. *No one* will take you.”

It was a chilling declaration, and I didn’t doubt it for a minute. He’d already made it clear he was willing to kill. Abundantly clear. It was the ‘why’ of it that I had concerns about.

Jonas and Trinity stood silently watching me, waiting for my decision. Problem was, I was just too tired to make one. My brain was having trouble dealing with everything else that had happened, and there was just no way I could add any more to the mix.

Sighing, I rose from my seat and began gathering up the makings of our meal, feeling the need to do something normal in the middle of all the chaos.

“You’re cleaning?” Trinity was incredulous. “You need to think about this

Taylor. I don't know if we can trust this guy."

"Neither do I, Trinity." I concentrated on gathering up the empty cans without cutting myself. "But I'm not sure it makes any difference. I have no idea where we are. Do you?" I didn't give her time to reply as I rushed on. "I don't know what's going on, who to trust or what to do next, but I do know that we're alive because of Mac and if we can believe anything he says, he intends to work to keep us alive. There may be hoards of Federal agents, waiting outside the door, planning to rush in and get us and suck out my brains, but if so, there's not a thing we can do to stop them. So whether I trust him or not is a moot point. We're here. He's here. We deal with it the best we can."

I managed to lose my grip on the load of cans, which went cascading down onto the table, before scattering to the floor. I started over, Mac helping collect the ones that had rolled under the table.

"Besides," I added, stopping long enough to look her in the eye, "I'm not the only one with a stake in this. You and Jonas have some big decisions to make too if I'm not mistaken."

"What are you talking about?"

"You fill her in, will you Jonas? I don't think I'm up to it." I took what I had in my arms and headed back into the kitchen, turning my back on them both. It was a cowardly thing to do, but I didn't want to be there when Trinity realized what had just happened to her. Mac followed me in, with his own armload of trash and silently worked next to me as I scraped dishes and wrapped leftovers.

13

I WAS WIPING down the counters as Mac bagged the last of the trash when it hit me what a domestic scene we must have made. We worked well together, and Mac seemed to know, almost before I did, what I needed to hear, what I was thinking. I had noticed earlier, that the kitchen had a lot of my favorite foods in it. Now as I opened the refrigerator door, I did a more thorough inventory. It was stocked almost identically to my refrigerator at home. I turned to look at Mac, who had finished securing the garbage bag and was standing still next to it, watching me. I moved over to the cabinets and opened a few of them, perusing the contents. Although lightly stocked, I again found many of the items I would have found in my own cupboards. Even the brand names were the same.

“I suppose you have my favorite laundry soap, too.” It came out as a statement, not a question because there was no doubt in my mind it was true. He confirmed it with a nod.

I slammed the cabinet door closed, feeling exposed and violated. Turning to face him, I asked the only logical question I could think of under the circumstances.

“How long have you been my Watcher?”

“Seven years, more or less. Pretty much since your Aunt died,” he murmured softly.

I felt like I had been slapped. Seven years? How had he been this close to me for seven years and I not know it? No wonder he knew so much about me. And me, an investigator. Didn’t say much about my skill level. Or maybe it said a lot. I closed my eyes in misery. I had never noticed a thing, never even suspected.

“It’s not as bad as you think.”

“It’s not? You could have fooled me. You’ve been spying on me for seven years.” It suddenly hit me. The implications staggering. “You’ve been in my life longer than anyone I know. You know my favorite brands, what I like to eat, where I like to go. Is there anything you don’t know?” He just stood there, looking at me, waiting for the next shoe to fall. He didn’t have to wait long.

“You knew about my so called *powers* before I even had a clue. Do you know my favorite books? My favorite movies? Wait, what am I saying? Of course you do. You know all about me. I guess that makes you my new best friend, doesn’t it? Only I don’t really know much about you, do I? You sort of have me at a loss. Let’s see, your name is Mac. It is Mac, isn’t it?” I said glaring

at him.

“Yes, Taylor. My name is Mac,” he said calmly. “I know you’re angry, and you have every right to be, but -”

“Don’t!” I cut him off. “Don’t patronize me. It’s my life you invaded. My life you exposed.”

“I did it to save your life. I gave up seven years of my life, to protect you.”

I knew there was a comeback to that, but right then I couldn’t think of it. I was stuck on the seven years part. How had I missed him?

“Is my apartment bugged? Do you have cameras installed?” I don’t even know why I asked. I really didn’t want to hear the answer. Why punish myself further?

“No. There are no bugs and no cameras. I’ve never even been in your apartment until tonight.” He dragged the garbage bag over to the kitchen door and opened it, tossing the bag outside into a can. “I was just around. I’ve shopped with you, gone to the movies with you, followed you on the job, had coffee with you. I needed to make sure you were safe, but I never violated your home or listened in on your private conversations.”

“How is it I never saw you, Mac? You’re not that easy to miss.”

“Well, I don’t always look like this,” he said. “You know me, even talked to me, but not as Mac.”

Somehow this knowledge wasn’t making things better. If anything, I was feeling worse, knowing I hadn’t just not seen him, but apparently, I’d seen him as other people and never noticed anything strange. I needed a new line of work.

“Where did you live? It has to be nearby if you were supposed to be keeping an eye on me.”

“I have the condo under yours.” He looked at me, waiting for it to sink in. It did.

“You’re Julian, the gay English guy downstairs?” I asked, incredulous.

“Right you are,” he said, taking up the high, cockney accent, Julian was known for. It would have been hilarious if it hadn’t been so horrifying. He’d certainly pulled one over on me there. I remembered all the admiring and longing glances I’d seen tossed his way. Apparently, I wasn’t the only who had been fooled. The thought only made me feel slightly better. Then I remembered what he’d said about having coffee with me.

“Who were you at the coffee shop?”

“Jason,” he said, quietly.

I closed my eyes in misery. Jason had made my coffee nearly every morning after I moved into the condo at my new favorite haunt. Jason was as different from Mac and Julian as he could possibly be.

“It helped to be able to talk to you once in a while. To not hide all the time.” I nodded. I was hurt and angry, but deep down somewhere, I was amazed too. Amazed that he had stayed with me for seven years and grateful that he had been there when the time came. “I wasn’t there the morning you had your run in with Marcus. They had called me back for a debriefing. Marcus was assigned to fill in for me until I was back.”

“Is that normal procedure?” I asked. Needing a coffee, I started looking through the cabinets for the coffee I knew had to be in there somewhere. Mac reached over my head to the cabinet above the coffee maker, pulled down an unopened bag of beans and began making me coffee, just like he’d done for the past several years.

“No, it’s not,” he said, finally answering my question. “I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. Felt something was wrong. I pulled out early and got back here as soon as possible, but I was too late.”

“He tried to kill Jonas at the coffee shop,” I told him. “Then there was an incident at the hospital.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.” He had ground the beans as we were talking and I watched as he tamped them down and checked the water pressure on the espresso machine.

“He’s dead, Mac.”

“I know,” he said, as the thick syrup began to fill the glass, the rich crema flowing to the edges. “I killed him.”

I hadn’t expected that, but somehow it didn’t surprise me. Mac seemed to be efficient at a lot of things, killing people not the least among them. Before I could react, Jonas popped his head around the corner.

“We have a problem,” he informed us. No slouch at detective work himself, he came to a fast stop and did a quick survey of the kitchen. “Something wrong in here?” he asked me, ending up with his eyes boring holes into Mac.

“I don’t know. Could be,” I replied unevenly.

“Well, if you don’t know for sure, it’ll keep. This won’t. You both need to get in here pronto,” he said and took off, back to the living room, Mac and I quickly falling into step behind him.

Trinity was sitting on the sofa, in tears, as I had expected. It’s not every day you find out that life as you know it is over. At least I had some warning, not to mention the fact that I was the cause for my change in circumstances. Trinity and Jonas were innocent bystanders, caught up in the middle of something they had no control over, but they were involved. They not only knew me, they knew *about* me. The bad guys, which by this time I decided were whoever was trying to kill us, kidnap us or in any other way harm us, had already tried to kill them.

The fact that they had attacked while both Trinity and Jonas were in the condo instead of waiting until I was alone told me they wanted them both silenced. Like it or not, they were in the same boat I was. Just for different reasons.

“Trinity, I’m sorry,” I started off. After all, her association with me was the reason she was in this mess.

“Don’t even go there,” she ordered, anger showing through the tears. “This isn’t your fault any more than it’s Jonas’ or mine. It just happened. I don’t like it. I’m not even sure I understand all the ramifications yet, but I’ll survive.”

“Okay,” I agreed, as I sat on the chair arm, waiting to hear the rest of it.

“My question to you Mac is this. Jonas said that we’re not safe, because one,” she held one finger in the air as she counted off, “we know about Taylor.” I flinched, even though I knew it was coming. “And two,” she continued, “we’re in danger because they want her, and will use us, if they get ahold of us, to force her in. Is that right?”

She looked to Mac for his response, but I kept my eyes on her. Yes, they would take her in a minute, use the people I cared about as pawns to get to me. If it ever happened, I would go. That wasn’t even a question.

“Yes, Trinity,” Mac agreed. “They’ll go after anyone Taylor cares about if they think it will give them the advantage.”

Trinity looked over at me as what Mac said sunk in and I saw the question in her eyes. A split second later, it hit me. Mama D. They’d go after Trinity’s grandmother. She was the only other person they could use.

“We have to go,” I said, suddenly moving across the room toward the door, Trinity right at my heels. “They’ll go after Mama D. We have to beat them to her.”

“Taylor, stop.” Mac grabbed my arm and whirled me around.

“No!” I was no longer tired. No longer scared. I was angry. “We’re going. You’re not calling the shots here. Not now! I will not let them hurt Mama D, Mac. I won’t. If you won’t go, I’ll go without you, but I’m not letting them take her.”

“We’re going. We’re all going,” Mac tried to assure me “but we need a plan. You need to think. You need to calm down. LOOK AT ME!” he yelled as I tried to break free. “Do you hear what I’m saying to you?”

I did look at him then, anger numbing my mind to what he was trying to say. All I could think of was Mama D, alone in that house and those monsters coming after her.

“Taylor.” It was barely a whisper on his lips. “Trust me.”

I wanted to. It would have been so much easier that way, but he was asking the impossible. This was the guy who had been spying on me for seven years.

Lying to me for seven years and now, he was asking me to trust him? I looked back for support from Trinity, only to find her tucked in tight under Jonas' arm, both of them watching me closely and I knew something was wrong.

I let my eyes move from them to the room beyond and saw the books and papers that had been thrown around the room. I saw the curtains hanging off of broken rods at the blacked out windows, still moving, as if there was a breeze and felt the fight go right out of me. It looked like a whirlwind had torn through the place. *No*, I thought, shaking my head, *not a whirlwind. Just me*. Defeated, I looked at Mac, who had been trying to warn me.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, this is okay." He smiled at me. "Kinda like a temper tantrum." He let me go and turned me around. "Take a look. There's a good 10 foot of clear space around us. No one was ever in any danger."

He was right. All the papers and books stopped short of us. It didn't make me feel much better.

"This is a good thing, Taylor. We're lucky it happened." I looked back at him, the fact that I thought he was crazy written on my face. "No, really, I mean it. This is the second time that you've pretty much lost it tonight and both times you protected the people you care about without even knowing you were doing it."

"He's right," said Jonas, "we're all completely safe. Taylor, I'm not afraid of you. I may be freaked out a little, but I'm not afraid of you."

I looked over at Trinity, still tucked safely against Jonas' side.

"I am afraid," she admitted. "I'm afraid the bad guys have a big surprise coming." She turned to Jonas and Mac. "What's the plan and how soon can we leave?"

14

TURNED OUT BOTH of the guys wanted something more threatening than flying books and papers, and I had to admit it was a pretty solid idea. Firepower was the order of the day and with a touch of a button, Mac provided it.

When the panel rolled back revealing what would only be described as a weapons cache, Jonas lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. I was pretty happy about it myself.

"This looks like something in a Schwarzenegger movie," Trinity commented dryly.

"No," said Jonas with a grin. "This is better. Way better."

"Hey, is this a taser?" Trinity asked. At Mac's nod, she pocketed it. "Then I'm keeping it," she declared to anyone who cared. No one did.

Within seconds, there were enough weapons loaded into the van to start World War III. As Mac closed the panel concealing the gun room, he thrust a Springfield 9 mm semi-auto into my hand along with a couple of extended magazines. Jonas grabbed them away.

"Don't give her those. She can't shoot," Jonas chastised him.

Mac grabbed them right back and shoved them into my hands.

"Oh yes, she can. We've been to the shooting range once a week for the past three years. She's a great shot."

Jonas looked at me with raised eyebrows. "We've?" he asked.

"Don't look at me. Apparently, we've been a lot of places together I wasn't aware of."

Jonas watched Mac's back as he strode out the door to the van loaded down with guns.

"Three years?" he asked.

"Seven."

Jonas cursed under his breath, then quickly looked around to see if Trinity had heard him and I had to stifle a smile. Poor guy. If he thought he had it tough now, just wait until Mama D got here. At the thought of Mama D, the sense of urgency returned to me full force. We were as ready as we'd ever be. It was time to go get her.

* * *

MAC KEPT THE van lights off until we were well away from the turnoff to the house. The clock read 11:30 p.m., which I found hard to believe. It felt like days had gone by, but events had happened so quickly, it had only been a matter of hours. It had taken us longer to set the table and eat a meal than it had to fend off an attack, kill seven, no make that eight men, and flee the scene. Thanks to the backcountry hills of Little Rock, our hideout, for lack of a better word, was only minutes from I-430, which put us about 20 minutes from Mama D.

Trinity and I sat in silence, watching the trees glide by in the dark, praying we would get there in time.

“How much time do you think we have?” I asked, directing my question to the front of the van.

“Before what?” Mac answered. “Before they realize that’s not our bodies in the condo? It all depends on how much damage the fire did. Depends on whether or not the guy who set the fire managed to get a call out before I took him down.

“What’s he talking about, Jonas? Has this got something to do with Grams?” Trinity was getting louder with each question. Her tone was accusing, and I braced myself, expecting Jonas to react accordingly. Instead, he surprised me, calmly turning around to explain.

“It comes down to this. If the bodies were badly burned, we have some time before the police realize it’s not us and start looking. We might not be so lucky if the guys looking for Taylor know she’s still obtainable. I think you and Taylor should stay in the van when we get there. There might be trouble.”

Mac and Trinity both snorted at the same time, and Jonas looked to me to back him up. I thought he might have a point, especially where I was concerned, what with the loose cannon, lack of control thing I had, but on the other hand, I had no intention of sitting anything out, and there was no way he was going to keep Trinity in the van. He was so obviously the new guy here. I just shrugged, and he turned back to Mac, obviously not happy, but smart enough to let it go. “How secure is the cabin?”

“They don’t know about the cabin.”

This raised Jonas’ eyebrows along with mine. “They don’t know? It’s not part of their plan?”

“It’s part of my plan, not part of theirs.”

Mac had suspected them. The government. Something had happened to make

him think he might need a place to hide.

“You’re hanging out there pretty far on that limb, Mac,” Jonas told him.

“All by my lonesome,” Mac agreed, as he pulled into the subdivision where Mama D lived.

“Not anymore,” Jonas whispered as Mac cut the lights and rolled to a stop.
“We walk from here. Load up.”

15

MAC PARKED THE van at the end of the block, around the corner and two houses down from Mama D's behind the Lang home. We had done a slow drive past the front. The house was dark and quiet, just like the street. The neighborhood was a mix of families and retirees, with tidy lawns sporting swing sets or garden benches, depending on who owned what. As it was nearing midnight, most were in bed, fast asleep. Just to be on the safe side, we decided to approach the house from the back, cutting through the Lang's backyard, using their landscaping for cover. No sense advertising our presence. Trinity was armed with her taser, and I had my gun ready, the extra clips stowed in my pockets. Mac and Jonas were ahead of us, guns drawn. As we crept through the Lang's border hedge, I could only imagine what we looked like and prayed nonstop that we didn't get shot. I was as much worried about the gun-toting Arkansans, as I was the guys we were up against.

I had the wild thought, as I squeezed past Mrs. Lang's bird-feeder, that maybe we should have phoned the police. Oh wait, that's right. We're the bad guys as far as they are concerned. We had dead guys piling up around us, and I was sure we were carrying illegal weapons. They'd slap us in jail so fast we wouldn't know what hit us. Then the government turncoat could just sweep in and grab us all. What was I thinking?

Mac signaled for us to stop and get down. I hit the ground and blew the grass out of my face. Trinity was off my knee to the left. Jonas and Mac, ahead of me by about six or seven feet. Between the moon and glow of the street lights, visibility was way too good for my comfort level. All anyone had to do was glance out a window, and they'd see us, plain as day. I didn't know if it was my hair standing on end or if I was lying in a pile of fire ants, but either way, my skin was crawling. I needed to move and soon. If I was lying in fire ants and they started biting, it was going to be sooner. Mac wasn't moving though, so I steeled myself and listened. In the silence, I heard a screen door creak open. Not sure if the sound came from in front of us or not, I glanced around to make sure none of the neighbors were taking aim.

There was no mistaking which direction the gunshot came from though. Trinity was up and running for the house before the rest of us had gained our feet. Jonas made a lunge for her, but missed, and she was off like a shot, taser in hand.

We were all three hot on her heels, but she reached the back door first and cleared the four steps in a single leap, exploding through the door to land in a heap on the kitchen floor as another shot rang out. Jonas, Mac and I split and headed for the sides of the doorway, ducking and bobbing as we ran in case they were firing at us. Jonas signaled Mac as he peeled off to head around to the front, leaving Mac and me at the back door. Cautiously sticking my head around the door, I could just make out the bottom of Trinity's shoe in the entrance to the dining room before she jerked it out of sight.

She was on the floor, and I couldn't tell from the glance I'd had, whether she was injured, but, at least she was alive. We heard Jonas break through the front door, and Mac and I went in through the back, fast and low, quickly clearing the kitchen and heading into the dining room, where Trinity had disappeared. Mac covered me as I stepped through the doorway, and skimmed along the wall toward the living room, where Trinity was waiting, crouched against the wall next to the doorway. A body lay on the floor blocking the passageway, the dark stain of blood spreading on the floor a real good indicator that Trinity's taser hadn't taken him down. Mac brushed past me and quickly stopped to check the body, shaking his head as he took cover behind the wall. It wasn't Jonas. They had gotten here before us. Question was, how many had they sent.

We had moved fast, coming through the house at a good speed. There had been no sound from Jonas since we'd entered and the house was eerily quiet now. I caught Mac's eye, and we rounded the doorway into the living room only to find Jonas standing at the wrong end of a shotgun, hands in the air.

"Gram!" hissed Trinity from behind me. "Put that gun down." Mama D had no intention of doing any such thing. Instead, she poked him a good one in the stomach with it, driving him back a step.

"Mama D," I whispered, frantic that she might shoot him, worried that others were coming who were a much bigger threat. "That's Jonas. You remember him. We're here to help you."

"I know who he is," Mama D informed me, clearly insulted. "Why'd you think I didn't shoot him like that other one?"

"Mama D," I tried again, seeing porch lights turn on at the neighbor's house through the living room window while trying to ignore what she'd just told me. "We don't have much time. People are after us, and we have to go. We've come to get you." Mac edged past them and headed up the stairs to check the rest of the house. Time was running out as we heard sirens in the distance.

"Gram, we have to go. Now." Trinity was waving her taser around, and I was afraid she might fire it off by accident and Mama D still hadn't lowered the shotgun.

Mac came back down the stairs in a rush and holstered his gun. “We’re going now.” He took the shotgun right out of Mama D’s hands and tossed it to Jonas, who quickly disappeared toward the back of the house. “Mama D,” he said, guiding the little woman toward the kitchen, “it’s not safe here anymore. You’re coming with us. Is there anything you have to take with you?”

“Well, I would like my medicines and my pictures,” she told him.

Trinity and I went tearing through the house. As I snatched up Mama D’s framed photos, I could hear Trinity pounding up the stairs after the medicine. I grabbed the afghan Mama D had made for the sofa and threw the frames into it, hoping to muffle the noise and make them easier to carry. I was bent over, grabbing the ends together, when I realized I wasn’t alone.

“Stop right where you are!” An angry voice demanded. It was Mr. Lang. Of the bird feeder yard, we’d just been crawling through. He’d made good time. Really good time. I froze where I was, picture frame in my hand, knowing a gun came with that voice, and he probably wouldn’t need much of an excuse to fire it. It was dark, and I was sure he had no idea it was me stealing the family photos. I could hear the nearing sirens, and knew he’d managed to call 911 before heading over. Or maybe he’d had Mrs. Lang call it in. Whatever the case, we didn’t have time for this. There wasn’t much I could do about it, though. I wasn’t about to shoot him. He was a friend, after all, and in other circumstances, I would have been happy to have seen him show up. If I turned around, I knew he would recognize me and lower the gun, but I didn’t really want him telling the police and whoever else showed up asking, that I’d been here. And then there was the dead man lying a few feet away. That would be hard to explain.

I was quickly running out of options when I caught movement from the corner of my eye and threw myself on the floor just as Trinity took aim and fired the taser. She caught Mr. Lang right between the shoulder blades, and he went down like a house of bricks, the shotgun he’d been holding skittering across the floor, slamming to a stop against the wall. The noise brought Jonas running back into the room, but the sight of Mr. Lang on the floor stopped him in his tracks.

“Neighbor,” I managed to hiss out as I checked the poor man’s pulse. He was out cold, but he was alive. Jonas reached down and in one fluid movement, he had Mr. Lang up and over his shoulder. He headed toward the back door, motioning for us to follow. I grabbed up my makeshift sack of photos and snagged the shotgun as we ran through the kitchen and out into the yard. Jonas stopped to lay the stunned man down in the yard a safe distance from the house, and I dropped the shotgun down next to him. Then watched as Jonas loped back to the house, stopping to pick up the bottle of lighter fluid Mama D kept by the outdoor grill. My heart sank when I realized he was going to borrow a page from

earlier in the evening and torch the house. It was a good plan and would hopefully buy us some time, but I knew what the house had meant to Trinity. This was going to kill her. I turned to see if she was still nearby, but she had run through the yard, following Mac and Mama D. Hopefully we would be away before the flames took hold and she wouldn't have to see it.

I waited for Jonas while he went about his business. Saw the match flare to life and arch into the kitchen as he tossed it through the open door. It took a second for the fire to catch, and Jonas waited, just to make sure. Then we were running, putting distance between us, the house and body inside, keeping to the backyards and the bushes as the police cars came screaming down the street. We ran for the safety of the van, which sat idling safely where we had left it. Trinity had the back sliding door open, waving us on. We threw ourselves inside, and Mac was off and moving before Trinity had the door closed. Gasping for air, we kept our heads down, as Mac wove slowly down the street, attempting to blend in with the neighborhood and the people who were coming out of their houses to see what the commotion was all about.

Finally reaching a main road, Mac turned onto it and put the pedal down. I glanced out the window at the lights and store fronts speeding past, waiting for the sound of sirens to fall in behind us in pursuit, but with each second that went by in silence, I felt increasingly confident that we had gotten in and out without attracting notice.

"Where now?" I asked as Jonas made his way up front to the empty passenger seat. Trinity had Mama D belted into a back seat, and she was sitting quietly, arms wrapped around the purse she had somehow managed to grab on the way out. She didn't seem at all phased for someone who had just killed a man and almost been kidnapped. I raised a questioning eyebrow at Trinity and got a shoulder shrug back in response.

"Back to the cabin," Mac answered. "We should be safe there for a little while, but they'll be looking for us now. If they didn't know you were alive before, they certainly do now." Glancing in the rearview mirror, his eyes met mine, and he gave me a head bob, motioning to Mama D.

I saw his point but was pretty certain they had figured out we were still alive before we ever arrived at Mama D's. I had to assume the body on the floor belonged to one of the guys who was after us. It would have been too much of a coincidence to have Mama D's house broken into the same night we were attacked. They either were covering all their bases or already knew that the bodies in my condo didn't belong to us. They were moving quickly, and we were lucky to have gotten there when we did. Luckier still that Mama D had a gun and knew how to use it. They had beaten us to the punch this time. My stomach

clenched into knots when I thought about how different things could have turned out.

Mac exited off 430 onto Chenal Parkway and was now turning onto Kanis, heading out of town. He was taking a different route back to the cabin. One I realized, that would have us coming up on the backside of the hill if he kept to this course. The fact that the cabin should be safe didn't mean it was. I was glad he was thinking ahead. As for me, my mind seemed to be skipping from one thing to another without much regard for coherent thought.

"Taylor." Jonas reached back, shaking my knee to get my attention. I don't know how long he'd been talking to me, but looking around now, I could see Mac had pulled off the road into some bushes. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said trying to shake off the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm me. The adrenaline from earlier was long gone, and I was feeling the effects of what had been a really long evening in every ounce of my being. "Yeah, I'm fine. Where are we?"

"The cabin's around the hill," Mac said, putting the van into park. "Jonas and I are going around to take a look and make sure everything is clear. You need to come up front."

I managed to unbuckle my seat belt and climb through to the driver's seat as Mac opened the door and got out.

"If we're not back in 5 minutes, Taylor, leave. Head out of state, and hide. Don't use your real names and don't use your credit cards. There's cash in the glove box."

I stared at him, as the full impact of what he was saying hit me, but before I could object he was gone, melting in the black of the hillside.

"How will they find us, if we leave?" Trinity asked from the backseat.

Looking up, I caught her eyes in the rearview mirror and didn't say anything. She knew the answer already and was just voicing the fear we all felt. If they weren't back in five minutes, they weren't coming back. Ever.

Dear God in heaven, help us, I prayed. I could hear Mama D and Trinity in the back praying too, which made me feel better. Strength in numbers.

I may have been praying, but my eyes were glued to the bushes where they had disappeared, straining to see in the dark. My knuckles were white on the wheel, and I could feel sweat break out on my skin as the five-minute mark neared, and there was still no sign of them. Suddenly the bushes parted near the side window, startling me, and Jonas was there, motioning for me to scoot over as he opened the driver's door.

"Everything's clear," he assured us as he drove slowly forward through the bushes and onto a barely visible path. "Mac's up ahead moving a barrier. We'll

be at the cabin in a couple of minutes.”

We cleared the area that Mac had opened up and waited while he swept away the tire tracks and moved brush back over the opening. He hopped in the back, and we drove the short distance to the cabin.

The group of us, bedraggled, dirty and all in all, one sorry looking lot, made our way inside eager for what little security it offered. So far, Mama D hadn't said much, and I was more than a little worried about her. She didn't even say anything about the mess of paper and books on the floor. Trinity brought her in and sat her on the sofa by the fire. Jonas went over and added some fresh wood and kindling, stirring the embers until it caught. I watched the flames as they grew, recalling the flames in Mama D's kitchen as they ate the lighter fluid and flowed across the floor and felt a shudder run through me.

Everything looked like it was happening in slow motion. I was sure it was the effects of shock, but couldn't rouse enough energy to concern myself about it. Mac disappeared into one of the other rooms, which I assumed was a bedroom and returned with an armload of towels.

“There's only one bathroom, sorry to say. There're clothes for Taylor in the bedroom. Trinity, I am sure you can find something there for you and your grandmother.”

Clothes for me in the bedroom? Turns out I had some adrenaline still left in my system after all. I strode in through the bedroom door, jerking open the first drawer I came to. It was full of socks, bras, and underwear. Great. A perfect stranger buying me underwear. I had enough trouble buying it for myself. Oh, wait. He wasn't a perfect stranger. He'd known me for seven years. How could I forget? No wonder he got my bra size right. Tamping down my irritation, I opened another drawer to find it packed with jeans, another full of sweaters. Barely glancing at the crowd gathered by the door, I walked over to what I assumed to be the closet door and opened it to find an assortment of footwear, the racks hung with clean shirts and jackets. All in my size. All my favorite brands. Squatting down in the closet, I lifted a pair of shoes, the exact make of a pair I already owned. I didn't know what to think. Frankly, it felt a little creepy. Okay, not a little creepy. A lot creepy.

I threw the shoes back down and shut the door on the abundance of clothes hanging inside. Finally taking a moment to look around the room, I took in the bed, the soft comforter matching the curtains that hid the blacked out window. The reading light on the bedside table, and the book sitting next to it by my favorite author. The colors, the style, even the feel of the room were what I would have chosen for my own bedroom. Shoot, it was my bedroom. These were my clothes, my shoes, my things. Mac had bought them for me. He had known

or at least suspected that at some point I would have to run, and he had been prepared for it.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe he was a pervert, but I just didn't get that feeling from him. As much as I hated to admit it, I was beginning to think he was exactly what he said he was. My Watcher. The thought took the wind right out of my sails. I was so tired I didn't know if it even mattered anymore.

"Where's the pajamas?" I asked, searching out his eyes where he stood behind Trinity and Mama D, his arms still full of towels.

Relief rippled across his face. "Top drawer on the end." He pointed with his chin to one of the few drawers I hadn't opened. "Robe is hanging on the back of the bathroom door. Sorry, there's only one. I wasn't expecting this many."

"That's okay." Trinity was already heading to the closet, Mama D following her into the room. "I don't need a robe."

"I wouldn't be too hasty," Mama D said as she opened the drawer Mac had indicated. "You haven't seen what kind of pajamas he bought yet."

We all froze, staring at her. It was the first thing she'd said since we'd left her house. She started chuckling as she pulled out a very conservative top with matching bottoms.

"Well, young man. You're either very wise or very cautious," she stated as she went through the rest of the drawer.

"I prefer to think I'm a little of both." He gave her a smile as he came into the room and deposited the towels onto the bed. "Taylor, we'll leave you and the ladies to get cleaned up. This is your room, and there's another bedroom next door down, that Trinity and Mama D can share. Jonas and I will be in the main room if you need anything."

He closed the door softly behind him, leaving me alone, with Trinity and Mama D, who was holding one of the pajama tops up to her small frame.

"I believe this one will fit me just fine," she said, and grabbing up a towel from the bed, headed for the bathroom.

"We need to talk," Trinity announced as soon as Mama D had closed the door behind her.

"I know. Trinity, I am so sorry about this. I can't believe you and Mama D are involved in this mess."

"As opposed to what? Not being involved?" Trinity flopped down on the bed, actually angry at me. "What would have been better, Taylor? Us not knowing what was going on? You just disappearing and us not knowing what had happened or where you were?"

"No Trinity. It wouldn't have been better. It wasn't even an option. I care about you and Mama D more than anyone on this earth, and they know that. You

wouldn't have been safe whether you knew what was going on or not. I'm just sorry. Sorry for putting you in danger. Sorry about disrupting your lives. Sorry, that's there's no other way."

"There's no going back, is there Taylor? Gram and me. There's no going back."

"No. There's no going back. For any of us."

16

A HALF HOUR later Trinity tapped on the door letting me know the bathroom was free. I spied my favorite soap, lotions, and shampoo lined up on the counter and decided to chance there being enough hot water for a quick shower. I didn't bother to check for a hair dryer. As efficient as Mac appeared to be, I was sure it was there in one of the drawers, probably right next to my favorite brand of flat iron. I wasn't disappointed.

I came out of the bathroom to the smell of bacon and biscuits. It was southern comfort food, in its purest form and as the smell hit me, I realized I was famished. Turning the corner, I found Mama D heaping a platter with scrambled eggs while Trinity was pulling strips of bacon from the hot skillet.

"Taylor, get the biscuits," Mama D directed, and I snatched up a mitt as they made space between them for me to open the oven door. We'd worked like this together in the kitchen more times than I could count. Within minutes the food was on the table, butter dripping from the hot steaming biscuits.

Jonas and Mac came in through the back door, both toweling off, having apparently gone outside to wash up. I felt a little guilty about my hot shower, but not all that much. They didn't appear any the worse for wear and if the look on their faces was any indication, they were as hungry as I was.

"Oh man, does that smell good." Jonas was already at the table, pulling up his chair, Mac right on his heels.

Silence descended as plates were piled high and we dug into the feast before us. Eggs and bacon had never tasted so good, and the biscuits were to die for. I limited myself to one biscuit but kept the last little bite of it to end on. Somewhat revived, I shoved my plate away and settled back into my chair, holding out my cup as Mac refilled my coffee. Setting the pot on the table, he settled onto the small bench he had used as a makeshift chair.

"Before everyone heads off to bed, I need to get some information." He pulled a pen and pad of paper out of nowhere and sat them on the table. I admit, I had to wonder what kind of information he was so intent on getting at 2 a.m. "If you could all tell me the name of your bank and any account information you can remember, that would help a lot."

Our bank information? I instinctively looked around for my purse before remembering I didn't have one anymore. It had probably burned up in the fire, and if it hadn't, there was no way I could go back and get it. My whole identity

was in that purse. My driver's license, my credit cards, my bank information, my keys, even my cell phone. It was gone. All gone. Just like my life. I couldn't use any of that stuff anyway, I reminded myself, but that didn't help relieve my feeling of loss. Some things were just too engrained.

"Why do you need that?" Trinity asked with a hard edge to her voice and a reprimanding look toward me. She didn't trust them. Having worked so well together when the pressure was on, now that Mama D was safe, and we were clean and fed, Trinity had reverted back to her old habits. Jonas and Mac were going to have to fight for every inch of ground.

Jonas shifted uneasily in his chair before answering. I didn't blame him a bit.

"Trinity, we can't go back now. To our lives, to what we were," he explained. "We're being hunted."

"Who's hunting us?" Mama D cut in fast and quick, surprising us all. I had forgotten that she had no idea what was going on here. All she knew was someone had broken into her house, whom she had efficiently disposed of, and we had whisked her away to some cabin in the woods. All in all, it was a good question.

"Bad men," Mac replied softly. "They're after Taylor, and they don't care who they hurt or what they have to do to get her." He looked over to Jonas, obviously needing an assist.

"That's right, Mama D," Jonas picked up, "They want her real bad, and they'll use the people she cares about to try and find her."

"That man in my house tonight. He was going to take me so they could trap Taylor?" Jonas silently nodded his head yes.

Okay, this was just awful. How do you tell a sweet little old lady, she killed a man because of you and that she had to leave the home she had made and loved. Wait a minute. She shot a man tonight. That raised a whole new set of questions.

"Mama D, where did you get that gun?" I asked, the food finally having caught up with my brain.

"That's a good question, Taylor," Trinity chimed in. "Where DID you get that gun?"

"Trinity, I've always had that gun. It's your grandfather's gun. I put it away when you and Kevin were little, but I keep it in reach now. I'm an old woman, but I'm not foolish. I know about things." Mama D gave her a reproving look. "And may I add, young lady, that you're lucky I didn't blow your head off, the way you came flying through that door in the middle of the night."

Trinity looked at me, her mouth hanging open in shock. I just shrugged my shoulders and attempted to hide a smile behind my hand. Mama D had a valid point. Trinity hadn't exactly been coming in low and stealthy. She was lucky she

hadn't been killed by Mama D or anyone else that had happened to be in there with a gun.

"I am curious to know one thing, Mama D," Jonas said as he reached across the table for the coffee pot. He paused filling his cup as he looked up to give her what I call his 'kind police glare'. He thinks it's not intimidating, but he's wrong. Mama D apparently thought the same thing as she got a hard look in her eye as he continued. "Just how did you manage to get the drop on the guy."

"Same way I got the drop on you," she replied, obviously irritated with him. "I couldn't sleep. Something was keeping me unsettled, so I got up and put on my things and thought I'd get a start on some church baking that needed doing. I had just started through the living room when I heard that squeaky board on the far side of the porch." She stopped and looked over at Trinity for support, who nodded at her to continue.

"Well, as I said, I keep the gun handy now, so I got it and waited to see what would happen next. He came in, real quiet like, through the front door. I was watching him, but he didn't see me as I was back in the corner and he was heading toward the stairs. I saw the gun in his hand, and it was throwing a little red light up on the wall."

At this Jonas and Mac gave each other a look. If they had any doubts about who this guy was, Mama D had just put them to rest.

"I watch those television shows. I know that's a special gun. I saw that light and I knew he was up to no good. That wasn't Joe Bob sneaking around from down the street. So I shot him."

"Well, you did the right thing," I said, reaching over to pat her arm and reassure her. No matter how calmly Mama D might seem, she was a solid church going woman, and she had taken a life. I knew deep down inside she had to be shaken. Heck, I was shaken, and I hadn't pulled the trigger. "It's a good thing you kept the lights off," I added, rising to clear the table.

"Oh honey, I don't need any light to find my own kitchen." Her chuckle of laughter flowed over and through me like warmth from a fire. I was so relieved and thankful that she was there, and that she was safe. It could have turned out so differently. She must have picked up on my feelings, because the next thing I knew, her arms were around me.

"Don't you worry, Taylor. We're a family, and we're together. That's the important thing." Tears welled into my eyes as she held me and I knew in that instant, that I would do whatever it took to keep this woman safe.

"I love you," I whispered to her as I hugged her back.

"I know baby, I know." She held me from her and placing her small hand against my cheek, searched my eyes. "They want you because you're special,

don't they? Because you have the touch."

I heard Trinity gasp and my eyes flew to hers over the top of Mama D's head. She shook her head no. She hadn't told her. Mama D patted my arm gently as she turned away to begin gathering up the dishes before heading to the kitchen. As for me, you could have knocked me over with a feather. Did everyone know about this except me? Stunned, I sat back down in my chair, grabbing my coffee cup for support.

"Um, I still need everyone's banking information," Mac reminded us bringing our thoughts back to the problem at hand.

"And you still need to explain why." Trinity sat back down and motioned for Jonas to comply.

"Okay, then," Jonas started again. "As I was saying, we're being hunted. This cabin is great for now, but we can't stay here for long. We'll have to stay on the move for a while, and that takes money." He paused as Mama D returned and took her seat at the table. "Mac and I talked about this earlier, and we decided it was worth trying to move some money around before anyone could lock the accounts or put an alert on them."

"Oh, you decided that, did you?" Trinity interrupted. "How nice of you to inquire as to what we might think of your plan."

We were never going to get to bed at this rate. My high intake of caffeine since we had gotten back to the cabin was ceasing to make a dent in my state of exhaustion. I rolled my eyes in frustration as I refilled my cup.

"What makes you think there's not already an alert on them? These guys seem pretty well informed," I asked, trying to steer Trinity back onto topic and effectively cutting off Jonas' reply to her snippy comment.

Mac jumped right in, confirming my belief that, at least for the time being, we made a pretty good team.

"I don't know who the traitor is in the government, but he has to tread just as carefully as we do or he'll tip his hand. There's no reason for the police to seal the accounts right now. They're still piecing it together, and although they may know Jonas is involved, they have no idea about Trinity and Mama D. I have a contact here in the area that is pretty good with things like this. I think we have a good chance of moving funds before they know what we're up to."

Within minutes, he had outlined his and Jonas' plan to attempt to move funds from our accounts into an untraceable offshore account he had already set up. Not knowing who the informant was, his access to funds and assistance from the government were both cut off. We were on our own, and it only made sense to try to pool our resources while we still stood a chance of doing so. Trinity, however, wasn't happy with the idea and had no problem voicing her concerns.

“Pretty convenient, Mac, how you just happen to have an offshore account already set up,” she accused. “I suppose everything is in your name, and you’re the only one with access.”

She stated the last as a fact, not a question. I leaned over, trying to rub the sleep from my eyes. She had a point, I suppose, but under the circumstances, I didn’t see that we had any choice but to go along with it. Time was critical here, and although I had never had an offshore account, I was sure that setting one up took time, a commodity that we simply didn’t have.

“You’re worried about losing your money?” Jonas asked incredulously.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I am.” She was back on her feet, in Jonas’ face. “And Taylor’s money and Gram’s money. Is that so hard to believe?”

Jonas took a deep breath and starting to get to his feet ready to do battle.

“Jonas, stop!” I said, stopping him mid-rise. “Trinity, in a couple of hours, I’m either going to be declared legally dead, or they’ll be tracking any movement on my account. That goes for you and Jonas too. Just depends on which way these guys want to play. If I were them, I’d work to get us declared dead, that way the police aren’t looking for us, and they have a bigger playing field to spread out and find us without anyone looking over their shoulder, complicating things. Either way, your money’s gone. Any way you look at it, we have nothing to lose.”

I waited for the impact of what I said to sink in. She knew it. I know she knew it, but admitting it was something else entirely. She’d have to trust Jonas and Mac, and that was a tough pill to swallow.

When she finally nodded her reluctant acceptance, I got up and wrote down all the banking information I could remember on Mac’s pad and headed off to bed.

17

I WOKE TO the smell of fresh coffee brewing. I had to search around to find the nightstand, much less the lamp sitting on it. With the blacked out windows, the darkness was absolute. I had barely noticed when I went to bed earlier, but I definitely had the feeling of being in a cave or buried alive now. Good grief, what a thought. Finally, my fumbling fingers managed to locate the switch and light flooded the room.

Mac had gone to a lot of trouble for someplace we would only be using for a few days. Looking around, I had to admit it had all the comforts of home. The sheets even smelled like mine, and I had a sneaking suspicion that if I looked, I would find my brand of dryer sheets next to the washer. As much as I longed to linger in the safe confines of the bed, coffee and reality called.

Checking my watch, I saw it was just before 7 a.m. Four hours of sleep wasn't much, but it had helped. The smells making their way through the closed door told me at least one other person was up and moving around if they had gone to bed at all.

I rummaged through the drawers and pulled out a pair of jeans and a shirt and threw them on. I did a quick mirror check to make sure my hair was good enough to make the dash to the bathroom. I must not have moved much during the night because it actually looked halfway decent. One side was flat, but it was nothing a hit with the flat iron that Mac had kindly provided, wouldn't fix.

Amazingly, the bathroom was empty, and once I had finished my morning routine, I headed out to the kitchen to hunt up some coffee. Turning the corner, I found Mama D standing at the range, churning out omelets and hash browns. Mac and Jonas were already there, each with a coffee in his hand, hovering.

"What are you guys doing? Supervising?" I asked as I pulled out a mug and filled it. Walking over I leaned down to give Mama D a hug. "You doing all right?"

"I'm fine, child. Never happier than when I'm cooking for hungry men."

I rechecked my watch. "Hungry men? You guys just ate 4 hours ago." They both just looked at me like I'd grown a second head. Fine.

"Mac," I asked, watching as Mama D piled sliced ham and cheese onto a waiting omelet "how come there's so much fresh food here? I can understand canned food and maybe a sack of potatoes, but cheese? Ham? Eggs? I know you were living at the condos, so it's not for you. It's almost like you were expecting

this. You know something the rest of us don't?"

It was a question that had been bothering me since we arrived, but there had been so many other pressing matters, that I hadn't voiced it. I had told Trinity we didn't have any other choice but to trust Mac, and we didn't, but this was a new day and the time had come to clear some things up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mama D reach up and grab the handle of the omelet pan, even as Jonas set his coffee down on the counter. Everyone was waiting for his answer, and I hoped for Mac's sake it was a good one. I would hate to see him get walloped upside the head with that hot pan.

"If you're asking whether I set you up, the answer is no. This isn't part of a grand scheme. It's survival. I laid in supplies a couple of days ago, after I found out about Marcus."

"You mean after you killed him," Jonas corrected. I looked at him, surprised. Apparently, he had heard my conversation with Mac the night before. More surprising was the fact that he had decided to let it go.

"Yes. That's what I mean." Mac was clearly unhappy at bringing up Marcus in front of Mama D. I had no such qualms, as after the events of last night, I was pretty sure Mama D was made of sterner stuff than anyone suspected.

"There'd been a couple of other incidents, with other Watchers. None of us know much about the others, but you hear things. I heard enough to be concerned." He walked over and held out a plate for Mama D, and she obliged by flipping an omelet out onto it. He handed me the plate and put a fork on it. "Eat that. You'll need the energy later."

Mama D smiled and went back to mixing omelets. Apparently, he had passed muster with her. Of course, Mama D was old school and liked anybody who ordered people to eat. According to her, a good meal was the answer to all ills. I looked down at the fluffy omelet sitting on the plate, swimming in butter and loaded with ham and cheese. A heart attack waiting to happen. If we didn't get out of here soon, we'd all be big as houses.

I sat my coffee down, leaned back against the counter and picked up the fork, deciding it was worth the risk and waited for Mac to continue.

"This place was already here. In bad shape, but workable. It didn't take much to bring it up to speed."

"I'm surprised you found the time, what with your 'watching' responsibilities." Trinity had come in behind me and joined into the discussion.

"We don't watch 24/7. Things are pretty loose until the Client shows some signs. Then we close up surveillance. This place has been ready for over a year. Just in case." He held up another plate, and Mama D tossed on the second omelet. Mac added a huge mound of hash browns before handing the plate over

to Jonas, who dug right into it.

“It needed furniture, towels, sheets.” He shrugged, indicating the room around him. “Supplies for the road if we had to run. It was just as easy to put in things I thought would make Taylor more comfortable.” He turned to me. “I apologize if it had the opposite effect.”

“No,” I mumbled, my mouth full of omelet. What he said made sense in as much as anything made sense lately. The whole thing was unbelievable, so why doubt the one person who seemed to know what was going on. *Because trusting him could get you killed*, a little voice called out, but I chased it away. Sometimes you have to go with your gut, no matter how illogical it is. My gut said Mac was on the up and up. My brain kept insisting I was a fool to believe him.

“It’s fine. In fact, you have better taste in clothes than I do.” I pointed to the shirt I was wearing, causing Trinity to give me a disdainful look as she helped Mama D dish up the last of the omelets. “Well, he does,” I told her.

“You can thank Julian for that,” Mac announced, referring to his gay alter ego. “He is really into clothes and has quite the keen fashion sense.”

“What about Julian?” It suddenly dawned on me that I wasn’t the only missing person from the condos.

“Oh, Julian met a wonderful man, and they ran off together,” he explained. “He’s donating all his worldly goods to charity. It’s all in the note he left behind. If it didn’t burn, that is. And before you ask, it’s been sitting on the kitchen table, ready to go, ever since Marcus came onto the scene.”

Well, that pretty much covered the bases, as far as I was concerned. Satisfied, I moved over to the table, along with Mac, so Mama D and Trinity would sit down to eat. Jonas stayed in the kitchen to clean up. That had to earn him some points with Trinity, but she was ignoring him. On purpose, I suspected.

“So what happened with the banks?” I was curious to know what was on the agenda for today besides staying alive.

“We’ll know soon,” Mac said, checking his watch. “We should be able to confirm the transfers in a little while.”

The plan had been to have Mac’s contact set things up to move all our funds into the offshore account as soon as possible. That would have worked fine with Mama D’s account, but it turned out the rest of us were a little too diversified to move the funds easily. Besides my checking and savings, I had a business account and a separate money market with Keith’s life insurance funds squirreled away along with the money I had pulled from the stock market when things started going wonky. Trinity and Jonas were pretty much in the same boat except Trinity had a safe deposit box full of gold coins. Insurance against a total

economic meltdown, I guess.

“Mac and I spent most of what was left of the evening, doing a little web banking.” Jonas had finished in the kitchen and took a seat at the table, coffee pot in hand. You had to love the big guy. He shook his head at me in disgust, but filled the cup I held out to him anyway.

“We managed to set up transfers for everyone, basically consolidating everything into one account for each of us,” Mac continued. “Once we confirm the transfers went through, my guy will snatch the funds into my offshore account,” At Trinity’s glare, he quickly added. “He’s setting up a numbered account, even as we speak, to which we’ll all have access. Once the funds are in the offshore account, he’ll move them into the numbered account after routing the funds through the system several times. With any luck, they’ll be untraceable.”

Get out. You had to love web banking. I looked down at the pad of paper Mac pushed toward me. Looking at the information they had jotted down, between the five of us, we’d have a considerable amount of funds available if everything went as planned. I thought it was a pretty big ‘if’, but Jonas and Mac seemed almost elated with the whole thing. Probably lack of sleep, I decided.

“You’re sure you can trust this guy to do it and keep quiet?” I asked. I may have decided to follow my gut and trust Mac, but trusting his contact was asking a lot of anyone. “All he has to do is send the money to a different account or make a simple phone call, and we’re up the creek.”

Mac hesitated. It wasn’t much, but it was long enough for me to feel my skin flush and the sweat start to break out on my forehead. He was having doubts now?

“He’ll do it,” Mac finally assured us. “He’ll do it, and he’ll keep quiet about it. He owes me.”

He said it slowly and quietly and looking at him, suddenly there was no doubt in my mind. Not that the guy would do as promised, but that Mac would kill him if he crossed us. The knowledge sank in with a shiver down my spine. Jonas might be big and mean, but Mac was the scary one. Not for the first time, I was glad he was on our side.

“What about the gold?” Trinity demanded impatiently.

“Uh?” I sounded like I didn’t have a brain in my head, but I was still focused on Mac.

“I said, what about the GOLD?” Now she had my attention, along with everyone else’s at the table. She was talking about the gold coins she had in the safety deposit box.

“What about it?” I asked, and watched as her head practically started

spinning.

“What about it? I’ll tell you what about it. It’s sitting there in the bank vault waiting for us to get it and I’m not about to let it stay there. There has got to be a way to get it out.”

I doubted seriously that there was. We would be lucky if we managed to pull off moving funds into the offshore account. Waltzing into a bank where they were bound to be looking for us was suicide. I didn’t want to be the one to tell her that, though. She had that tone in her voice that said she wasn’t backing down.

The guys choose that moment to go check on the transfer, made their excuses and all but ran from the room. Had I said they were mean? Scary? Yellow-bellied cowards was more like it. *Jerks*. I might have expected it from them, but when Mama D got up and excused herself from the table, I was flabbergasted. I had expected her to try to talk some sense into her granddaughter and instead she had hightailed it out of there right behind the guys. That she had left, told me one very important thing. The guys might be avoiding confrontation, but Mama D was backing Trinity on this, and I was left standing out there all alone.

“Trinity, you know there’s no way we can get to your gold. They’ll be watching for it,” I started in, attempting to try reason first. It might work. She was a lawyer after all.

“I’m going to get it,” she informed me. “If I have to, I’ll take Jonas with me, but I’m going.”

Was she serious? The fact that she had even thought Jonas would agree to let her go, much less go with her to help, told me how desperate she was. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand the sudden turnabout. She’d seen the amount of funds we were moving around. We didn’t need the gold.

“Taylor,” she said, gripping my arm. “We don’t know what’s going to happen. We may need that money later. Then it will be too late to come back and get it.”

She had a point, but I still couldn’t see any way to do what she wanted. Just the idea of her going in with Jonas was ludicrous. At 6’5” Jonas was easy to spot in a crowd. Add in his looks and his swaggering air of confidence and Jonas couldn’t enter a room without being the center of attention.

Trinity didn’t realize it, but she was practically a carbon copy, right down to that crusader attitude they both had. I guess if I really thought about it, we all had that attitude. Fighting for the right. Truth, justice, and the American way. Now, we were all criminals. On the run. Which brought me right back to my main concern. No way could those two get in and out of a bank without being noticed. Big time. I was all for leaving the gold behind. It was a small loss to

keep from exposing anyone to danger, but that was just my opinion, and it wasn't my gold. Obviously, Trinity felt different.

"Why is this so important to you? Is getting this gold worth risking your life over? Jonas' life?"

"It's not like that, Taylor. It's not even my gold." She paused and bit her lip. "It's Kevin's."

I shook my head, confused. Her brother was dead, and she was saying the gold belonged to him? Kevin had been killed in a drive-by shooting a few months before Keith's death. He had stood up as best man at our wedding. I liked Kevin. He was a great guy, but he had never struck me as the type to even have a portfolio, much less to have diversified into the gold market. Why he had it was a big question. A bigger one was why she'd kept quiet about it all this time. Warning bells sounding in my ears, I asked the question, even though I was dreading the answer.

"Exactly how much gold are we talking here, Trinity?"

She looked around like she expected someone to be spying on us and then leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"Half a million."

I couldn't possibly have heard that right. Did she say half a million? Half a million what? Coins? Dollars? Ounces? Did it even matter? Kevin had worked in a garage. There was no way he had a half a million of any of the above. Not legally. My stomach rolled at the thought that this had something to do with his murder. What was Trinity thinking? She had to know this was trouble, the minute she found it.

"Trinity, what have you done?" I hissed at her.

"I found it. After. You know." She was back to looking around like she expected hoodlums to pop out of the cabinets any minute. If I had any doubt that Trinity knew the gold was trouble, she'd put it to rest. "You know how it was. Gram was out of her mind with grief when Kevin got killed, and whoever did it, got away with it." Her voice was breaking at the painful reminder of what they had gone through, and tears threatened to spill as she blinked them back. "I found the gold in his locker at the gym weeks later. They called to ask me to come clean it out, and I found it in his gym bag. I knew it was wrong to keep it, but I couldn't bring myself to turn it in."

I couldn't believe it. All this time, she'd kept evidence from the police. If she'd turned it in, it might have led them to the killers. Instead, she put it in a safe deposit box.

"What on earth possessed you to keep it? That's evidence Trinity!"

She flinched like I had hit her and I suppose, in a way I had. What she'd

done was just as illegal as whatever it was that Kevin had done to get the money in the first place.

“You don’t know that. We don’t know that it had anything to do with Kevin’s death. That was Kevin’s money. I wasn’t going to give it to the police. They would have just put it in evidence, and it would have disappeared into someone’s pocket.” She was crying now, and I had a hard time understanding the words as she tried to explain. “Kevin was killed, right in our front yard. You remember, Taylor, I know you do. They killed him and the police never found who did it. They never even tried. They didn’t care.”

“Trinity, you know that’s not true. Jonas worked round the clock. They all did. I did. It might have helped if we had known the whole story.”

“I told you I didn’t find it for weeks. Taylor, that gold is the only thing we have left of Kevin. I can’t leave it behind. I won’t.”

What a bunch of hooley. She had a lot of things that had belonged to Kevin. It was a lame excuse, and she had to know it. Even worse, was that she actually expected me to buy into it. For Pete’s sake, she was a lawyer. A good one. She ought to be able to concoct something better than that load of malarky. Then again, none of us were exactly on our game. Jonas was law enforcement and had broken more laws in the past 24 hours than I cared to count. I’d gone from calm and collected to borderline basket case, and I didn’t even want to think about the turn around Mama D had gone through.

As irritated as I was at what she’d done and that she’d kept it from me, the fact remained that I knew Trinity pretty well. She wasn’t a criminal, and she wasn’t stupid, although you couldn’t tell it from the conversation we were having now. Trinity had kept quiet about the gold. Trinity, the warrior for justice. If there had been a chance that the gold would have led us to Kevin’s killer, she would have turned it over in the blink of an eye. The fact was, she hadn’t, and there was only one reason I could think of that would cause her to do what she did.

“Mama D knows about the gold?” I asked, but I already knew the answer, so I was ready when Trinity nodded. Of course she did. That’s why she had left the room when she did. I thought she was avoiding Trinity, but she’d been avoiding me.

“I told her not to tell anyone about the gold. Not even you. That it would put you in a bad situation.” She reached across the table, imploring me to understand. “Taylor, she didn’t want to, I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t tell you.”

“She doesn’t know Kevin was doing something illegal, does she?”

“No.” It came out in a sob. “I couldn’t do that to her. No matter what. Not after losing Mama and then Kevin. She was so sick, Taylor. When Kevin was

killed, I thought I would lose her too. She thought it was just a drive-by shooting. If the police had taken the gold and opened a case investigating Kevin, it might have been more than she could take. I'm so sorry Taylor, so very sorry."

I looked at her sitting there crying at the table and thought about everything she had told me. She had gone against everything she believed, everything she stood for and quite possibly allowed her brother's killers to go free to protect Mama D. The fact that she had broken the law didn't really bother me all that much. True, Trinity had tampered with, and concealed evidence, but last night, I had killed four men. I had done it to protect Jonas and Trinity, but that didn't change the fact that I had done it. And covered it up.

Had Trinity been any less justified in what she had done? Truth be told, I was having a little trouble here. What had seemed black and white less than 24 hours ago, was now obscured with hazy gray lines. What Trinity had done had come with a price. Secrets always do and this one, I knew, had haunted her.

It certainly complicated things, though. Going to the bank was a tremendous risk to everyone concerned. If we didn't go, we stood to lose the only chance we might have to find Kevin's killers. I knew this was the thing that Trinity feared the most. The reason she would go in alone if it came to that. When push came to shove, justice had to be served. It might come late, but it would come.

Jonas and Mac chose that moment to come loping around the corner. Both stopped short as they took in the scene before them. Trinity hunched at the table, in tears, the tension thick in the room.

"Are you okay?" Mac asked, searching my face. Jonas had moved toward Trinity, which I found somewhat ironic, given the fact they were usually occupied with yelling at each other.

"Fine," I lied, purposely ignoring the elephant in the room. "How's our money situation?"

"We're good. Everything went smooth as silk. All the money's accounted for and sitting in the Caymans."

I nodded. I should have been relieved, but I wasn't. I knew the worst was yet to come. We were going to have to walk into a bank in downtown Little Rock and make a withdrawal. I had made the decision. Heaven help us, we were going for the gold.

“ARE YOU OUT of your mind?” Jonas was on his feet before the words were out of my mouth. “There’s no way anyone is walking into that bank. Period.” He turned on Trinity, obviously blaming her for my decision. “We have enough money in the Cayman account. We don’t need to risk everything to fetch a few gold coins.”

Okay, he was right to blame her, but it was for all the wrong reasons. He thought it was about the money. It wasn’t, but he didn’t know that. I hoped that Trinity had enough sense to keep quiet, but she rose to the bait like a fish takes to water.

“Who do you think you are?” she growled out between clenched teeth. “You don’t make the rules around here, mister. And don’t you dare look down your nose at me for wanting to get them. We’re not just talking about a *few gold coins*. They’re important, and we’re not leaving without them.”

Trinity was nose to nose with Jonas, hands on her hips, spoiling for a fight. From the looks of things, he was going to give her one.

“Stop it. Both of you.” Mac stepped in between them, successfully separating them. Jonas hesitated and then backed down, holding up his hands in surrender.

“Fine. You tell them, Mac. I’m obviously not getting through to them.”

Mac was silent long enough for Jonas to realize he wasn’t going to get the backup he had hoped for. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Don’t tell me you agree with these two?”

“It doesn’t really matter what I think, Jonas. What matters is what Taylor thinks, and” he held up his hands to stop Jonas from cutting in, “if you’ll sit down and give me a minute, I’ll explain why.”

My eyes widened at his words. Mac was backing me up, much like he had last night when I insisted we go get Mama D and that Trinity and I go along. Thinking about it now, Mac had conceded to almost everything I’d wanted. I had felt that until now, he and Jonas had been calling the shots, but if I was honest, that wasn’t the way it was at all. I had voiced my preferences, and Mac had quietly backed me up. I hadn’t realized it, and apparently from Jonas’ glare, he hadn’t either.

It took Jonas a minute or two to decide and frankly I didn’t blame him. For the first time, I think, it really hit me just how horrible this was for him. Like the rest of us, he’d lost everything, but for Jonas, it had to be worse. He was used to

being in control. Being the one in charge. It was as much a part of him as fighting for the right was for Trinity and me. Now Mac was telling him it wasn't his call anymore. It was mine. He was losing the one thing he still had, and I wasn't sure that was something he was going to be able to accept.

Finally, he drew back a chair and sat down, keeping his distance from the rest of us. Mac noticed, as did Trinity, but for a change, she kept her mouth shut. Maybe it had dawned on her too, just how much Jonas had sacrificed to help us.

Mac nodded and sat down as well, placing his hands gently on the table.

"You all know about Taylor's telekinetic ability, but there's a little more to it than that. Usually, when someone has one psychic gift, they have a secondary gift as well. It's not as powerful as the first, but it does exist."

Well, he certainly had my attention now. A second psychic ability. My mind was racing, trying to think what it might be. I could barely handle one. I knew I'd never be able to deal with a second one.

"Taylor, take it easy." Mac had reached over, covering my hand with his on the tabletop. I knew what he was saying this time. He was warning me not to freak out, but trying to be nice about it. I took a couple of deep breaths to calm myself down, remembering all too well what had happened the last time I had panicked. I definitely didn't want a repeat. Mac waited until I had gotten better control before he continued.

"Jonas, Taylor has the ability to sense things. That's why she reacted so quickly when Marcus drew his gun on you. She had already sensed something was wrong. It's why she's so good at her job."

"Wait. Are you saying Taylor can see the future?" Trinity interrupted him.

"No, not at all. It's different than that, isn't it Taylor?"

I looked at him blankly, not wanting to believe what he was saying. All this time, I thought I had just been listening to my gut feelings. That I was just good at my job, had great instincts. Now I find out I'm gifted. I know it wasn't reasonable, but I felt like it was cheating somehow. No longer a level playing field where I excelled. I suppose that what he was saying made sense if you believed in that kind of thing. Now he'd put me in the hot seat, and they were all waiting for me to explain as if I knew what I was talking about.

"I don't know. If what he's saying is true, it's just a feeling. Sort of knowing, without actually knowing." As I stumbled around trying to explain it was becoming clearer to me. "It's like instinct, but more than that. There's a conviction to it."

"Exactly," Mac said, cutting back in. "Conviction. Deep down she just knows. So you see Jonas, no matter how much experience, or information any of us have, on her worst day, Taylor is still 100 times more likely to make the right

decision than any one of us. She leads. We follow.”

I had heard enough. I wasn’t the person who should be in charge. Not of the group anyway. Jonas had way more experience and Mac had ... Well, I wasn’t sure what Mac had, but whatever it was, it was way more than me.

“I don’t want it.” I pulled away and kicked back my chair from the table. “I don’t want the responsibility.”

“It’s too late, Taylor. You already have it. You’ve already made the decision. We’re going to the bank, and we’re going to get the coins. Don’t second guess yourself now. That’s the fastest way to get us all killed.”

Stunned, I stared at Mac, horrified at the burden he had just placed on me. It was one thing to follow my gut when it was just me. How could I do anything but second guess myself when their lives could be at stake? How could I do that to Jonas? Ask him to just accept a decision that seemed insane to him, even if I felt it was the right thing to do. This wasn’t going to work, and I was about to tell Mac that when Jonas got up and walked right out the back door.

19

“HE’LL NEVER ACCEPT this,” I told Mac, staring at the closed door, “and I don’t blame him.”

“It doesn’t matter, Taylor. It’s the way it is. He’ll either come around or he won’t, but it doesn’t change things.”

“Well, thank you Mac. That was really helpful. That just makes everything better,” I snapped at him.

He flinched at the impact of my words, but I didn’t really care. Taking it out on him wasn’t fair, but at the moment, it felt pretty darn good. I couldn’t look at Mac without thinking about the reason he was now in my life. Trinity had caused a huge problem with the whole gold business, so I wasn’t very happy with her, and then Jonas had just walked right out the door. Something I wished I could do. Walk away. No people. No responsibility. No nothing. Just gone.

Needing some space, I picked up my empty coffee cup intending to head over to the kitchen, but decided to check on Mama D first. The cabin wasn’t big, but the kitchen and eating area were separated from the living area by a wall. It was open at both ends, providing more of an illusion of privacy than anything else, but it was better than nothing.

I peeked around the corner, not knowing if Mama D had taken refuge in there or one of the two bedrooms. She was propped in one of the recliners, sound asleep, a daytime soap opera playing on the television across the room. Mama D loved her soaps. I snorted at the thought that my whole life had become a soap opera and headed back into the kitchen to put on a fresh pot of coffee.

Both Mac and Trinity had disappeared, and I wasn’t sorry to see it. I wasn’t what you’d call a people person. I loved Trinity and Mama D, but I needed space, and there was little to none to be had in the cabin. I did have a bedroom to myself, but I’d been so tired the night before, that I hadn’t been able to enjoy the solitude.

I watched as the coffee began to drip into the pot, completely absorbed in the process as it slowly covered the bottom of the carafe, making its way up the sides. The last few drops were hissing out when I felt Mac slide up beside me.

“Trinity went out to tell Jonas about the gold. I thought it might be a good idea to turn off the alarm systems before they set them off.” He sat his cup down next to mine, and I filled them both without a word.

We went back to the table and sat in silence sipping our coffee. I couldn’t

help but wonder about Mac. Seven years, he'd been watching me, but I'd never even known he existed. He'd been on the fringes of my life. A downstairs neighbor. The guy who handed me a coffee in the morning. But ever since he'd made his appearance last night, he'd known what I was feeling, practically before I did. Something Keith had never managed to do, and he had been closer to me than anyone.

How many times had I been close to losing it only to have Mac caution me, bringing me back from the edge? Even now, there were things to be said, decisions to be made, but he sat quietly sipping his coffee, giving me the space I needed.

I slid my eyes up slowly, to find him watching me, and I knew. Something else was going on here.

The door flew open, causing us both to jump, as Jonas and Trinity came in from outside. Mac announced he was going to reset the alarms as Jonas led Trinity to her seat and pulled up a chair next to her. She had obviously been crying, a near perpetual state, it seemed, since this whole thing began, but other than puffy eyes and a runny nose, she seemed none the worse for wear. I had a million questions I was dying to ask, but none of them were important right at the moment. What was important was that Trinity had told Jonas the truth, and he was back.

"Trinity explained about the gold coins," Jonas said when Mac came back into the room. "Obviously, I don't agree with what she did, but I can understand why she did it, and why you feel the need to go after them. For what it's worth, I still think it's a big mistake."

Mac looked at me, waiting to see if I would step up or not. Heaven knows I didn't want to, but if what he said was true, I didn't have much of a choice. I was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Somehow, while I was watching the coffee stream into the pot, I had made the decision. I might have the ultimate responsibility, but that didn't mean I had to go it alone.

"I understand Jonas, but before we get into that, I want to say a couple of things, clear a few things up, if I may." I looked at Jonas, who reluctantly nodded. I was treading on thin ice here, and I knew it. "Jonas, I have relied on your advice in the past, always valued your opinion. It's the same with you, Trinity. You both have knowledge and information and experience that I will never have. I may know, instinctively the direction we need to go, but I don't know how to get there or maybe even what to do once we arrive." I paused, at a loss for words to explain what I wanted. Not sure how to convince them of how important they were to the whole process.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I have no intention of running blindly

into the fray. I need your help, just like I always have.” I paused, letting my words sink in before offering him an option out. “Jonas, it’s not too late for you. They don’t know you’re with us and your connection with me is weak enough that I don’t feel they would go after you. If you want out, there’s still time.”

He sat there, looking at me and I could practically see the thoughts tumbling around in his head, weighing the options. He could go back, back to his job and his life and pretend this had never happened. If he had half a brain, he would jump on the chance. I only wished it was still an option for Trinity and Mama D.

Trinity looked at me like I had lost my mind, and I wasn’t convinced she was wrong. Mac had come through in the clinch, but he was still an unknown. Jonas was our security blanket, and the prospect of losing him and essentially being on our own was daunting, but I couldn’t deny him the choice. He had been trapped into this, and there was a way out if he wanted it. I held my breath, waiting for his decision.

“I’m sticking,” he finally said, with a grim smile. “I can’t leave Mac out here alone, with three women.”

“That’s a good choice because Taylor is wrong,” Mama D announced from the doorway, surprising us all. “You can’t go back now, Jonas. None of you can. According to the news, you four were tragically killed last night in a fire.”

We rushed into the living room, but they were already onto the next story. Mac flipped the channels and landed on one of the local stations, just as our pictures flashed onto the screen.

Jonas took top billing, being a Little Rock detective, tragically killed during a rescue attempt. Trinity and I had apparently been trapped in the blaze, which had spread to the adjoining condos, resulting in the additional death of homeowner, Julian Hayes. I cocked an eye at Mac. Poor Julian. So much for finding love and living happily ever after.

We watched as they got comments from some of the surviving neighbors, and a statement from the police about Jonas’ record with the department. When they cut to the weather, Mac grabbed the remote, and the screen went blank.

“Well, at least you died a hero, Jonas. Taylor and I were apparently too stupid to run out of a burning building,” Trinity said, sarcasm dripping from each word. “Julian, what can I say, except that photo did not do you justice.”

I looked over at her in surprise. It was the most she’d said since she’d come back inside and I took it as a positive sign that she was getting some of her sass back. Coming clean about the gold with Jonas and me probably had a lot to do with that. Mama D announced she was going to go try to get some more sleep, and Trinity decided to join her, leaving Jonas, Mac and me alone in the room. I waited until they had disappeared down the hall to voice my question.

“Just how do four dead men become two dead women and a couple of dead guys?” I asked. “What happened to the three Mac got outside the condo?”

“That agency you work for powerful enough to have fingers in this, Mac?” Jonas wanted to know.

“Worked for, Jonas. Past tense. And you have no idea how powerful they are.”

I was afraid we were going to find out.

20

WE MADE OUR plans for moving the gold over lunch. Getting in and out of the bank without raising red flags was the main problem. Having been declared dead, at least the police weren't looking for us, but it also meant that even if we could get Trinity into the bank without being seen, she'd never make it into the vault past security. Not with her recent demise being the breaking news and as recognizable as she was.

The only other person with access to the box was Mama D. The very thought of sending her in gave me the chills, but we were out of options. It was either that or leave the gold behind and neither Trinity, or Mama D were willing to do that.

It took us about two hours, but we managed to pull together what I thought was a pretty good plan. Mac's contact was in nearby Hot Springs and not only was he good at moving money around, he apparently was a whiz-bang at making fake ID's. I couldn't help but think how incredibly convenient that was when Mac told us about it. I could only hope that this psychic sense thing that told me Mac could be trusted was dead on the money, or I was going to be extremely put out.

We'd get the new id's, and then Mac and I would go into the bank, disguised of course. Mac was handling that portion, and I could hardly wait to see what he would do, what with all the talent he had in that arena. Trinity and Jonas were just too difficult to conceal so they would be stationed outside. Mama D would go in, retrieve the gold and get out. Just that simple, except for one little thing.

Gold weighs a lot. I don't care what you see in the movies, those guys are not carrying a bag of gold bars. Jonas had put pen to paper and figured out that a half million in gold at today rates, would weigh in at 15-20 pounds, and that was after gold had soared in price. Depending on the going rate when Trinity had figured the total, it could easily be 30 pounds or more. It didn't seem like that much, but 30 pounds of compact weight that you're trying to hide is vastly different from a 30-pound child slung over your hip.

"There's no way Gram could walk with that kind of weight, and what if something goes wrong? How do we get her out fast?" Trinity and Mama D were doing the dishes and Mac was busy putting them away. Jonas and I were at the table pouring over his notes, trying to figure out a way to get Mama D in and out with the gold without much success.

“Too bad we can’t just slap some wheels on it and roll it out.” I threw my pencil on the table and watched it roll along, stopping just short of disappearing over the edge. I was tired, frustrated and worried. It would be so much easier to just forget the whole thing, but there was a part of me, deep down, that said that was the wrong thing to do. We just hadn’t hit on the answer yet.

I finally noticed that everyone had stopped what they were doing to stare at me.

“What?” I asked totally clueless. I thought back over what I had just said, and it finally hit me. We *could* just roll it out.

* * *

WE DECIDED TO hit the bank mid-afternoon the next day, missing the lunch crowd. With any luck, whoever was watching would be tired by then and not paying close attention. There was no question in my mind that they would be watching. Other than turning something up on Mac’s cabin, which was highly unlikely considering all the precautions he’d taken, their only way of locating us was to watch the places we might turn up. Right now, they had no way of knowing if we had left town or not. That was all about to change.

Within minutes, we were heading south, on our way to Hot Springs and Mac’s contact to get the new ID’s. Mama D would use her real name to get into the vault and then switch to her new identity. Mac had already taken care of my new paperwork, in the event we had to run, but I needed some form of id in case of a problem at the bank, and he didn’t want to use my new id for that.

I watched out the window as the Arkansas countryside slid by with a heavy heart. In a matter of hours, we would be leaving the state and odds were good, I’d never be back.

Mac turned onto Highway 5, the old back way into the Springs and as we neared the East Gate to Hot Springs Village, where Keith and I had lived, memories came flooding in. I had loved the drive home. After running after bad guys and seeing the seedier side of life during the day, driving the 40 minutes home, through the winding, wooded hillsides was the highlight of my day. About halfway home from Little Rock, the two-lane highway twisted around, through a grove of trees, their branches stretched over the road. As you came around the last curve, you passed the overlook of the long valley spread out below,

surrounded by mountains. If I got lucky and hit the overlook right at sunset, the sight was breathtaking.

I hadn't seen that view in over six months. A stark reminder that this was no longer my way home. I thought back over everything that happened in the past year. Losing Keith had been devastating, and the past few days had been nothing, if not brutal. Everything had changed. Everything was different now.

As we passed the turn off into the Village, I felt hot tears sting my eyes. This was the last time I would be here. In a matter of minutes, I would become someone other than Taylor Morrison. Considering everything that had happened, perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing.

Lost in thought, we were in Hot Springs before I knew it. Looking up, I saw we were on Central Avenue, the famous bath houses lining the road on one side, while local shops, filled with tourists crowded the other. Our goal was the mall at the other end of town. If I had been paying attention, I could have directed Mac to take the cutoff through Gulpha Gorge and bypassed the congestion, but I'd missed my chance and now here we sat stuck in traffic.

"What is that, in front of me?" Mac asked, impatiently. "Is that a duck? Because it looks like a giant duck, and it's full of people."

I leaned over at his question to see around Jonas, who was sitting in the passenger seat, his big frame blocking any view to the front. Sure enough, we were behind a Duck Tour. The huge amphibious vehicles cruised from the Bathhouse area over to the lake where, to the delight of the tourists, they plowed into the water for a boat tour of the area.

"It's fine, Mac. They keep up with traffic. You can't see, but there's a line of cars in front of them, holding things up. There's usually a tie up here." Tapping the steering wheel with impatience, he didn't look too convinced. "I'm surprised you don't know that seeing as how you've been following me for years and your contact is here."

"I don't follow you. I just keep tabs. And no, I've never been here. I don't come to him. He comes to me. Today is an exception."

"Funny, your covert contact is here in the Springs, Mac. Kind of ironic really."

"Why?" he asked, catching my eye in the rear view as he inched slowly forward.

"Covert operative, spy, whatever he is, he's located in what used to be the biggest den of iniquity in the States. I find that sort of amusing."

At his incredulous look, Trinity began to fill him in on Hot Springs' notorious past. Mama D even pitched in a few details. Most of the tourists came to see the bathhouses, famous at the turn of the century, known for the healing

power of the hot mineral water. People had come from all over the world for treatments. Franklin Roosevelt and Babe Ruth were known to frequent the bathhouses. It was the gambling dens and the moonshine, though, that attracted the likes of Al Capone and Bugsy Malone.

Few people realized that when Las Vegas was just a speck of dust in someone's imagination, Hot Springs, Arkansas was the place to see and be seen. At one time there were more than ten casinos in the town, the mob so ensconced that the governor had to bring in a task force to shut them down. Now the only gambling was at Oaklawn Park, a premier horse racing facility, smack dab in the heart of Central Arkansas and another place to expect traffic problems. Mac was going to have to drive right past it. He was going to be thrilled, I was sure.

The traffic had finally cleared, and we were fast approaching the race course. In season, you could sometimes catch a glimpse of the field making the final turn into the stretch as you passed, but this afternoon the track lay empty.

I had never gone to the races. I'd driven by, even sat in the parking lot on a few mornings, when I was early for an appointment and watched them take the horses out for exercise and training, but I'd never actually attended. Funny how things like that happen. You think you have all the time in the world, but then opportunity passes, and you realize you missed half the stuff you planned to do.

Morose. I was becoming morose. First I was tearing up, and now I was bemoaning not going to the horse races. I didn't even really like horse racing. I caught Mac watching me in the rearview mirror again, and I made a face at him, which I admit was childish, but it sent his eyes back to the road where they belonged. I really needed to talk to him and get some things straightened out. I highly suspected that the Watchers weren't without their own form of psychic power. Why would you send an unarmed man into a gunfight, right?

Within minutes, we had arrived at the Hot Springs Mall. It wasn't big, as malls go, but it had a Sears, a JCPenny's and most importantly, a Dillards. Trinity, Mama D, and Jonas had instructions to pick up clothes and any other necessities for the road. Trinity had changed her hair, left off her makeup and was in jeans and a shirt, the tails hanging loose. The difference from her normal appearance of tailored professional was amazing. I barely recognized her.

"Try to stay out of Dillards," I cautioned as she hopped out of the van, knowing full well that would be the first place she'd head for. Full of designer clothing, it was her favorite store. She threw an evil smile at me as she swung her \$800 hobo bag up on her shoulder and walked off with Mama D in tow.

I was much more worried about Jonas. With his size and looks, he really stood out, even with the dark glasses and hat Mac had given him. If anything, they made him stand out even more, only now he looked like some large scary

hoodlum instead of a large scary cop. Mac had given him instructions on what to buy to blend in more. I had doubts Jonas would ever blend in, but I was curious to see what he came up with.

We arranged to meet them back at the entrance in two hours. Not much shopping time for Trinity, but then Mac had only given her a couple thousand to outfit the three of them, so I figured she'd be cooling her heels by the time we got back.

"Don't worry," Mac said, as I watched them walk away. "They'll be fine. Jonas can take care of them."

He was right, I was worried. This was the first time we had been separated since the attack and they were walking around in the open in a mall. For whatever reason, his assurance rubbed me the wrong way, serving to remind me of my intent to talk to him. As Mac turned onto Central, heading to meet his contact, I decided it was the perfect time.

"You have something else you need to tell me, Mac?" I asked, the irritation I felt evident in my voice. "Because I'm thinking maybe you left out a few things."

I saw his hands tighten on the wheel and when he didn't immediately answer, I felt my anger start to build. Apparently, he felt it too.

"Hold on, hold on. Let me get off the road so we can talk." He swerved the van into a Sonic drive-in at the last minute and pulled into a space between two other cars. Putting the van into park, he left it running, the windows up for privacy.

"What do you want to know?" he asked calmly.

"Don't play games with me, Mac. You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't. I didn't lie to you."

"You didn't tell me the truth, though, did you? You're keeping things from me, and I'm not working like that."

He blew out a breath of air in frustration and turned away to stare at the menu, which really ticked me off. I didn't consider myself a violent person, but right then, I had an almost overwhelming desire to smack his head into the window and knock him around a bit. Here we had trusted him with our lives, and he'd been holding out on us.

"Stop!" he hissed at me, grabbing my arm. I felt the tremble from him clear to my shoulder. "Stop, please. I'll explain, but you need to calm down. Please."

My emotion switched almost instantly from anger to fear, at the pain I heard in his voice. Sweat began to run down his face, and he snatched his hand from my arm like it was a hot skillet. Sure he was having a heart attack, I quickly

undid my seat belt and moved to help him.

“Stop! Taylor, don’t touch me.” He was backing up against the driver’s door in an effort to avoid my hands. I froze in the seat, inches from him as the truth hit me. I was doing this to him. I was hurting him. I didn’t know how, but I knew, without a doubt, it was me.

Suddenly, I had a desperate need to get out of there. I threw the van door open so fast it hit the menu board and bounced back on me, knocking me sideways as I ran from the van. I had no idea where to go, but I knew I needed to get away from Mac. I headed up the road, back in the direction of the mall, my mind a mass of confusion.

I looked back over my shoulder and seeing a break in the traffic, sprinted across the four lanes and hopped the divider into the mall parking lot. Out of breath and overheated from the run, I slowed to a walk just as Mac cut in front of me, the van rocking as he slammed on the brakes and rammed it into park. I turned to head the other way but hadn’t gone more than two feet before he grabbed me.

“Taylor, stop. It’s okay. I’m okay.” He turned me around to face him, but I couldn’t bear to look at him, remembering the pain that was etched into his face because of me.

“Let me go, Mac.” I swatted at him as he tried to stop me leaving again. “Don’t touch me! Stay away.” I was trapped. He dropped his hands but blocked every attempt I made to get away from him.

“Please Mac,” I begged, exhausted. “Let me go. Just let me leave.”

“Where would you go?” he asked softly.

I didn’t know, didn’t care. Just away. I couldn’t take this anymore. Couldn’t live with the thought that I could hurt someone without knowing it, trying to put the realization that I already had, out of my mind.

“Taylor, you aren’t going anywhere without me. You can leave, but I’ll find you.” He reached over and wrapped his hand firmly around mine. I tensed waiting for him to draw back in pain, but it didn’t happen. “Don’t ever run from me again.”

He pulled on my arm and led me around the van to the passenger side. Opening the door, he sat me down on the seat, and I was too tired to resist. My arms and legs heavy, my mind numb, I slumped against the closed door while Mac rounded the front and climbed in next to me.

“You’re in shock,” he told me as I began to shiver in the relative coolness of the van. He pulled back out into traffic and headed across the road, back to the Sonic. Parking the van on the opposite side of the drive-in from before, he ordered two Route 44’s and some chili fries. The next thing I knew he was

pressing the huge styrofoam cup into my hand and ordering me to drink. He helped guide the cup up, and I managed a couple of sips. After a while, the smell of the fries permeated my deadened senses, and I roused myself enough to look over and find the source. He smiled as he waved the steaming tray under my nose and I snagged a fry dripping with chili and melted cheese.

"I can't believe all the food I'm eating." I popped a second fry in my mouth against my better judgment. The way things were going, I was going to need a new wardrobe myself. A bigger one. The thought was thoroughly depressing. "I'm always hungry."

"It's the stress. And your abilities. Your system is revved up, burning more calories. You'll settle into it in time, but right now, you need food. It will help."

He was right. By the time we had polished off the fries and I was half way through my Diet Coke, I was feeling halfway human again. Not back to my old self, but good enough to talk.

"Okay, so what happened back there, Mac?" My voice broke, and I realized I wasn't doing quite as good as I thought. Taking a couple of deep breaths, I tried again. "What's going on?"

"I'm an Empath," he said, looking at the steering wheel instead of me. "All Watchers are. It's one of the requirements for the job."

I was confused. This psychic stuff was still new to me. "So what? You can read my thoughts?"

"No. Taylor. Never. Empaths sense emotions. It makes them ideal for watching over the Clients."

So that's what happened. He was picking up on my emotions. That's why he always seemed one step ahead of me. That explained a lot and wasn't far off from what I had expected him to admit to, but it still didn't explain the past few minutes.

"Seems kind of dangerous to me, considering what just happened."

"This isn't normal."

Not normal. Now why didn't that surprise me? I knew nothing about Empaths except what he had told me so far, and even I had figured out this couldn't be normal. Mac was still focused on the steering wheel or something close behind it. He seemed as confused as I was, and I could tell he was trying to sort things out in his head before trying to explain them to me.

"Maybe you should start at the beginning, Mac. When did you start being a Watcher?"

"Right after I got out of Special Ops." He looked up and shrugged. "I'd always been sensitive to people's emotions. Could tell when someone was hurt or angry. It came in handy during missions. I'd know if someone was lying, or if

they had given us all the information they had. I always assumed I had, I don't know, like a second sense. When my last tour was over, I was approached by the Agency. I went in for their testing and apparently passed with flying colors. I didn't have anything else in the tube, and it sounded interesting, so I signed on."

"How did you get assigned to me?"

"I did my basic training and then taught some, working with some of the Handlers. Those are the guys who teach the Clients how to use and control their abilities," he explained at my confused look. "I told you that you didn't have a Watcher until seven years ago. They just keep an eye on things and stop by once in a while to make sure everything's going okay. The abilities manifest themselves in people at different times. Something usually sets it off, a trauma, or high-stress situation. When a person is a high candidate for having some abilities, they send a Watcher in if there's an event that might precipitate a change. In your case, it was the death of your Aunt that started the ball rolling."

"And lucky you, you got stuck with me."

"Actually, that's not true. I picked you." He started playing with his straw, moving it up and down nervously. "I was sent to do a visual check on you when your Aunt died. You didn't see me, but I was at the funeral, sitting in the back. Even that far from you, the connection was strong. Stronger than anything I'd come across. I didn't understand it, but I pulled some strings and made sure I was assigned to you. I packed my bag and flew in the next week. I've been with you ever since."

I was surprised at how calm I'd remained during his explanation. He had given me bits and pieces before, but now, for the first time, I was getting the full picture, and it should have been overwhelming. Somehow it wasn't, and I had a feeling that had something to do with Mac.

"We need to head out to meet my contact. We need those ID's." He checked his watch and stowed his drink, putting the van in gear. "We're running behind, so we'll finish up after we pick up the crew at the mall."

He pulled onto Central and headed toward Lake Catherine. As we passed the huge lakefront homes and marinas dotting the shoreline, Mac's fingers beat out a rhythm on his leg. I had never seen him nervous like this before, and I wondered what problems he was anticipating that had him so worried.

"What about this afternoon?" I asked. "You said it wasn't normal, what happens between us. What's different?"

"I told you I felt a connection with you immediately?" I nodded that I remembered. I wasn't likely to forget. "It was strong. After I got here, it grew stronger. Empaths can sense emotions, but this is more. It's like I feel your emotion. Almost like I absorb it. It's stronger if I touch you." He ventured a

quick glance at me and then back at the road.

“It’s incredibly strong if you direct it at me. This afternoon, you were angry at me. Then you were scared. It was,” he paused, searching for words. “I don’t know, like a sensory overload. I don’t understand it. I’ve never seen it before, but that’s the best way I can think of to explain it.”

“So that’s why you know when I am starting to freak. That’s when you tell me to calm down.” He nodded.

“Why are you nervous now?” I gestured toward his tapping fingers.

“I’m not,” he answered, with a half laugh. “You are.”

* * *

I SAT IN the car while he met his contact. We had gone to a park on the lake for the meeting. Mac had phoned ahead to let him know what we needed and e-mailed digital photos of Jonas, Trinity and Mama D to him to use on the ID’s. The rush job had cost extra, a lot extra, but if he was as good as Mac claimed, it was well worth it. While I was waiting, I had time to think about what Mac had said and the pieces started fitting together. It made sense in an insane sort of way. One thing I knew for sure. I needed to quit second guessing myself and stop being suspicious of every move he made.

He opened the door and tossed the packet of ID’s to me as he slid behind the wheel. I stopped him before he could put the van into drive, though. If we were going to be together on this, I needed to set some ground rules.

“Mac, why didn’t you tell me about this before?” It may have sounded a lot like my other questions, but my attitude was different. This time, I was curious, not angry and accusing. I needed to know how he thought, how he worked. The best way to do that was to find out how he reasoned things out.

“There wasn’t a good time. You were a bundle of emotions, all of them threatening to erupt at any minute. You’d had a lot of stuff coming at you, and it didn’t seem like a good time to throw something else on the fire.”

He put the van into drive but kept his foot on the brake. I could tell he was debating with himself, and I tried to stay relaxed as I waited for him to decide what to do.

“That’s not all of it, though. The main reason I didn’t say anything was because this is something between you and me. I don’t understand it, but there’s

a bond between us. I don't know what's going to happen or how this is going to end, but I think the fewer people that know about it, the better. That includes Jonas and Trinity."

He was telling the truth. I knew it, could sense it. I didn't like the idea of keeping secrets from Jonas and Trinity, but I had to agree with him. The less they knew, the safer they were. At least for now.

Mac waited while I weighed things in my mind. He knew the minute I had decided, as he nodded at me, and put the van in motion. He might not be able to read my mind, but being able to sense my emotions so strongly was pretty close. After all, he'd had seven years to practice.

I reached down and snagged the envelope before it could slide under the seat. We were due at the mall to pick everyone up in 10 minutes, and we were barely going to make it on time. As we sped back to the highway, I opted to worry about whether anyone had recognized them and if they were all safe rather than the fact that I had just colluded with Mac to keep secrets from the people I loved and trusted.

* * *

WE PULLED INTO the parking lot with one minute to spare, and relief poured through me when I spied Mama D coming through the glass doors. Right behind her were Trinity and Jonas, both of them loaded down with bags.

"Good grief." Mac threw the van into park as soon as he saw the bags, hopping out to open the back for Jonas as he threw me a horrified look. He had vastly underestimated Trinity's shopping prowess. I had to laugh when I got out to help them stow the bags. Trinity was practically dancing around, while Mama D was proudly wiggling her fingers in front of me, waiting for me to notice her new acrylic nails.

I made the appropriate compliments, assuring her several times, that they were in fact, the perfect color, the shape was wonderful and the length, just right. Reassured, Mama D, finally got into the van and sat there, watching the light bounce off the shiny red polish. I looked at Trinity, and she threw me a smile and a wink, obviously enjoying herself. I couldn't be sure, but from the way Mama D was acting, she'd never had her nails done before. Scrubbing floors and doing laundry wasn't really part of a good hand care regimen.

Jonas pushed past me and latched onto the front door handle.

“I have to sit up here now. I need some man time,” he informed me, just before he hopped into the seat and slammed the door closed.

Relegated to the back seat, I climbed in and managed to wedge myself past Trinity and Mama D into the far rear seat.

“You did actually get the things on the list, right?” I asked while trying to shift a pile of bags out of the way.

“Yes, we did and a few extras besides. There were sales. Big sales,” Trinity assured me as Jonas groaned from the front seat.

Trinity reached up and flicked her ear, giving a nod in his direction. I leaned around her to get a look at Jonas and see what was going on. He turned his head to talk to Mac, and I caught sight of the big diamond earring he was now sporting. Once she knew I had spotted it, Trinity grabbed my arm and jerked it around in glee while Mama D sat grinning from ear to ear.

“Wait until you see the clothes we got him. No one will recognize him.” They both burst into gales of laughter, and I heard Jonas snort as he turned to look out the window.

I shook my head in disbelief. If these two had been like this all afternoon, it was no wonder Jonas needed some man time in the front. At least they were having fun instead of being scared to death, and Jonas looked like he’d survived being the target of their fun, but I was sure there was a limit as to how much abuse he could take.

I caught Mac’s eye in the rear view and made some eating motions. He caught on and giving me a nod, turned onto Highway 7 in search of food. He hadn’t gone two blocks before he shot left across the traffic and up the small service road into a lot where he pulled in to park. Looking up, I spotted the Whole Hog Cafe about the same time Jonas opened his door, flooding the van with the heavenly aroma of southern barbecue. By the time he had slid the back door open and was helping Mama D out, my tastebuds were on full alert and my stomach was rumbling. I fought my way out of the bags and caught sight of Jonas herding Trinity and Mama D through the front doors of the cafe. I paused for a second before stepping out of the van to watch as the door closed behind them.

Jonas might have complained about the shopping, but it had been a good thing. The feeling of unease that had gripped me since the confrontation earlier lessened considerably. Jonas may have agreed to stick around, but I knew that he couldn’t be a follower, waiting to see what happened next. No matter how valuable his experience and opinion were to me, Jonas needed to have a job, needed to know his role. Apparently, he’d found his place, and it was taking care

of Trinity and Mama D.

“It’s a good thing.” Mac’s voice came at my shoulder, echoing my thoughts. I turned to see him watching the door, as I had been just seconds earlier.

“Just so you know, Mac, in case you didn’t already,” I said as I hopped out of the van, “that still freaks me out. Tell me again, how you can’t read my mind.”

He slammed the van door shut. “I can’t read your mind. I felt you relax some and I’m not blind. I saw what you saw, and I can put two and two together. Especially when I feel the same way. I haven’t known Jonas long, but I don’t think he’s the sort to stick around if he feels useless. He needs to serve and protect, and he’s found some victims who need him. It’s a good thing.”

I flinched at the word ‘victims’, but really, that’s what they were when I thought about it. I just didn’t like thinking about it. He was right about one thing, though. It was a good thing because I was pretty sure that sooner or later, we were going to have to separate in order to keep them safe. Knowing Jonas had chosen his role and would be there to protect them, made that knowledge a little easier to accept.

The evening had turned out to be long, but uneventful. I had been a little worried about just walking into a public restaurant, given the fact that our faces had been flashed on the news, but Hot Springs was a long way from Little Rock, not in miles, but in community. Either the customers hadn’t watched the news or were too busy eating to care, but we managed to put away more than our fair share of pulled pork, brisket, cole slaw and beans without attracting any undue attention.

We picked up everything else on our list at Wal-Mart and headed back on the long drive to the cabin. It was after 9:00 by the time we pulled in and after nodding off several times on the way back, I was ready for a hot shower and bed. After we unloaded the van and sorted out the bags, I made my excuses and gathered up my things, heading for the bathroom. The hot shower did wonderful things to the tight muscles in my neck and back. By the time I slipped under the covers, my bones felt like jelly. I was asleep before my head even hit the pillow.

21

THE SOUND OF Trinity's scream had me bolting up and on my feet so fast, it made me dizzy. My gun was in my hand and at the ready, as I eased the bedroom door open and slipped into the empty hallway and listened. Whatever was happening was coming from the kitchen, and I was heading toward her when I sensed someone suddenly behind me. I spun, gun leveled and ready, as the bathroom door flew open to reveal Jonas, dripping wet, and half dressed, but well armed. I gave him a nod as he slipped in behind me and we made our way quickly down the hallway and through the living room. I paused at the doorway to the kitchen and looked to Jonas for the plan. He motioned for me to go low and gave the count. We rounded the corner in a blur of motion, our guns leveled and ready.

Trinity stopped mid-scream, frozen in place. Mama D was at the stove, cooking and didn't even look up. Suddenly the back door flew open, and I shifted to cover the opening only to pull up as Mac wheeled around the doorjamb, coming in low, gun first.

I did a quick scan and saw there were only the five of us standing there. Whatever Trinity had been screaming about, it wasn't because she was being attacked. The fright we had given her when Jonas and I had charged around the corner with our guns was forgotten as she laid eyes on Mac.

"I don't believe you did this," she said, hissing through her teeth, as she advanced on him, waving what looked like a charge card above her head. I straightened up, lowering my gun, confused and not a little put out. My knees were pretty shaky, and my stomach felt like I'd been punched.

"What's the problem, Trinity?" Mac was backing away as she bore down on him. Mama D had stopped cooking and was watching now along with Jonas and me.

"CANDY JONES?" She spit out the words like they were poison. "You expect me to go through the rest of my life with a name like Candy?"

"It's not Candy. It's Candice." Somehow he kept his tone calm as he held up his hands to ward her off. "Look, it's not forever, Trinity. You can pick another name if you want, but later, when we have more time. For now, you're Candice. It's important that you accept that. We all need to watch ourselves in public. The last thing we need is to confirm someone's suspicions by calling each other by our real names."

“Oh, like we even know your real name,” she snapped out, defiant and ready for a fight.

“Enough!” I went from being scared to angry in record time. The back door slammed shut, breaking three of the blackened panes of glass, causing Mac to look over at me in warning and Trinity to look at me in fear. I saw it, and I didn’t care. This whole debacle was about her new identity? She had scared Jonas and me out of our wits because she didn’t like her name?

Jonas shoved past me and grabbed Trinity by the arm. He threw what was left of the back door open and dragged her out of the cabin, slamming the door closed behind him. We watched in silence as the last pane of glass fell out and burst upon the floor.

“Well, how about that,” Mama D muttered before turning back to the stove like nothing had happened. Mac stood quietly across the room, waiting for me to pull myself together. I walked over to the table and sat my gun down in disgust. Hooking a foot around a chair rung, I pulled it under me and sat down. Mac bent to collect the larger pieces of glass from the floor while Mama D hummed a little gospel at the stove.

I propped my elbows on the table and rubbed my face, running my hands over my head in frustration. I felt like tearing my hair out but settled for just balling my fists into it instead.

I loved Trinity. God knows how much I loved her. Her passion and zest for life was one of the things that I loved the most about her. Maybe it was because of losing my parents so early in life, or maybe I was just born that way, but I’d always kept my emotions bottled up inside. I made a good investigator because I could stay detached, and focused, keeping my emotions at bay. Or at least, that was how it used to work.

Trinity, on the other hand, let her emotions flow out like a river. Her passion swayed juries, her obvious compassion touching hearts. Now the very thing that made her so special, so unique, was the very thing that had me on edge. The excitement and passion that Trinity had brought into my life were things that I couldn’t afford to have there now. Every time I lost control, it had something to do with the people I cared about. Last night I had been afraid we would have to separate to protect the people I loved from the people who were after me, but that wasn’t turning out to be the main reason, I thought, as my eyes wandered to the light streaming in through the broken window panes on the door. We needed to separate, so I could have time to get a handle on this thing. Learn to control it, before someone got hurt. It wasn’t a question of loving them enough to let them go. It was a matter of loving them too much to let them stay.

Mac sat a cup of coffee down in front of me, and I reached out, grateful, to

take a sip. He found a broom and starting sweeping up the last of the glass. Cleaning and cooking. It all seemed so normal. It was hard to believe there'd been three of us in the room just minutes ago with our guns drawn, looking to shoot someone.

Finished, Mac pulled up a seat and sat down next to me to drink his own coffee as we watched Mama D turning hash browns in the skillet, still humming away.

As the seconds ticked by, so did my anger. What had been turmoil moments before, was now almost peaceful. I didn't know if it was because Mac could sense what I needed or if he just instinctively knew. Whatever it was, I found myself relaxing listening to Mama D, sipping on my coffee.

The envelope with the new ID's was sitting on the table, and I reached over and grabbed it, fishing the two remaining passports out. Mac had given me my new one last night, so I already knew my new name was Samantha White. Mac hadn't bothered with another ID. He had a drawer full of them already and besides, he didn't die in the fire. Julian did. Trinity was right. We had no idea if Mac was really his name. I had to figure it wasn't and surprisingly didn't really care. It wasn't like it mattered at this point. Flipping the passport on top open, I found the name Bryan Harrison stamped next to Jonas' photo. Bryan with a 'y'. He was going to love that.

"My name is Della," Mama D informed me, as she set a steaming plate of eggs and hash browns down in front of me. "Della Jones."

"Well, that worked out well. We can still call you Mama D then, can't we?"

She nodded happily as she refilled my cup. I set the passports back on the table and pushed them away so I could eat. Mama D was adapting to all this better than I had any right to hope for. Trinity was the one that had me worried. It wasn't the name that bothered her. I knew that. It was what it represented. I looked over to see Mama D dishing up another plate of food for Mac.

"Mama D, why don't you sit down and eat? You don't have to do all the cooking." I said, getting to my feet to help her.

"I already ate, child, and you leave the cooking to me. Cooking helps calm my nerves and helps me think. Trinity, she has to fight it out, just like the lawyer she is. So don't you worry. It'll all work out, baby." Mama D reached out to pat my hand as she refilled my cup. "Trinity will calm down. It'll be fine."

Fortunately, she was right. When Trinity and Jonas returned, she was much calmer and surprisingly subdued. Jonas either threatened her or she was afraid of pushing me too far. I didn't know what was worse. Trying to deal with the passions and emotions that seemed to surround her all the time, or to see her trying to tiptoe around me. I decided the best thing to do was just to get through

the day. We had enough problems with trying to move the gold without adding this into the mix.

Jonas and Mac took off right after breakfast leaving Mama D, Trinity and me to pack the bags and clean things up. As I was emptying the refrigerator and wiping down the shelves, it hit me how ridiculous it was to close up the house. We were on the run and would probably never be back here again, but I couldn't seem to help myself. No one likes to come home from a trip to the smell of sour milk and spoiled meat.

By the time Mac and Jonas returned at noon, we had packed up and were ready to go. Jonas and Mac had taken most of the guns and what ammo that Mac had stored with them this morning, so we had everything in the van with just a couple of trips.

We waited while Mac nailed a piece of plywood over the broken window panes. I really didn't want to leave. The little cabin may have been close quarters for the five of us, but it was a safe place. Now we were heading to who knows where. First, though, we had to survive the afternoon without getting killed or arrested.

THE BANK WAS nearly empty when I went in. The lunchtime rush was over and the afternoon crawl towards quitting time was well underway. I was first inside. My job was to take a look around and see if any of my *alarms* went off. If I had any doubts, I was to head back out the doors, and we'd abort the job.

I headed over to the display filled with brochures while I tried to access my instincts. This had been so much easier when I just relied on my gut. Back then, I would know immediately when I was in a bad situation. My stomach would clench, I'd feel clammy, and my feet would practically itch to turn and run the other way. This was new, and I wasn't picking up anything now, except the fear that I would screw up, and someone would get hurt. Or worse.

That everyone was relying on me to keep them safe was pressure enough. The fact that I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing was the final straw. I didn't know if my alarms weren't going off because there wasn't any danger, or if they were going off like fireworks and I didn't recognize them. This wasn't going to work, and I wasn't prepared to risk anyone until I had some sort of a handle on things. I was turning to leave and walk right out of the building, when it hit me, stopping me in my tracks.

The stomach clench, the cold, clammy feeling, the need to flee. It was all there. This instinct thing and my gut *were* the same thing. Mac had said they were. My brain knew it, but I didn't feel it, didn't believe it until I turned and saw the man sitting at the desk in one of the personal banker cubicles.

He was no more a banker than I was a customer. I'd found him. I hadn't lost it after all. I let out a small chortle of laughter in relief, drawing his attention to me. Stupid move. At least I hadn't danced a little jig too. I nodded at him and turned to pick up a brochure. I had on glasses and a wig. It wasn't much, but it changed my appearance enough that hopefully, he wouldn't recognize me. I would have preferred a hat and sunglasses, but the banks wouldn't let you in the doors dressed like that anymore. Rotten crooks had spoiled it for everyone.

I chose another brochure and waited another heartbeat or two before turning around to see what he was doing. He was more interested in watching the hemline on the woman filling out a form at the table in the lobby than in what I was doing. I kept an eye on him though as the door swung open minutes later and Mac came in with Mama D. His eyes shifted over and saw them, and dismissed them, moving swiftly back to the woman in the short skirt. I couldn't

have asked for a better distraction.

I took a seat in the waiting area to open a new account. There were three people ahead of me, so I probably had a good 30-minute wait. Plenty of time for Mama D and Mac to finish if everything went as planned.

If I hadn't known it was Mac pushing Mama D in the wheelchair, I would have never guessed. No wonder I had never caught on to him during the past seven years. He was good. Real good. Watching him in action made me feel considerably better about my talents as a detective. Mama D looked every inch the rich woman she was portraying, from her manicured fingertips to the veiled hat, to the cashmere lap blanket that was hiding 30 pounds of pennies that they were going to exchange with the gold. When questions were asked later, and they would be, of that I was sure, I didn't want some bank clerk making note of how much lighter the box had been after they had left.

They called the next person waiting to open an account as Mac wheeled Mama D to the safety deposit counter and she began filling out the forms. I pretended to read about interest bearing accounts as our fake banker watched Miss Short Skirt get in line for a teller.

When I looked back, Mac and Mama D were disappearing into the vault. The box belonged to Trinity, and she was 'officially' dead. They had let Mama D in as she had a box key and was a signer on the account too. It was the way it was supposed to happen, but that didn't mean it would. Too many weird things had been happening lately to make any assumptions. They had made it past the tricky part. Now came the hard part. Getting back out.

One of the bankers came back from a late lunch or appointment and called in the man waiting in front of me. One more and I was next. I checked the clock on the wall. Only ten minutes had passed. These guys were a lot faster than the people at my bank. If I'd had been in a hurry, it would have taken an hour.

The woman with the short skirt was at the counter now, leaning over to talk to the teller. I glanced over to see how my buddy was enjoying the show just in time to catch the nod he gave to another man who had just entered the bank. Well, great. A second guy. Was he just back from lunch, relieving this guy, or were they onto us?

When guy number two came over and took the seat next to me, it was all I could do to smile and shift over, giving him more room. He barely even noticed me, he was staring so intently at the vault entrance. They'd been made. Probably a flag on the account, which we had been worried about. For whatever reason, though, they were playing this cool. Probably hoping to tail them and find me, or just waiting to grab them when they were outside the bank. I shrank into my seat, trying to become invisible and watched the vault entrance. Mac and Mama

D could be coming out at any time, right into a trap.

I had no way to get in touch with Mac and warn him. There was a good chance that transmitters wouldn't work through the steel walls of the vault, and we were afraid they might be scanning the frequencies anyway, so we didn't even bother with headsets. My brain was scrambling for some way to keep him and Mama D in the vault until I was ready. When a possibility finally did pop up, it was so ludicrous, I almost couldn't force myself to do it.

Mac said he was an Empath. He said he was more tuned into me than even he had imagined possible. Maybe I could think a warning to him, make him feel that there was a problem. It wasn't much, but it was the only thing I could think of. Problem was, I had no idea how to do it, and there wasn't time to think it through.

"Don't come out!" I shouted in my head, concentrating on reaching out to Mac, hoping he'd somehow manage to feel me willing him to stay put. *"Don't come out, Don't come out! Don't come out!"*

I glanced over at the guard. I didn't think he was in on it with the others, which probably meant these guys weren't with the police. I wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not, but at this point, it didn't really matter. The guy next to me needed to be gone when Mac and Mama D came out of the vault, and I could think of only one way to make sure of that.

When I finally had my plan down in my mind, I reversed my chant, trying to relax and give him a clue that now was the time to get moving. I don't know if he picked up on it or not, but within seconds, the wheelchair came into sight at the vault door. The man next to me saw them too, and I felt him shift his weight forward, ready to stand. I uncrossed my legs and braced myself, praying I was doing the right thing.

Mac walked calmly to the counter where Mama D signed out and thanked the woman. As they started heading toward the bank exit, the man next to me rapidly got to his feet, his eyes fixed on them. As he rose, his jacket rode back, and I caught a glimpse of his shoulder holster. I had assumed he was armed. Knowing he was, made it that much better. I straightened out my leg just as he started moving forward, and swept it backward as I got to my feet, cutting his legs out from under him. He went down hard and fast.

"Gun!" I screamed. *"He's got a gun!"*

People began screaming and running, giving me enough time and cover to get in two strong kicks to his ribs to keep him on the floor until the guard could get there. I looked over to see the other man lurching up from his desk, hand reaching under his jacket, his attention centered on me, a smile on his face. He knew who I was, and he was coming for me.

I focused on the office door and how badly I wanted it closed. Almost instantly, it slammed shut, blocking him from view. It wasn't going to slow him down for long. I knew he'd be coming through that door within seconds. I waited until I saw the door handle begin to move and thought about how badly I wanted that door to fly open. It couldn't have gone any better. It flew back hitting him squarely in the forehead, sending him backward to the floor before bouncing closed again. From the slack-jawed look I had caught on his face in the instant before the door slammed shut, I was pretty sure he was out of the picture. At least for a little while. I turned to check that my buddy on the ground was still down and found that the guard was coming fast, gun drawn. I covered my face with my hands and joined the rest of the group, running from the building.

I got out just in time to see Mac and Mama D disappear into the van Jonas was driving. I turned right and headed down the street, slowing my pace to mingle with others on the sidewalk. Police cars went howling by me, screeching to a halt in front of the bank. Close behind them was Trinity, driving the low profile junker Mac and Jonas had shown up with after their morning errands. I was sure I was getting into the right car but did a double take when I opened the door and spied the driver. It was Trinity, but she'd gone all Mod Squad on me. Big hoop earrings, floppy hat, peasant blouse, and vest. She looked like she'd stepped right out of the 70's.

"Good grief, Trinity. I barely recognized you."

"It's Candice," she said, putting her foot down on the gas, as I closed the door and buckled up. "And if you think this is something, wait until you see Jonas."

* * *

I GOT THE shakes around the same time we pulled onto Highway 30.

"Adrenaline." I managed to get out in answer to the look Trinity threw me as we flew down the highway. We were supposed to meet up with Jonas and Mac at a parking lot at a home repair store in Bryant, fifteen miles away if everything went well. I had checked several times and couldn't make any tails. I was pretty confident that by the time they had discovered I was in the bank, they hadn't had time to get the message out. If anyone had a tail on them, it would be Jonas and Mac, but I wasn't all that worried about them. If a cop and a spy couldn't shake a

tail, something was wrong.

By the time we pulled into the parking lot, my shakes were down to shivers, but I was totally wrung out. Jonas and Mac weren't there yet. I scanned the area and accessed the situation.

"Mickey D's or Sonic?" I asked, all the while knowing the answer. Trinity was a Sonic addict, as was I. All I got was a snort and an eye roll as she headed out of the lot.

"Take the exit with the light," I said, checking my watch. "School's letting out, and we'll never make that turn without it."

Sure enough, the cars were backing up down the road. We made it through on the first arrow and managed to get one of the last remaining spots before the kids had them all.

We ordered enough food and drinks for everyone, on the assumption that they would be joining us shortly. We managed to get back to our assigned meeting place without spilling anything, which was no easy feat since the 44-ounce cups didn't fit in the car's cup holders. Even with the tray they had given us, it was touch and go for a while.

Trinity and I waited in the car, quietly munching our fries and watching the entrance to the lot. She didn't ask any questions, and I didn't volunteer any information. When I had finally decided it might be time to start worrying, a bright shiny new van pulled in to park next to us. I looked up to see Jonas emerge from the passenger side of the van. In addition to his new earring, Jonas was sporting big baggy jeans, \$300 sneakers, and an oversized U of A Razorback football jersey. He'd topped it off with a baseball cap, which he wore backward, and a pair of the darkest sunglasses I'd ever seen. With the attitude that was rolling off him at the minute, he was one scary dude.

"I didn't know we had a van like that," I said, rolling down my window, trying not to look intimidated.

"We don't." Jonas' reply was terse. "Mac stole it. Right now, there's some poor woman coming out of Bed, Bath, and Beyond with nowhere to put her sheets and pillowcases."

He had opened the back door and was helping Mama D climb down out of the back. The combination of his gang look with Mama D's rich matron look was so bizarre, I had to look away before he caught the smile that had reached my lips. It was obvious he'd had a hard time with the events of the afternoon, and I was sure he wouldn't see the humor in the situation. Reaching in, he lifted out a duffel bag one handed, that I had to assume held the gold coins. Sure. Easy for him.

Mac appeared from around the side, and leaned in, wiping away any prints

that remained in the back before tossing the keys inside and slamming the door.

“You know someone is going to steal the van again if you do that, right?” Jonas said it more as a statement than a question.

“I sure hope so, or I’m gonna lose my faith in human nature,” Mac returned with a smile, before sliding into the back seat of our car. “Yum - do I smell french fries?”

Jonas threw up his hands in disgust and tucked Mama D into the back seat before getting in himself. It was a tight fit with the five of us, the gold and the food. Fortunately, it turned out we were just going across the highway to the Wal-Mart.

Mac directed us to park at the end of a row, between a van and an RV. Trinity had barely put it in park before Mac was out the door and herding us into the RV.

It wasn’t a new RV, but it was clean and roomy, and our suitcases and bags from the house were packed inside. We threw the drinks and bags of food onto the table as Jonas opened a cabinet and tossed the bag of gold inside. I looked around, impressed and gave Mac a nod of approval. We had discussed the need for transportation that would be easier on Mama D, not knowing how long we would need to be on the road or when we would be able to make stops. This fit the bill perfectly.

I snagged a couple more fries to take the edge off and then headed into the store with Trinity to stock up on supplies for the RV. By the time we were back, the boys and Mama D had eaten, and Mama D was settled into a comfortable looking recliner, with her seat belt on, sound asleep.

As Mac pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the highway, we threw what was left of the fries and burgers into the microwave and ate. I wasn’t really hungry after all my munching, and the nuked fries and burgers left a lot to be desired, but I knew I needed food after the afternoon we’d had. My stomach had just started to unclench when the RV changed lanes and began to slow. Looking out the window, I could see we were once again exiting the highway. By the time I got to the front, Mac was pulling into a grocery store parking lot, where he once again parked the RV.

“We already have food,” I informed him, confused, “Why are we stopping?”

“See you in Texarkana,” he said, tossing Jonas the keys before turning his attention to me. “Get your bag and whatever else you need. We’re leaving.”

Leaving? I glanced over at Jonas not sure of what was going on, only to get a half-hearted wave goodbye before he slid into the driver’s seat and started up the RV. Apparently, I was leaving.

I waved to Trinity as I grabbed my bag and headed out the door. I had put these two in charge of getting us out of Little Rock, and they seemed happy with

how things were going. I had to trust that they knew what they were doing, but it was hard, not knowing and going on blind faith.

I followed Mac as he headed to an old Camaro parked a few rows down from the RV. It had obviously seen better days, but when Mac started it up, even a novice could tell this was a street machine. He roared out of the parking lot, leaving Jonas trailing behind in our wake.

As we merged onto the highway, I looked back to see the RV crossing the overpass behind us. I pulled my seat belt tight and leaned back, closing my eyes in relief. We had done it. We had the gold and everyone was alive and well. What tomorrow would bring only tomorrow knew, but for tonight, for this minute, it was over.

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I WOKE UP as we took the exit off the highway into Texarkana a few hours later. Mac pulled the Camaro into a truck stop and got out to tank up while I tried to wake up. Finally, I got out, stretching my muscles just as Jonas pulled in with the RV, before heading inside to the bathrooms.

The great thing about truck stops is you can buy practically anything there, and no one pays any attention to you. The bad thing is they are loaded with security cameras. Just to be on the safe side, I kept my head down as I made my way through the display racks, so I was surprised when Trinity passed me, practically shoving me out of the way in her haste.

When I finally turned the corner into the women's room, she was sitting on a sofa set just inside the door, a big smile on her face. I passed by, ignoring her, as I looked around to verify we were alone. The stall doors were floor to ceiling, so it took more than just a glance around. Two of the doors were partially closed, and Trinity gave me an exasperated look when I held up a silencing hand while I went to check behind them.

"You think there're spies in the toilets at the truck stop?"

"No," I said, heading toward one of the empty stalls, "but I do think there're eyes and ears everywhere and we can't be too careful. Or didn't you see your photo on the front page of the paper during your mad dash through the store? What's up with that anyway? You're riding in a toilet with wheels, for Pete's sake."

She didn't answer, and I looked around to find her sitting there with her mouth hanging open. Either she didn't know there was a toilet in the RV or she hadn't seen the paper. I was willing to bet she hadn't seen the paper.

"Give me a heads up if someone comes in," I said, shutting the door behind me.

Within seconds, she was outside the door of the stall.

"What's my photo doing on the front page?" she hissed at me. "You think they know something? Are they looking for me?"

"Candice. Are you watching the door?"

"Yes, I am."

"Okay, then. In answer to your question, I have no idea. I'll pick one up on the way out."

I hit her with the door when I came out, nearly knocking her down.

“Don’t you need to go, Candice? I mean there seemed to be a big rush,” I said, laughing, as I washed my hands.

“I went in the RV. I just didn’t want to look like I was following you. Sorry.” I looked in the mirror in time to see her flop back down on the sofa. From excited and happy to scared and fearful, to despondent and sad, in the blink of an eye. She’d had a day of it.

“Sorry about what?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood. I dried my hands and shot the wet towels into the trash. “It was a good idea. One we’ll use on the way out. And you were good at it. Had me fooled. I thought you really had to pee.” That, at least, got a smile out of her, which was more than I had hoped for. “Look, you head out first. Don’t run, but don’t dally, and keep your head down. There’re security cameras. I’ll get a drink and the paper and be out after you. You ready?”

She nodded and went out the door. I waited for a minute or so and headed out behind her. I got a couple of fountain drinks and a bag of corn nuts and headed to the counter to pay. I had her add the paper to the total and picked up a copy on the way out the door, folding Trinity’s photo to the inside and tucking it under my arm as I juggled the two drinks and the nuts. Jonas had already pulled out, and Mac was checking the oil when I got back in the car. He slammed the hood, hopped in, and we were off.

I showed him the front of the paper and settled down to read while he ripped open the corn nuts. Trinity was on the front page, but it was an article about one of her current cases and what was going to happen now that she was deceased. They’d printed her picture more as a footnote to the case than anything else, and it was in the Arkansas Democrat Gazette which was even better. We had just crossed into Texas, and they weren’t really all that concerned with the news in Arkansas.

I put the paper down about the same time Mac was fishing the last of the corn nuts out of the bag.

“You didn’t want any of these, right?” He paused in the act of popping the last few kernels into his mouth, waiting for me to answer.

“No. I just got them because they were there and I needed to buy something. I didn’t think anyone would actually eat them.”

Grinning, he tossed them into his mouth and made a big production of chewing them up. Great. I was trapped in a car with a comedian. I turned to look out my window, determined not to encourage him by providing an audience, smiling in spite of myself. We were all a little slap happy after the afternoon’s success with the possible exception of Jonas. He was still having a hard time dealing with everything, but he was hanging in there, and I had to give him

kudos for that.

"I need to call Trinity and let her know the paper was nothing to worry about," I told him, shaking my head at his antics as I pulled out a phone. Cell phones had been at the top of the list of our purchases at Wal-Mart. We had picked up a handful of pay-as-you-go phones and activated them while we were there. We needed a way to communicate, and the phones were the best way to do that. Use them for a couple of days, toss them and get new ones. Nearly impossible to track or trace. The crooks loved them.

Mac and I quickly went over the plan for tomorrow. We needed to stop at a bank in Dallas and move the funds from Mac's offshore account into separate numbered accounts for each of us. Right now, Mac was the only one with access, and if anything happened to him, we'd all be up the creek. We decided to stop in Greenville, about an hour outside of Dallas. I called Trinity's cell to let her know about the paper, and we agreed to meet up at the Chili's at the Greenville exit.

I watched the first stars come into sight as darkness fell. Last night, I had been looking forward to this evening, knowing that when it finally arrived, it would be over. We'd either have succeeded or not, but, at least, the dread that had been suffocating me would be gone. Sometimes it seemed like that was how I lived my life. Waiting for the current trial to pass, relief when it did, frustration when the next one reared its ugly head. Living from one problem or challenge to the next. Wishing tomorrow would just magically appear so today would be over. Wishing my life away. One of these days, I promised myself, I was going to live in the moment. Enjoy what life had to offer. Have no worries or responsibilities. Someday, maybe, but it wasn't going to be tonight.

"We need to talk about what happens after Dallas," I said to Mac.

"Okay." Mac settled down into his seat, shifting his position so he could look at me better. "What's your take on it?"

My take on it? That was easy. I'd gone over it at least a dozen times in my mind.

"As I see it, it boils down to three problems. First, someone, or perhaps multiple someones at the Agency are after me. Second, we don't know who they are, or how high up this goes. Even if we find out who the bad guy or guys are in the Agency, if we don't know who they're working for, we've accomplished nothing."

"That's two big ones, all right. What's the third?"

"Me. I'm every bit as dangerous as the guys who are after us." I held up my hand to stop him from disagreeing with me. "I know what you're going to say. So far, we've been lucky and relying on instinct has worked in our favor, but it's only a matter of time before we get in a tight jam, and I lose it. I feel like we're

playing Russian Roulette, only I'm the gun."

"So what do you want to do?"

"What do I want to do? Run. As fast and far as I can. That's what I want." My voice was calm, half joking, but I could feel myself getting angry. I didn't know how or why this was happening, but it had ruined everyone's life. Now I was responsible for them. So would they be safer with me gone? Would my responsibility to them be any less if I wasn't with them? Frustration and resentment at the situation rolled through me as I sat silently looking out the window, avoiding Mac's gaze. Then I remembered it didn't matter what he saw or heard. There was no way to mask my emotions from him. If I felt them, Mac could feel them. I looked over to see if it was affecting him, but he seemed okay.

"You can't do that." He said it so quietly that I had trouble hearing it, but the fact was, I did, and it sent my hackles up another couple of notches.

I turned away from him again with a mumbled, "Yeah, right." and was thrown against the door when he swerved off onto the shoulder and stood on the brakes.

"Okay. You want to run, Taylor. Here's your chance." He tossed the keys at me as he threw open the door and got out. Before I could blink an eye, he was walking down the highway, leaving me sitting there in the passenger seat, keys dangling in my hand.

I just sat there, stunned, as he walked away. I couldn't believe he was doing this. He'd been shadowing me for seven years and now, just like that, he was willing to just walk away? There was a full moon and between that and the passing headlights, I was able to make out Mac's shape for a while. I kept my eyes on him, fully expecting him to turn around at any minute, but he didn't. As I watched, he became nothing more than a dark shadow on the horizon and then suddenly he disappeared, swallowed by the darkness.

It was over. I was finally on my own. As the feeling of freedom washed over me, I looked at the keys resting in my hand and realized Mac had given me much more than a chance to run. He'd given me the right to choose. I'd been carried along for the past few days on a whirlwind of events and now, for the first time, the choice of what to do next was mine and mine alone.

I opened the door and got out, taking in a deep breath of the country air. The light scent of fresh cut hay was barely noticeable over the stench of cow manure. After a few minutes, my nose recovered from the assault and the smell ratcheted down from overpowering to bearable.

There was a break in the flow of traffic and in the silence I could make out the sound of cattle grazing nearby. Leaning back against the car door, I thought about what it was I really wanted to do, now that I had the choice.

Mac had forced me to face a few things, not the least of which was that I had been running away for quite some time. Now that I thought about it, I'd been running since the key incident. I was just doing it mentally, lying to myself and everyone else. I'd allowed myself to be driven by fear. Fear of the thing inside me and what it could do. Afraid of hurting someone I cared about by accident, or making the wrong choice and getting one or all of us killed. Running away from the truth.

I'd deluded myself into thinking that there was some way out of the mess. That I could find a way to keep everyone safe, and happy. Retain some semblance of the lives we once lived and all the while I'd been tilting at windmills. I was kidding myself. There was no running away from this. Not for me. And Mac knew it. He'd felt it in me when I didn't even know it existed. Strange feeling knowing there is someone out there who might know you better than you know yourself. He'd given me the chance to get out, and I wasn't going to take it. He'd known that I wouldn't, even when I didn't. When he said I couldn't run, I thought he meant that he wouldn't let me. Live and learn.

Shaking my head in disgust, I pushed away from the car and kicked at a clump of grass. All this inner angst had been for nothing. Things would have been so much easier if I had just looked at the facts and accepted them at face value. I still had questions, but I knew the answers would come. The important thing was that the decision had been made. I knew what had to be done. Now I just had to figure out how to make it work.

* * *

I MUST HAVE been communing with the cows longer than I thought because Mac had made it a good piece down the road. I was beginning to think I had either missed him or he'd gotten a lift when I finally caught sight of him. I laid on the brakes and pulled over in front of him. He walked up to my window, and I rolled it down.

"I'm driving," I informed him and rolled the window back up. When he got in, he was smiling, but he didn't say anything. Smart man. I waited until I heard his seat belt click before I peeled out, laying us both back in our seats.

By the time we were at the Greenville exit, I had come to terms with a lot of things. Driving helped. It gave me back a sense of control, and I had needed it.

I'd been solidly over the speed limit the whole way, tempting fate, and the Texas Highway Patrol, but Mac had stayed quiet. With each passing mile, I felt more in control, more like my old self.

My mind began to function again, sorting facts and assessing information. Relief flooded through me as my thoughts cleared and the detective in me surfaced again. I'd harbored the ridiculous fear that my ability to be decisive and think on my feet had evaporated with the arrival of my newfound abilities. The inner panic I'd felt had been fuel on the fire, only making matters worse.

What an idiot, I thought, as I pulled into the Chili's parking lot.

"Well, we made great time," Mac said, checking his watch before undoing his seat belt.

I stopped him before he opened the door and got out. I wanted some answers while the questions were still fresh in my mind. He settled back into his seat and waited for me to talk.

"Mac, I need some answers. I know what I want to do. Just not how to do it."

He just nodded at me to continue. Obviously, he wasn't going to make this any easier.

"I need to be able to control this ability I have before we go any further. The agency you worked for, they trained people like me, right?"

"Yes. If they wanted to be trained."

"Well, I want to be trained. Is there anyone there who you trust? Anyone you know who isn't involved in this mess that can help me?"

He studied the back of the building for a few minutes, thinking.

"There is one man. He recently retired from the agency, but he was one of the best instructors. I don't think he'd be involved in this. I can't guarantee anything, but I think he's our safest bet."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, but I am pretty sure we can find him."

"Good. Let's see if we can locate him tonight and head his way in the morning," I said as I opened my door and got out. The smell of steak and french fries assailed my nose, immediately replacing the lingering scent of manure. With my lead foot, we were sure to have quite a wait before Jonas and the RV arrived, and I had no intention of waiting in the car for them. Mac fell into step beside me as we rounded the building, heading to the front doors. By the time Mac pulled the door open and ushered me inside, I was feeling pretty fine. The prospect of good food, a warm bed and a plan in the works, sure did wonders for a person's outlook. It was all about attitude and mine was becoming more positive by the second.

We'd made our way through a couple of drinks and most of an onion

blossom when Jonas, Trinity, and Mama D, came through the doors. Jonas had changed clothes and now bore a much closer resemblance to an RV driving, family man. Trinity was wearing the same clothes as earlier, but Mama D had changed into a velour lounging suit and was in good spirits, especially considering the events of the past few days.

“Grams got a good nap in while we were on the road,” Trinity explained when I commented on how rested Mama D appeared. “Whoever thought of the RV, was a genius.”

“That would be Jonas.” Mac pointed across the table to Jonas, who was more than happy to accept the genius title and Trinity’s gratitude.

All things considered, it was a festive meal. Everyone was feeling relief that the gold was secure, and we were all safe. I kept quiet, enjoying the time together. There would be time enough later to lay my plans out on the table and let the chips fall where they may. For tonight, it was time to relax and celebrate our success. Tomorrow it would start again.

WHEN WE WERE finished, Mac and I headed over to the Best Western across the street. It was new and more along the lines of a Hilton Hotel than the usual BW's that dotted the highways. Mac got two rooms. One for me and one for Mama D and Trinity to share. He and Jonas would camp out in the RV with the gold.

I slid my key card into the door and watched the little green light go on, indicating the lock had been opened. I slipped inside and immediately flipped on the bathroom light and smiled. My own private bathroom. One I didn't have to share with anyone. Not that I minded sharing, but the idea of being able to take as long as I wanted in the shower without worrying about the hot water supply was all I could think about. I was still admiring the shower and stack of fluffy towels when the knock sounded on the door.

"I want to talk to you for a minute before the guys come up." My illusion of privacy swirled away in the whirlwind that was Trinity, as she pushed past me into the room. "Look, I know you need some downtime, but I've wanted to say something to you since this morning, and there hasn't been a good time to do it."

"Okay." I resigned myself to a discussion that I knew would last until the guys came up in the 30 minutes we had agreed on. "What's up?"

"There's a couple of things. First off, I want to apologize for what happened this morning. It wasn't about the name."

"I know that, Trinity. You don't have to explain."

"Yes, I do. I saw your face. I know you were angry, and you had every right to be. Don't!" She stopped me before I could get a word out. "Let me finish."

She began to pace back and forth at the end of the bed. I felt a warm glow as I moved to take a chair at the computer desk across the room, waiting for her to continue. This wasn't the nervous pacing that I'd been seeing since we'd been on the run. This was summation pacing. I'd watched her do this in the courtroom so many times I could probably tell you how many steps she'd take before turning. Trinity was thinking. Choosing her words just so, to make her point the best way possible. All the passion and drama that was Trinity, but none of the chaos of the last two days. She was back in control. Her body language told me what I needed to know. Now I needed to hear what she wanted to tell me.

"You were angry, but you were mostly scared. Scared, not only by what might have happened when you lost control but by what you were prepared to do

when you came around that corner, riding to my rescue.” She stopped pacing to stand in front of me, hands splayed out on the desk as she leaned in to make her point. “Don’t think that I don’t understand what it cost you to kill those men in order to protect me. Or that I don’t realize you’d do it again in a heartbeat if you needed to.”

She started pacing again, gathering her thoughts. I kept quiet, not wanting to interrupt her train of thought. She was heading somewhere with all this, I just didn’t know where yet.

“I know you feel guilty that this all happened. I know you feel responsible. I know I have been making things more difficult for you while I tried to come to terms with things. I know all this, but there’re a couple of things I want to make sure you know before you make any decisions that effect all our lives.”

Well, she had my full attention now, and she knew it. She came to a stop in front of me, and this time got right down in my face, eyeball level.

“I want you to know that Grams and I love you. That we don’t blame you one bit for what happened. I want you to know that I’ve come to terms with it and that you can trust me to keep it together. Most of all though Taylor, I want you to know that if you can’t do what you need to because you’re afraid for us, we’ll leave. Right now. Tonight.”

She stabbed the desk in front of me to emphasize her point. I had been afraid I would have to send them away to keep them safe and here was Trinity offering it to me on a silver platter. All I had to do was agree with her, and they’d be gone.

“What do you want, Trinity?” I asked softly. “It’s your life.”

“What do I want? I want to stay. I think we’re better together than apart! But not this way. Not with you afraid to move because it might expose us or put us in danger. We can’t hold you back, and as long as you feel guilty, you’ll play it safe. You have to do what you’re best at. So you decide. I just wanted you to know, I have your back if you want me.”

She turned and walked out the door, leaving me sitting there with my mouth hanging open. What just happened? Did I just get yelled at for trying to protect her? I think I did. Was she right? The epiphany I’d had with the cows on the roadside to not run, meant nothing if I deceived myself about the reason I was staying. If I could sweep away the feelings of guilt and the gripping need to protect them, what was left?

Twenty minutes later, when Mac knocked on the door, I was still sitting in the same place, but I wasn’t the same person. The transformation wasn’t complete, and I wasn’t sure what I would be when it was finished, but the roots were taking hold. I knew what I had to do next. I just wasn’t certain how to go

about it. Trinity had just cleared that up for me. I felt a shiver of anticipation run up my spine, as I crossed the room to open the door.

* * *

EVERYONE ARRIVED TOGETHER with the exception of Mama D, who had opted to watch some television and turn in.

“She’s over there making herself a cup of tea. I didn’t realize it, but she’s never been in a hotel before,” Trinity told me as she threw the pillows around on the bed. “Here we are on the run, I’m worried sick about her, and she’s having the time of her life.”

Trinity plopped down in the little nest she’d made. Jonas took the sofa and Mac the easy chair, leaving me the desk chair. I rolled it over, not wanting the desk in front of me, separating me from the rest of the group. I might be the leader, but we were a team, at least for now, and I wanted them to feel that way.

“Okay, so tell us what happened inside the bank today? Mama D didn’t know much, other than we got the gold,” Trinity said. “Why was everyone running out like that?”

“I think it had something to do with Taylor yelling about a gun, but I couldn’t see what was happening,” Mac explained, “I was busy getting Mama D out of the bank.”

“Yeah, you were moving pretty fast when you got to the car. I thought you were going to toss Mama D right out onto the street,” Jonas put in, making us all laugh. “What did happen in there?”

Everyone turned to me expectantly, and I realized I was the only one who knew what had gone down. Things had been moving so fast we hadn’t had time to discuss it. Once we’d gotten on the road, the bank seemed a distant memory, not something that had just happened. I’d been too distracted with other things in the car to even think about it.

“They had a guy in one of the offices watching the bank,” I explained. “He didn’t seem much of a threat as he was paying much more attention to the short skirt in line than he was to the general comings and goings around him.”

“How’d you make him?” Jonas asked.

“The usual way, I guess,” I said, remembering my anxiety that I might have lost my touch.”I just knew.”

I heard the melody from *The Twilight Zone* and gave Trinity a look, while Mac chuckled, encouraging her.

“Anyway,” I continued, deciding to ignore her, “he either noticed something and alerted them, or they had the box flagged because a second guy came into the bank. They didn’t talk, but I caught the nod between them, and then the new guy came over and sat down next to me, watching the vault door. When Mac and Mama D came out, he started to go for them, and I tripped him up. I saw the gun when he was moving and decided it would make a good diversion and give Mac some cover to move. You know. Bank. Gun. Lots of running and screaming. Seemed like a plan.”

“What about the guy in the office?” Mac asked me. “Did he have a gun too?”

“Uh, yeah,” I answered evasively. “He sort of ran into the door.”

They all just looked at me for a minute. The mood had sobered as I told them what all had gone on. Jonas and Trinity had been outside and had no idea any of this had happened. Mac may have been on the inside, but he’d been in the vault until the last minute. This was the first they’d heard that it’d had been a near thing.

“You think they know she was there?” Jonas asked Mac.

“Depends.” They both looked over at me.

“How hard did he ‘run’ into the door?” Mac asked me.

“Pretty hard,” I answered back. “And I’m pretty sure the other guy has some broken ribs.”

“Okay, then. I guess it’s safe to say they know,” Jonas said grimly. “They’ll know we’re working together, and that’s what they’ll be looking for.”

“I think they already had a pretty good idea we were together when they attacked us at Taylor’s condo,” Trinity snapped at him. “We were lucky she was at the bank today, or it would have had a different ending.”

“Hey! I agree totally.” Jonas held up his hands in surrender. “Don’t bite my head off. I’m just saying, if I were hunting us, I’d know if I could find one, the others wouldn’t be far away. Gangs are easier to find than just one person.”

“Jonas is right,” I cut in. “It’s something we need to talk about, but before we get into it, there’s something I need to say.” I hesitated, knowing what needed to be said, but not knowing how to start.

“Taylor, go ahead and just say it. We’re listening.” I gave Trinity a nod and decided to plunge on in.

“I know you all are here because of me. No,” I said, when objections started in, “let’s be honest. I’m a victim here too, I understand that, but if it weren’t for knowing me, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, you wouldn’t be here. You’d be living your lives, safe at home, instead of being on the run. I think we

can agree on that, right?”

“We don’t blame you, Taylor. At least, I don’t,” Trinity put in, throwing a look at Jonas.

“I don’t blame you either,” he said, “but I’d be lying if I said there hadn’t been times when I wished I didn’t know you.”

I laughed at that. “Thanks, Jonas. There’ve been times I wished I didn’t know me either. That’s been the problem lately. I didn’t know me. I lost who I was. When this whole thing started, it really rattled me. I couldn’t get a handle on it. Things were coming at me from all directions, and I was so busy dodging them, I couldn’t get my feet planted.”

Everyone nodded agreement. They’d felt it too and were able to sympathize with my plight.

“Today, on the drive here, I had some time to think about things. What was the next step for us? How best to keep everyone safe? Stuff like that. Frankly, it wasn’t going well. There didn’t seem to be any clear answer. At least, none that I could see. Then Mac asked me what I wanted to do. Simple question really, but it made me angry. Really angry. That’s when he pulled over, threw me the keys to the car and walked away.”

Jonas turned on Mac, incredulous. “You left her there? What! Are you crazy?”

Trinity picked up a bed pillow and threw it at him. Mac had been watching Jonas and didn’t see it coming, so it hit him square in the face, throwing him back in the chair.

“Before you lynch him, let me finish!” I said, getting up to pull a soda from the mini-fridge. “His walking away was the best thing he could have done.”

I pulled out drinks for the others and started passing them around the room. “It forced me to stop and look at what I really wanted, and I realized something important out there, alone with the cows and the crickets. I may be a victim, but that doesn’t mean I have to act like one. I’m tired of trying to stay one step ahead of these guys. Tonight, I took my life back. I’m done running.”

“So what are you saying, Taylor?” Jonas asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to embrace the weirdness, Jonas. Whatever this thing is inside me, it’s not going away. It’s part of me now. Maybe it always was, and I just didn’t realize it. It doesn’t really matter. The important thing is I need to understand it better. I can’t just cross my fingers every time it rears its head and hope I can live with the fallout. Mac knows someone who may be able to help me learn how to control it. I plan to find him and see if he can teach me a few things.”

“That would take care of your worry about hurting one of us,” Trinity noted,

“if you could learn to control it.”

“That’s true,” I agreed, “but there’s more to it than that. This isn’t just about learning to control it. I plan on using it.”

“Using it? Just what do you intend to do, Taylor?” Jonas asked.

“I intend to go after them, Jonas,” I answered, “And I intend to win.”

“You’re going after them?” Jonas was on his feet. “I thought you were concerned about keeping Trinity and Mama D safe? How does putting them in harm’s way keep them safe?”

“It doesn’t,” I snapped back at him. “I didn’t say *we’re* going after them, Jonas. I said *I’m* going after them. If I can’t find them and stop them, no one here will ever be safe. Look at what they’ve been willing to do so far. They’re not going to stop. The only way any of us have a chance of having any kind of a life is for me to stop them.”

“Wait, what are you saying?” Trinity cut in. “You’re going without us? You want us to leave? You want us gone?” Her voice was rising with each question she asked. She may have offered to go, but she didn’t like the idea.

“No Trinity, that’s not what I *want*,” I assured her. “but that may be the way it needs to be. What you said tonight is true. This is what I need to do, but I can’t ask you to risk anything more. I have enough guilt to carry around without adding that to it.”

Mac and Jonas both looked over to Trinity, who ignored them, concentrating instead on what I had to say. She knew what she’d told me. Now she was waiting to see what I had decided to do. I looked at her and knew in my heart I was doing the right thing. Maybe it was my gut feeling or my special senses, but whatever it was, I knew without a shadow of a doubt this was right.

Right or not, the mood had gone to confrontational in a blink of the eye. Mac was sitting still as a statue, watching me, waiting for the next shoe to drop.

“So you want us to leave,” Trinity said, tears in her voice.

“What I want is for you to understand where I’m coming from, so you can make a decision about what you want,” I said, trying to explain. “The three of you haven’t had any more choice about what’s been happening than I have. Up until now. Things have changed. We have the gold. They don’t know where we are. You have a new identity and tomorrow after we go to the bank, you’ll have the money to start over. I know what I’m going to do. I’ve made my choice. Now, I’m asking you to make yours. That includes you, Mac. I’ll protect you as best I can, but I can’t let fear stop me from doing what I need to do. You can come with me, or go your own way. The decision is yours. But if you choose to come with me, it’s got to be your choice, and you need to consider all the ramifications and risks involved before you make it.”

“You understand these guys are heavily armed professionals with one goal in mind and that’s finding you and taking you in. You don’t even know who these people are.” Jonas threw the facts at me rapid fire. “You know you don’t stand a chance against people like this, right?”

“What I know Jonas, is that we can’t keep running. Sooner or later, they’ll find me or one of you, but they will find us. What I know is that this is the right choice for me. The only choice. I feel it. I have to do this.”

“You going to get yourself killed.”

“Probably,” I said.

“What about Trinity? You going to drag her into this and get her killed too?”

“No, Jonas, I’m not. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. I’m not dragging her or anyone anywhere. Come with me or not, it’s your decision. If you come, it has to be with the understanding that one or more of us probably won’t be walking away when it’s over. I’ve accepted that. I don’t like it, but I don’t have a choice. You do.” I stood up, dizzy from all the tension radiating in the small space. Desperately needing fresh air, I picked up my bag, slipping the room key into my jeans pocket on the way to the door. “I wish you had more time to think about it, but time’s something we’re short of. Tomorrow after we go to the bank, I have to move on. You’ll all need to know what you’re doing by then,” I said as I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

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“WHAT’D YOU BUY?” Mac asked as he slipped into step next to me as I came out the doors of the Wal-Mart across from the hotel.

“A gun. And I’m going to use it to shoot you if you sneak up on me like that again.”

“You didn’t buy a gun, and you wouldn’t shoot me even if you had.”

I stopped to turn and look at him. “You sure about that?”

“I’m staking my life on it,” he replied, reaching over to take the bag of supplies from me. “I appreciate your offer, but I’m not about to leave just when this is getting interesting.”

I nodded and headed across the parking lot in the direction of the hotel, Mac by my side. I had hoped that he would stay. Even figured he probably would, but I needed to give him the choice. More for my benefit than his. I’d been ignorant of his presence during those seven years. He may have been watching and protecting me, during that time, but he’d been working alone. Telling him what I planned to do and giving him the option to leave, was a game changer. If he chose to stay, we’d be working together as a team, and his job description was going to change big time. In my mind, I had no option but to give him the opportunity to leave, but I wasn’t about to lie to myself that I wasn’t relieved that he’d decided to stay.

“How are the others?” I finally asked, not sure if I really wanted him to answer.

“Torn, I guess would be the best way to describe it. You’ve given them a lot to think about.” He walked for a few minutes in silence before adding, “I’m worried about Jonas.”

I just smiled, nodding to myself, as we walked along. I understood why Mac was concerned. Trinity and Mac would follow me anywhere because they believed in me. Jonas never would. He would dig in his heels, question every move and the motivation behind every decision and choice I made. Jonas, my voice of dissent. What Mac saw as a problem, I was grateful for. Jonas would keep me on my toes if he decided to come along for the ride. He’d taken his role as Trinity and Mama D’s protector very seriously and wasn’t too keen on putting them in danger. Neither was I, but I wasn’t sure which road was the most dangerous one. That was something they’d have to decide for themselves.

“They still up in my room?” I asked him, putting the subject of Jonas on the

table for now.

“No. Things broke up just after you left. I wasn’t sure how much Trinity was going to rely on Jonas, but she went off to her room without saying much to him.”

“She’s smart, and she’s used to operating alone. Making decisions for herself. She’s got Mama D to think of now. She knows that. Whatever she decides, it’ll be the right decision for the both of them.”

He nodded in agreement. We had reached the hotel, and he hesitated. I slowed down, giving him time to tell me what was on his mind. Obviously, he had something more to say.

“I did tell them, no matter what their decision, they would need to start using their new identities tomorrow, even in private. They need to get used to calling each other by their new names, so they don’t make a mistake when it really counts. They need to forget who they were. Decide who they’re going to be.”

And now he was telling me. I nodded to let him know I got the point and walked past the fountain to the entrance. I’d left the hotel as Taylor Morrison. I was going back in as Samantha White.

“You can call me Sam,” I informed him as I pushed through the door into the lobby. “All my friends do.”

He chuckled and followed me in. I headed to the business center. They had some computers there for guests to use and we needed to try to locate the guy Mac thought could help me. I checked my watch, surprised to see it was only a quarter to ten. With everything that had happened that day, I was sure it had to be after midnight. When we got to the Business Office, it was empty. The center was open until midnight, which gave us a good two hours to track him down. Mac came in behind me, closing the door, and pulling up a chair next to me.

“I’m going to wipe the drive when we finish, just in case,” he told me in a low voice, as he sat my bag on the floor. “I don’t want to leave any evidence of where we’re going in case someone comes looking.”

I offered him the keyboard, but he rejected it. “You’re the detective. I’ll give you what information I have, and you take it from there. Between us, maybe we can get somewhere.”

Two hours later, my eyes were glazing over, and we still hadn’t found him. Exhausted, I headed to my room wanting nothing more than a hot shower and a soft bed. Before they’d split up, everyone had agreed to make it a late morning, to give the rush hour traffic in Dallas time to clear before we hit town, so Mac and I agreed to meet for the free breakfast in the lobby at 8:00.

I ended up standing in the shower for a good 30 minutes, letting the jets of hot water beat the tension out of my muscles until the stress and terrors of the

day gave up their hold on me. Exhausted, I crawled into bed, pulled up the covers and let the sweet release of sleep take me.

* * *

I WAS MORE or less awake when the sun lightened the room through the drapes. I lay there determined to keep my mind off the coming day, intent to get at least another 15 minutes of sleep when the knock sounded on my door. My head jerked up off the pillow, and I snorted in dismay. It had to be Trinity. Or Candice, I thought, shaking my head. I had to start thinking of them with their new names, or I'd blow it in public. Mac had warned me it was time.

I checked the clock and was amazed to find it was 6 a.m. Frankly, I was surprised she had waited this long to seek me out. I crawled out from the covers as she rapped again and made my way across the room. Opening the door, I found both Trinity, and Mama D standing in the hallway outside.

"Candice, Della. Come on in." I swept my arm back, waving them inside. I picked up the morning paper the hotel staff had left and softly closed the door. "What brings you out so early this morning?"

I already knew. You had to be brain dead not to. I looked over at them standing there, bright eyed and bushy tailed and ready to talk and tried to shake off remnants of sleep that clung to me. Needing to be awake and alert, I stumbled over to the coffee maker and started rummaging around for the makings. I didn't get very far before Mama D came over and grabbed the pot from my hand, sweeping into the bathroom. I caught Trinity's smile as Mama D filled the pot with water. Within minutes, she was back, and the smell of coffee began to filter through the room.

"We've been talking, and we've got some questions," Trinity started in right away, Mama D at her elbow, presenting a united front.

"Okay. Shoot," I said, eyeing the dripping coffee, wishing I'd been able to brace with some caffeine before facing this.

"Say we come along with you," she asked, "what do you see us doing? What's our part in this whole thing?"

Ah. I stared at the pot willing the coffee to brew faster. I was on thin ice here and without the benefit of a fully functioning brain. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes stalling for time for the coffee to finish. Suddenly, the stream of coffee

slowed to a drip and I snatched the pot out and quickly poured a cup. I took the time to add some sweetener and cream before I went over to sit on the bed facing them.

“First off, you don’t just come along,” I started, pausing to take a long sip of coffee, letting the smooth taste slide down my throat. “You’ll be part of a team. Our team.”

I was a little confused about the question here. We had talked about this last night before the meeting. Trinity was the one who said she wanted to stay. Insisted that we were a better team together. In fact, she’d yelled it at me if I recalled correctly.

I stood up, taking another drink, my brain finally starting to click. Trinity wanted to stay, but she didn’t want to just come along for the ride. I’d been worried about Jonas having a role, feeling needed. She and Mama D both needed the same thing. To know their place. To be needed.

“We all have different abilities and experience that we’ll bring to the table. You aren’t going to be out there fighting gun battles, creeping around spying,” I assured her. “We need your brains. You know the law, and we’re going to be walking a fine line there. Probably stepping over it more often than not. We’re going to need information that you’ll know how to find if you don’t know it already. We’re breaking new ground here, going where no man has gone before. There’s going to be legal ramifications, and we’re going to need you to fight those battles.”

She nodded agreement, relief evident in her face. I felt bad. I should have foreseen this and told her last night.

“Mama D, you are every bit as important to the team. You have a wisdom and a peace that we need, but, even more importantly, you represent something that we desperately need, and that’s a sense of *home*. Don’t think that we haven’t noticed that you’re making sure we’re fed and taken care of. You’re both important and of value to the team. That’s why I gave you the option of coming.” I wanted them to realize they were wanted and needed, but I also needed them to understand the risk involved.

“Look, I have no intention of involving you in a gun battle or putting you in dangerous positions, but you have to understand, I can’t guarantee anything. They’ve already come after you in surprise attacks and they probably will again. I can’t make any promises.”

Trinity looked at me, and I could see the doubt and indecision written on her face. Mama D saw it too and took the choice away from her.

“Trinity, I’m going with her. I’ve lost everything, and all I have left is you and Taylor. Samantha, I mean.” Mama D looked over at me with an apologetic

look that nearly broke my heart. “I may not be able to fight them, but like Sam said, there’re other things I can do that will help.” She reached over and took Trinity’s hand in hers. “Baby, they’ll find us whether we’re with her or not. You can’t protect me forever. I say let’s stick together and fight them.”

Trinity wrapped her arms around Mama D and looked over at me, tears running down her face. “Okay. We’re in,” she announced, with a laugh. “What do we do now?”

“Now,” I said, not exactly dry-eyed myself, “We turn me into Samantha White.” I grabbed up the bag of stuff I had gotten at Wal-Mart the previous night and headed into the bathroom with a grin. They were right on my heels.

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BY 7:40 THE transformation was complete. One of the few advantages of being poor was learning how to do things for yourself that people with money pay to have done. As a result, Mama D was a whiz with a pair of scissors. I had a short, breezy new cut and had gone from my medium brown hair to a dark rich brunette with red tipped spikes on the crown. I'd plucked my eyebrows into a thin high arch, added a few rings to my fingers and a pair of racy dark shades to finish off the new look. The results had been dramatic.

"Well, Samantha. Um, Sam," Trinity corrected as I gave her a look over the top of my lowered sunglasses, "I hate to say it, but your new look suits you."

"I should have taken shears to you ages ago," Mama D agreed, going through my clothes.

Mama D and Trinity were having a ball trashing my old look. The clothes Mac had for me at the cabin had been along the lines of what I normally wore. Clothes that were meant to blend in. Bright, bold colors didn't mesh with the low profile I needed to keep, and I avoided them like the plague. With my red tipped hair, I needed some color in my clothes to balance it out. People would see my hair and my clothes. Not me. Which was exactly what I wanted.

"You have some good basics here, but you need a few things to snazz it up a bit, otherwise that cool new hair is just a waste," Trinity said as she pawed through my luggage. "We ought to stop at the Dillards Clearance Center and pick up a few things before we leave Dallas."

My eyes glazed over at the thought of shopping, but before I could say anything, we were interrupted by a knock on the door. I opened it to find Mac standing there, Jonas right behind him.

"Wow!" Mac exclaimed. "You look fab. Absolutely fab!" He rushed into the room, grabbing my hands and swinging them back and forth.

"I'm gonna be sick," Jonas informed us, as he strode into the room, slamming the door behind him. I cringed, hoping the neighbors were already up and about.

"Everyone else on this floor is gone," Mac said, reading my mind. "We have it all to ourselves."

"Which begs the question, why are you still prancing around like that?" Jonas said as he flopped down on the sofa.

I looked over at Mac. I wasn't the only one who had transformed this

morning. Mac had obviously brought along some of his other disguises and was now wearing an ensemble I definitely remembered seeing before.

“Julian?” I ventured.

“Troy, actually,” he corrected before pointing at Jonas. “Bryan here is having a little trouble getting used to it, but I think it works. Especially now that I’ve seen your new look.”

“You looked in the bag last night didn’t you, nosy?” I asked him accusingly.

“Yup, I did. I confess, you caught me! I thought since you were changing your look, I’d do the same and fem up a bit.” At Jonas’ mocking laugh, he conceded maybe he’d fem’ed up more than a bit. “Laugh all you want Bryan, but it gives us an out for staying in different rooms and explains why I let her boss me around. Plus, and this is a big PLUS,” he added dramatically, making Jonas roll his eyes, “It’s a persona that no one in the agency has seen. It’s a good cover.”

“Oh, I’ll give you that,” Jonas said, shaking his head in amazement. “I got worried when Trinity, er, Candice wasn’t in her room and went to find Mac. When he opened the door, I was sure I had the wrong room. I’m a cop, and I had to do a double-take. We figured you were here with Sam since you weren’t downstairs in the dining room.”

At his words, Trinity stopped packing the clothes back up. “Why were you looking for me?”

“I wanted to see if you’d decided on what you were doing before we were all back together,” he said, casting a withering look at Mac, who had gone to sort through the clothes with Mama D. “But apparently I arrived a little late for that.”

“Grams and I came over early this morning,” Trinity explained to him, which for me was as hard to believe as Mac’s transformation into Troy. Trinity didn’t explain her business to anyone, most especially to a man, but maybe Candice did. “We had some questions for Sam I needed to have answered before making any decision.”

“I take it you decided to throw caution to the wind and throw in with her.”

At his words, Mac’s hands froze, and the room stilled, waiting for the shoe to drop. Of everyone in the room, Jonas had the least connection to the group. The least reason to risk his life.

“Yes, that’s right.” Trinity’s voice dripped ice. “We’re throwing in with her, as you put it, but we’re not throwing caution to the wind. I happen to think our odds of coming out of this alive are substantially higher working with Samantha, than running off to hide somewhere, waiting for them to find us.”

Ohhh. I could be wrong, but I was pretty sure she just insulted him by insinuating he was going to run. I waited to see if Jonas would rise to the bait. It

was a small room for the five of us, and when he stood up, his 6'5 inch frame made it substantially smaller.

"You're sure?" he snapped at her. "You're sure this is what you want to do?"

"Yes. I'm sure," She snapped it right back at him.

"Okay." Jonas put up his hands in surrender. " I just needed to know what you had decided to do." He turned to me, a grin slowly spreading across his face. "I'm in if the offer's still open."

I didn't even have time to nod before Trinity was on him. "Wait a minute! You're happy about this! You wanted to go after them all along. Why didn't you just tell her that last night instead of dragging this out?"

"Because I wasn't going to let you and Mama D go off by yourselves and wait for those guys to find you. If you decided to leave, I was going with you. There was no way I was going to leave you alone to fend for yourselves."

She stared at him for an instant and then turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door closed behind her. All eyes turned to Jonas, who hadn't moved an inch.

"Well?" demanded Mama D, snapping him out of it. Within seconds, he was out the door after her.

"This could complicate things," Mac said, turning his attention back to the clothes as Mama D stood there chuckling to herself.

Personally, I didn't see how things could get any more complicated than they already were.

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER, I was ready to concede how wrong I'd been. We'd gotten through the banking in Dallas without incident and even made a stop at the Dillards outlet, where we all managed to fill out our wardrobes with surprisingly little damage to our wallets.

Jonas and Trinity had managed to carve out an uneasy truce, and Mama D was having the time of her life between watching the two of them trying to avoid each other and discovering the joys of being on the road.

Things were going smoother than anyone had a right to expect with one big exception. After spending the past 24 hours looking for Mac's contact at the Agency, we'd come up empty handed. Not only could we not find him. It was

like he'd never even existed.

We'd pulled up in Wichita Falls, a town about two hours northwest of Dallas. Off the beaten track, but close enough to the major highways to get on the way quickly once we knew where to go. It wasn't bad as towns go, but after being there for two days straight, I was getting antsy to get on the road.

"We've got to be missing something here." Jonas threw the pen he'd been using to jot down notes with onto the desk in disgust. "You sure you're not forgetting something?"

It had to be the sixth time he had asked Mac the same question, and I was somewhat surprised that Mac hadn't hit him by now. I know I was ready to.

I watched as the pen rolled off the desk and went back to reading the Dallas newspaper that I had picked up in the hotel lobby earlier, ignoring them both. I had bought a notebook computer in Dallas before we left town so I could research in private. I hadn't realized at the time that my room would become our home base of operations. When Jonas and Mac arrived at 9:00 a.m. bearing breakfast and coffee, I'd already been online for most of the night with absolutely no reward for my scratchy, bloodshot eyes. Trinity had popped in around 10:00 leaving Mama D watching Price is Right in their room. She had stretched out on the bed and proceeded to stare at the ceiling. I didn't blame her a bit.

I listened now with half an ear as Mac went over it again. We were looking for Caleb Brown Ph.D., a white Caucasian male, age somewhere between 40 and 50, with black hair and gray eyes. At 6 ft. 2 and weighing in at about 180 pounds, he wouldn't be that hard to find in a crowd, but he was definitely proving to be something of an enigma on the computer.

Apart from knowing that Brown was a Handler that had recently retired, he hadn't been able to supply any additional information other than that Brown had been recruited into the Agency because he was so highly respected in his field. His research into Parapsychology was cutting edge. Papers had been published, awards had been won, and there wasn't a scrap of evidence that I could find to prove it. I hadn't logged into my usual search programs, in case they were being monitored, but even so, if he was half the brain that Mac was claiming, I should have gotten some hits on him.

I had a bad feeling that it didn't matter how many times Jonas asked him to go over it, it wasn't going to help. If Mac hadn't remembered something by now, he wasn't going to, and it probably wouldn't matter even if he did. We were beating a dead horse. I needed to face the fact that Caleb Brown had disappeared just as thoroughly as Denzel.

As soon as his name popped into my brain, my pulse quickened and the

exhaustion that had clouded my thinking was gone in an instant. Jonas had said that Denzel's name was Marcus. Marcus Adams from Omaha and that's all they had been able to find out. A name and a place. Everything else had been wiped or didn't exist. Perhaps they'd done the same thing with Brown, and that's why we couldn't find him.

As the pieces began to come together in my head, I didn't know whether to be happy about it or frustrated that it had taken so long for me to figure it out. Relief poured through me at the knowledge that we were finally making some progress. I still didn't know where Caleb Brown was, but I was 99% sure I could guarantee where he wasn't.

I turned to get Mac's attention only to find I already had it. At some point they had stopped talking and were now sitting quietly, watching me.

"What is it? What did you think of?" Mac asked, apparently sensing my excitement.

"We're not going to find him this way. It's a dead end." I dropped the paper and stood up, crossing the room to the computer desk. "Tell me about the Agency. Who did Brown report to? Who else works there? I need some names here."

He thought for a minute and began jotting names on the notepad. "I don't know many. There're only a few people I know of besides Brown, and that's only because I met them when they recruited me, or I reported to them at some time. Everything's very hush-hush. They operate on a strictly need to know basis, to protect the Clients. I have a feeling about this one here," Mac underlined one of the names he had just written down for me, "and no, I'm not going to tell you why until you do your thing. Then we'll compare."

I shooed Jonas out of the way and slipped into the vacated chair. My mind was spinning as I pulled up a search engine and typed in the first name on the list.

"How do you know Brown? Why'd you choose him?" I asked Mac, as I waited for information to start popping up on the screen. "What made you think you could trust him?"

"He's the string I pulled to get assigned to you." He sat down on the bed behind me and continued to explain at Jonas' bewildered look. "There are Handlers in the agency and Watchers. Guys like me. The Watchers, do exactly that. We watch, and we send in reports. The Handlers evaluate the reports and give advice or whatever. Clients are assigned to Handlers according to their abilities. Brown was your Handler, Sam. He's the one who sent me to check on you in the first place."

"What do you mean he's the string you pulled?" Jonas' question had me

sending Mac a warning look over my shoulder. I didn't like keeping secrets from the others, but the Empath connection between us was something I wanted to keep quiet a while longer.

"Normally Watchers are randomly assigned to Clients. Some Clients progress into their abilities and others never do. From what I saw, Sam here, was going to be one of the former, and I figured as long as I was looking at a long term assignment, it might as well be one with some potential. I convinced Brown that I was the right man for the job and voila. Here I am."

"Yeah, here you are," Jonas snorted in amusement. "Bet you never figured on this."

"No, can't say that I did, but you have to admit, it's certainly not boring." He turned his attention back to me. "To answer your question, Sam, I don't know that we can trust him. He's what you said you wanted. He's someone who can train you, and there's the added bonus that he's familiar with you. He's the one I sent my reports to, or at least, that's who I used to send them to. When I was called back to the Agency, he was gone. I was told he'd retired, but no one ever contacted me with new instructions or a new Handler for you."

"You mean when you were *unexpectedly* called back just before Marcus showed up. When did you send in your last report?" I asked. "Did you say anything that would alert them?"

"It was just before I got called back and yes, my report would have alerted them of a change in the situation."

I was most of the way through his list already, crossing off names as I went. Knowing what I was looking for made it easy. I had saved the name Mac had underlined for the last, my gut telling me that he was right, and this was the guy I was looking for. Finally, I typed it in, hit the enter key and waited for the results to come in.

"Why didn't they kill him?" The voice came from across the room, and I looked behind me to see Trinity rise up on one elbow on the bed. "Why didn't they just kill Mac when they had the chance? He's been nothing but trouble for them since this whole thing started."

Excellent question, I thought as I turned back to the screen. If we'd thought to ask that 24 hours ago, I could have gotten some sleep. Then again, maybe I'd needed the time to figure it out. If necessity was the mother of invention, maybe exhaustion was the mother of thinking outside the box.

"They didn't kill him," I said over my shoulder as I scanned through the results. and smiled in satisfaction as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. "for the same reason they didn't kill our missing Dr. Brown."

"They didn't kill Brown because they didn't need to. He's out of their way,"

Jonas interrupted. "Brown retired, remember?"

"How do we know that?" Trinity asked, swinging her legs off the bed. "If I was an award winning, highly respected expert in my field, with years ahead of me for research, and the project I'd been working on for years just started showing signs of promise, the last thing I'd do is walk away."

"I agree, but if that's the case, then he's either involved in this, they took him, or he's dead," Jonas concluded, counting off the possibilities on his fingers. "Sam here, seems pretty certain he isn't dead."

"So what? You think Brown is working for them?" Trinity asked me.

"I think if he were behind this or involved in it, he would have stayed put." I finished going through the search results as I answered her question. "It would be the easiest way to keep tabs on what's happening and raise the least amount of suspicion unless of course, something unexpected happened and they moved him."

"Something like Marcus disappearing?"

"Good a guess as any. That certainly would have sent up a red flag for me. The only thing we know for sure is he's missing, and we can't find him."

"And why is that?" Jonas threw up his hands in surrender. "This guy has completely dropped off the radar. Not only is he no longer with the agency, but it's almost like he never existed. According to Mac, he's supposed to have won all these awards and be this big wig, but there's nothing to support it. Where's the paper trail?" He stopped short, his eyes looking into the distance instead of focusing on me. I could practically see the wheels turning in his brain as he put it together.

"Marcus," he whispered so softly I could barely make it out what he said, and I was expecting it. "They erased him. Just like Marcus. What makes you think they didn't kill him?"

"Because *they* didn't kill Marcus and more importantly, they didn't kill Mac, even though it was the logical thing to do." I got up, stretching my legs and giving my eyes a rest from the glare of the computer screen. "The question we need to ask ourselves isn't why didn't they kill him. It's what was so important that they needed to keep him alive?"

"Isn't that the same thing?" Jonas asked.

"No," Trinity answered for me. "It's not. Well, it is, but it's not. It's all in how you look at it. You can ask the same question over and over, and you'll always get the same answer. Asked a different way, the brain responds to the new question, and you'll trigger a different response. We use it all the time during trials and depositions. You use it too, *Bryan*. It's called interrogation. You just don't recognize it without a bright light shining in your face."

I was impressed in spite of myself. She'd calmly explained and still managed to throw a jab in there at Jonas. I looked over at Mac, who'd been exceptionally quiet during the past few minutes. Where Jonas and Trinity needed to talk things through in a logical progression, Mac was more intuitive, relying primarily on his senses to find his way through a problem. Probably because he knew logic, as we knew it, had little to do with it anymore. We'd entered a world where the impossible was now possible and the illogical made sense. The ramifications of what I alone could do was overwhelming. What if there were dozens like me? What if there were hundreds? How do you fight a war where there are no rules and no limits, except for those you set for yourself? I had a horrible feeling I was going to find out, and it gave me the shivers.

"It's you," Mac said quietly, breaking into my thoughts. "You're the reason we're alive. They're after you, but you're useless to them if you can't control your power. They need Brown to train you, and they kept me around in case things didn't work out and they needed me back in place."

"So, we have to assume they have him." Jonas rubbed his face with his hands, despair evident in his voice as realization sank in. "Question is whether he's a willing participant or not. Either way, we'll never find him. I hope you have a plan B, *Samantha*, or we're in big trouble."

"We don't need a plan B," I said. "Our objective is still the same. I need to learn to control this, and we need some answers. We have to find Caleb Brown."

"Just how do you propose we do that?" Trinity asked. "They have him, and we have no idea where he is."

"You're right. We don't know where he is, but someone at the Agency does. It's too good a source of information for them to abandon it. There's someone there. We find him, we find Brown." I reached over and pulled Mac's list of names over to the edge of the desk.

"I did searches on the names Mac gave me. They all came back with associated sites on recent and past activity with the exception of one." I pointed to the name that Mac had underlined on the sheet of paper. "Matthew Hughes. He exists, but barely, and nothing in recent history. Just like Marcus Adams and Caleb Brown. I'm willing to bet he's there at the Agency, keeping an eye on things. Who is this guy?" I looked over at Mac, waiting. This was the guy he'd picked out too. Now I wanted to know why.

"Matthew Hughes is the Head of Security. Doesn't get much better for them, or much worse for us."

No kidding. That was about the last thing I wanted to hear. If the Head of Security for the Agency was part of the problem, we couldn't just walk in the front door looking for answers. His position gave him way too much power and

too much freedom to use it however he wanted. It didn't change our objective. Just made it way more complicated.

"We need to check him out. Find out what he knows and if he's involved."

"Well," said Mac, dusting off his jeans as he rose, "there's only one way to do that. When do you want to leave?"

"Leave? Wait a minute. We're going to the Agency?" Trinity asked. "Is that safe?"

"No, it's not," Jonas answered, keeping his focus on me. "In fact, it puts everyone here in a great deal of danger."

He was right. It would. This was what they signed up for, but now the rubber was meeting the road for the first time. Mac and I were committed, but it wasn't too late for them to duck and run. I waited, not saying anything to break the silence. It was their move, and I wasn't going to try to convince them either way.

"Okay." Trinity popped up off the bed with a determined look on her face, making the decision for them. "Then I want a gun."

* * *

MAC AND JONAS went through their little arsenal and finally agreed on a semi-automatic for Trinity to go along with the taser she had already appropriated. We spent the afternoon at the shooting range and after a couple of hours of practice, she could definitely be labeled armed and dangerous.

'Candice' apparently was into shopping as much as Trinity was. The shooting range was under the gun store, 'store' being the operative word. Before we could make our way through the aisles and out to the car, she had managed to locate a leather shoulder bag with a special concealed compartment for the gun. Once she realized she could carry her wallet, makeup, and gun, all in one handy dandy stylish purse, it was a done deal. When she bought two of them, exactly the same, just in different colors, I thought Jonas' eyes would pop out of his head, but he held his tongue and ushered her out the door into the car like the wise man he was.

We stopped by the store to lay in supplies for the trip, ate dinner and went our separate ways. It was the first down time I'd had in a while. We had a destination and a plan. We were together. For the time being, we were safe, and I fully planned to relax and enjoy it, not knowing when it might happen again.

Resisting the siren call of the computer, I crawled into bed, still slightly damp, but toasty warm from what had to be the longest shower in history and fell asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

WE WERE HEADING to Colorado, which had completely taken me by surprise. For whatever reason, I had thought the Agency, being part of the government would be in D.C. We were looking at over 12 hours on the road, hugging I-35 north into Kansas and then cutting onto I-70 to head west into Denver, and that wasn't counting stops for food, gas and leg stretching. Mac and I might have been able to switch off and make it in a long day, but Jonas was the only driver right now for the RV, and he just couldn't do 817 miles in a day. As anxious as I was to get to the Agency, I preferred we arrive there in one piece, so we stopped for the night in Salina, Kansas.

I can honestly say, I've never seen so many wheat fields. Or windmills. Kansas is nothing if not flat and windy. It was a relief when, in the late afternoon of the second day of driving, the Rocky Mountains came into sight. At first, I thought they were low-lying clouds on the horizon, but as we closed the distance to Denver, the clouds rose higher and gained definition. The green of the front range separated from the snow capped peaks behind, as the sun began to set in the west. It was an amazing sight for me, not having seen them before. At least not like this, having crossed hundreds of miles of prairie land to have this mammoth range rising abruptly before me. My mind couldn't help but think back to the covered wagons and the people who had come before me. They saw it, I was sure, just as I had. As clouds in the distance. How did they feel, when they realized the size and grandeur of what was before them, knowing what they were seeking was on the other side?

Probably a lot like what I was feeling now. What I was seeking lay in the mountains that now loomed just beyond the city of Denver. The foothills appeared dark and ominous, hidden in the shadow of the high peaks, which sparkled silver, as the sun sank behind them. The sky above was a rainbow of colors, the few clouds there, reflecting the dying rays of light as the blue sky above melted into deep hues of purple to the east.

As the last bit of light faded from the sky, darkness fell and with it came an overwhelming sense of fear and pain. Mac, sensing the change, jerked his attention from the road to me in concern. Nearly suffocating in panic, I waved to him to get off the road.

The car was still rolling when I threw open the door and flung myself out, raking in deep breaths of air, trying to stand on what were decidedly shaking

legs. I watched in silence as Jonas roared by, tapping the brakes but unable to stop.

“He’ll get off at the next exit and wait for us,” Mac called out as he rounded the back end of the car. “What’s wrong? What’s the matter?”

I gave up the fight to stand and leaned against the car, giving my knees extra support as my stomach began to roll. Doubling over, I felt sweat break out on my scalp and begin to trickle its way down.

“Taylor! What’s happening?” Mac demanded, as he grabbed my arms, trying to steady me and I needed it. Lights began exploding on the edge of my vision, the center filling with black clouds and I knew I was going down.

It stopped almost as fast as it started. One minute I was on the verge of passing out and the next, it was over. Not just the pain, but the fear and the panic. I was still shaky and had the feeling I would be for some time, but the rest was mercifully gone. Exhausted, I slid down the side of the car to sit on the hard pavement of the shoulder. Mac slid down next to me, and I noticed he was pretty shaky himself.

“Did you feel that?” I finally managed to ask.

“Yes. No. I mean, I felt something, but not what you were feeling.” He was as out of breath as I was, his words coming out in gasps. I sat for a minute longer, waiting for my stomach to settle and my heart beat to stop pounding in my ears. When I started feeling the pebbles under my rear end, I figured I’d recovered enough to stand up. It was slow going, as getting upright seemed to impart a bit of vertigo, making my stomach do flip flops again, but eventually, things calmed down and came back to center.

Taking one more deep breath, I stood up straight and looked over at the mountains, which now in the twilight, stood out as dark shadows against the darkening sky. We had swung north by the Denver airport, cutting off the trip through downtown and were on the outskirts of the main city on our way to Loveland.

“How do you know?” I asked, watching as the cars sped by us on I-85. “How do you know it wasn’t what I was feeling?”

He didn’t answer for a moment, and I turned to find him standing with his eyes closed, lips pressed together in a grim line.

“You were terrified. I could see it in your eyes,” he finally said, opening his eyes to meet mine, “but all I felt from you was waves of confusion, and panic. And then anger.”

“Well, you got the terrified part right, but of what?” I took a deep breath, unable to understand what had happened. “I don’t know about the anger. I don’t remember getting angry, but I could be wrong. It all hit so fast.”

My legs were feeling steadier by the minute, and my heart rate had slowed back to a normal rate, or what felt like one compared to what it had been.

“Trust me, Taylor. It was anger. I’ve been around you enough to know, and you were about as angry as I’ve ever seen you. Then you just popped like a balloon, and it was gone.” He was walking around in the narrow space on the shoulder, shaking his legs out as he went.

“Yeah, it’s gone. For now, at least,” I agreed, opening my door, wondering what on earth was going on and worse yet if it had something to do with what was waiting for us. I hated this. Hated not knowing, hated losing control. Hated the whole situation. *Roll with it. Accept it. This is reality now.* I repeated the words in my head like a mantra, knowing if I didn’t come to terms with it, I’d lose my mind. Or possibly get somebody killed. What had I told them? *I was going to embrace the weirdness.* Well, it didn’t get much weirder than what had just happened. Embracing it was proving to be the hard part.

* * *

WE CAUGHT UP with Jonas and the others at the next exit, just as Mac had predicted. Jonas gave us a look but kept his questions to himself. After a brief confab, we decided to grab some dinner and spend the night in Longmont. After what had just happened, I needed a little time to pull myself together before we scouted out the Agency and saw the lay of the land. It was after midnight when the knock sounded on my door. I was still awake, too restless to relax. I flung open the door to find Mac standing there, his arms full of pillows, dragging sheets and blankets behind him.

“Mind if I sleep on the floor?” he asked.

I was about to make some flippant remark, when I turned and looked at the big bed behind me, still made up, and the vacant floor space at the end of it. Flashes of earlier in the evening went through my head. How bad would that have been if Mac hadn’t been there to help me?

I looked back at him, standing in the hallway, and opened the door further, stepping back to allow him access. He walked past me, threw his stuff down, tucked his gun away under the bed and wordlessly started building his nest on the floor.

Softly closing the door, I padded back into the room and watched him

arrange the blankets. How had it come to this? The day had started out so well, and now I had a babysitter and was actually thankful for it. Disgusted, I crawled into bed, still dressed and pulled the covers over my head. With Mac settled on the floor by my feet, I could finally face what had happened, what I had been avoiding all evening. Mac had only been partially right earlier when he said I had been terrified. He'd seen terror in my face all right, but it wasn't mine. I had nothing to be terrified of, but someone else did, and I had felt it. Felt their terror and fear pour through me in a suffocating wave of emotion. I had no idea what had happened, but I knew somewhere out there in the darkness something horrible had happened. Mac said he hadn't felt it, he'd only picked up on my emotions. I had picked up on someone else's. The very thought had me shivering beneath the blankets. I didn't want this. Not this. Feeling what someone else is feeling? I had thought it was bad before, but I had no idea. How had Mac kept from losing his mind when mine kept forcing its way in? Even now, I knew he was there, laying on the floor, feeling the despair that was consuming me. Someone was in trouble, I knew it, and could do nothing to help them. I couldn't even help myself. Tears stung my eyes at the realization. What if this was just the beginning? What more was to come? *Dear God, I silently begged, Help me. Help us all.*

* * *

WHEN I WOKE in the morning, Mac was gone, as was all evidence of his spending the night on the floor. I felt like I'd been in an all-night wrestling match and in many ways, I had been. I didn't have any more answers this morning than I'd had the night before, but I'd managed to come to terms with things. What choice did I have really? It had taken hours to come to that conclusion, and Mac had been there to help, absorbing emotion when I had been close to being overwhelmed. I could actually feel it now, when it happened, like an easing somehow, a lightening of a burden. Is that what I had done last night? Lightened the pain for someone else? The thought that I had, helped me more than anything else. The idea that there was a purpose, that I could use what I had for good, to help others, made it easier to accept.

I dragged my legs over the edge of the bed. I had prayed for help last night, and now I threw a special thanks up to heaven. I might not have the answer, but

maybe I had found a way to live with what had happened.

By the time I had showered and dressed, I was mentally ready to get to work. Now, more than ever, I needed to find Caleb Brown. Needed to learn how to control and use what I was.

I grabbed my bag and threw open the door only to find Mac on the other side, grinning like an idiot, relief written on his face. Last night must have been worse than I'd thought.

"Let's go!" he said, as he snatched the bag from my hand and headed down the hall to the elevator. "We have work to do."

Yes, I thought, as I fell in behind him. We most certainly do.

28

“WELL, DID YOU see him?”

Trinity was waiting at the door for us, and I could hear the anxiety in her voice. We’d left her and Mama D at a motel/campground outside of Estes Park while Mac, Jonas and I went to scope out the Agency and attempt to verify if Matthew Hughes was still on site.

We’d been lucky finding the campground. Set back from the road, it provided hook-ups for campers and RV’s, along with small log cabin units scattered along the river.

Mac and I were in a cabin, with Jonas, Mama D, and Trinity staying in the RV. It was close quarters, but no one was complaining. We were all a little jumpy, and I know I felt better knowing that there was someone handy with a gun at each location. Checking my watch, I couldn’t blame Trinity for being nervous. We’d been gone a little over four hours, and the shadows were starting to grow long.

“Yes, he’s still there,” I answered her, throwing my pack onto the floor. “He looks like Barney Fife in Lederhosen.”

“You’re kidding?” she laughed, relief evident on her face. It was hard to be afraid of Don Knotts, especially in shorts.

“Who’s Barney Fife?”

I snorted in amusement at Mac, as I unrolled the map that had been lying on the table. We had stopped that morning at a mountaineering store and picked up maps of the area, backpacks, binoculars, and scopes, along with what seemed like a trillion other things that Mac and Jonas had determined were absolutely essential. That was one of the great things about Colorado. You could pick up all sorts of stuff for spying, and no one thought a thing about it. It was the Rockies after all. God’s country. Of course, you’re going to want to see it up close and personal. Mac and Jonas had enjoyed themselves immensely, taking what I thought bordered on the realm of *forever* arguing the merits of this scope over that one. By the time we finally left, I was about ready to shoot myself, but Trinity just opened the door for the guys, clutching her new leather purse, smiling and nodding as they loaded their loot into the car. I assumed some sort of strange kinship between shoppers. I’d never understand it.

Shaking my head, I was intent on the map which insisted on rolling itself up every time I took my hands off it. Frustrated with it, I finally glanced up to see

he was serious about the Barney Fife thing.

“What? You’re seriously telling me you’ve never seen the show? You know, Andy, Opie and Aunt Bee?” I was incredulous. It may have been way before my time or his, but I thought everyone had seen the reruns on television. At the shake of his head, I went back attempting to flatten the map out as I explained. “Barney was the bumbling, goofy deputy in the town, played by Don Knotts, the original nerd. Hughes is a dead ringer for him.”

“Well, he may look like him and nerd he may be, but Hughes is anything but bumbling and goofy.”

“Consider me warned.” I looked up to find Jonas and Mac watching me struggle with the map, indulgent looks on their faces. “What?” I snapped out, completely irritated by this point with the map and getting no help whatsoever from the onlookers.

“There’s a bag in there with weights for holding down the map.” Mac pointed to a sack sitting on the floor next to the tube the map had come in.

Disgusted, I let the map roll up and flop off the table. What was wrong with these people in Colorado? Maps came in a book. Flat and labeled, not rolled up in a tube. It was a little disconcerting to find myself so totally out of my element and didn’t appreciate being a source of amusement.

“Is there coffee ready?” I asked, turning away to the little kitchen in search of a mug. They could roll out the map themselves.

“Of course there’s coffee, honey.” Mama D bustled over and was now pouring me a cup like I was an invalid. I ignored the snorts of laughter behind me and thanked her. Trinity caught my eye and threw me a wink. She apparently thought I mishandled the map on purpose. Fine by me. I wasn’t about to tell her otherwise. Sad as it was to admit, the guys needed this. Needed confirmation of the fact that they weren’t just along for the ride. That there were some things they knew that I didn’t, even if it was something as trivial as unrolling a map. I could tell them a million times, but there was nothing like seeing it in person to convince a man he was needed. I was immensely grateful to have Jonas and Mac along, even if they were the occasional pain in the rear.

I looked over at them, absorbed in the map, now spread out perfectly on the table before them and felt a fast clench of my heart. *Dear God, don’t let me get them killed*, I prayed. I felt Mama D’s arm snake around my waist for a quick hug before she wandered into the living area and settled down on the sofa with a book. It was exactly what I needed, and I found myself smiling, thinking not for the first time, that I wasn’t the only one here with psychic ability. I shook off the feeling and went to pull out the computer to download the photos I had taken. We had some answers. Now we needed a plan.

* * *

“IT’S JUST A mountain lodge,” Trinity said as soon as she saw the photos. “A big one, but it’s nothing like I expected.”

“It looks like a lodge because it is,” Mac said, coming over to the coffee table, where we’d set up the computer. “Or it used to be. As far as the locals know, it’s an exclusive resort for executives. The sort of place used for training, seminars, that sort of stuff. Makes the perfect cover for the Agency. The Clients are housed in the lodge when they come for training, but it’s only a small part of the complex. The rest of the structure is underground. There are entrances from the main lodge, and three of the outbuildings.

“The underground structure runs beneath the mountain and the offices, training center, and security offices are all located here,” he said, moving back to the table and pointing to a section of the map, some distance from where he had marked the lodge location on the map.

“Where do the Watchers and Handlers stay?” I asked. “Do they live on-site?”

“There are quarters for the Watchers in the underground area, places to stay when they come in for reports or are waiting to be dispatched.” He pointed to a new area, opposite the underground quarters, beyond the lodge. “We’re pretty much restricted to that area, which is why I haven’t seen but a handful of the Handlers and staff. I’ve heard that the Handlers stay in the lodge, separated from the Clients, but I don’t know much more than that.”

We didn’t have much to go on. We had a vague idea of the layout and where people might be, the operative word there being ‘might’. At least we knew that Matthew Hughes was on site, which should have made me feel better, but for some reason, just didn’t.

“Why did we see Hughes?” I asked. “Why, out of all of the people who work there, out all of the people we could have seen and didn’t, why did we see the one guy we needed to see?”

“That is sort of weird, isn’t it?” Trinity piped in. “What was he doing?”

“He was going from the lodge to one of the other buildings,” I answered her. “Mac, you said there were entrances to the underground facilities from the lodge and the three outbuildings, so if he was headed underground, why didn’t he use the lodge and keep out of sight?”

“What’s in there?” asked Jonas, pointing to the building on the computer screen. “Above ground?”

“The security offices,” Mac answered grimly, confirming my worst fears. It was a large building, indicating the probability of a large security force. He pointed to a darkened area behind the building. “And this is where they keep the dogs.”

Dogs? Well, that narrowed down the options on the table. Jonas was absolutely right. Getting to Hughes was going to be tough, not to mention dangerous. Problem was, we were out of options, and I had a bad feeling we were running out of time.

“Okay,” I said, releasing the breath I’d been holding since Mac had dropped his bombshell of news. “I’m going for a walk.”

I left them sitting there in silence, still looking at the screen, slipped on my jacket and slid out the door.

The crisp mountain air cleared my head almost immediately. Still warm during the day, the nights were decidedly chilly, making me glad that I’d had the presence of mind to grab my coat. The sun was nearly down, but there was still enough light to follow the path that meandered through the cabin area. I made a couple of circuits through the grounds to wear off some energy and finally settled down on a rock by the river just as darkness fell. I watched as the moon slowly appeared in the sky, edging its way out from behind a mountain top. The rushing water tumbled over the rocks, the cascading surface reflecting the sky above in shimmering bursts of light.

I’m not sure how long I sat there, lost in my thoughts and the roar of the river. The smell of coffee brought me out of my reverie, and I looked over, expecting to see Mac, surprised to see Trinity instead, standing a distance away, holding a couple of steaming mugs.

“It’s beautiful here,” she said, walking over to hand me a cup. “Peaceful.”

I hadn’t realized how chilled I was until I wrapped my hands around the hot mug. I nodded in agreement and took a grateful sip of coffee, letting the steam wrap itself around my face, taking its warmth deep into my lungs.

“You ready now,” she asked, “or are you going to stay out here until you freeze to that rock?”

“I’m ready,” I answered, getting to my feet, which wasn’t easy since my whole backside was numb. “The boys getting restless in there?”

“Oh yeah,” she said, looping her arm through mine to help me balance. “There’s two big men in there, spoiling for a fight and no one to pound on except each other. They need some direction to point all that male angst at. Besides, Mama D has dinner ready and on the table.”

I nodded as we made our way back in companionable silence, enjoying the peace and quiet. I was so glad she and Mama D were with me. I needed them,

and not just for their skills.

Dinner wasn't quite on the table when we got to the cabin. Mama D had taken things in hand and had Mac tossing a salad while Jonas stood guard over what smelled like garlic bread toasting in the oven.

By the time I finished washing up, everything was ready. Jonas had the decency to wait until Mama D had set steaming bowls of Chicken Alfredo in front of us before starting in.

"Okay, *Samantha*," he said, drawing my attention, as he spooned parmesan cheese into his bowl. "I hope you have something else up your sleeve because there's no way I can see of getting into the compound without someone getting killed. Meaning you." He pointed his spoon at me for emphasis.

"Why don't we talk about this after dinner," Trinity said, giving Jonas a look that would have killed a lesser man on the spot. "And quit with the cheese. You haven't even tasted that yet, and you're drowning it."

She grabbed the spoon and bowl of cheese from him and plunked them down on the table, which, from the look on his face had been a huge mistake. I stepped in quickly before they came to blows.

"No, he's right, Trinity. We need to talk now. We have a lot of work to do later."

Mac and Jonas' faces lit up like Christmas trees. I couldn't really blame them. It was a relief to finally be able to do something pro-active even if the odds of success were stacked against us.

"Our goal is to get into the facility and get some information. We need to find Brown and see what's up with Matthew Hughes." I gave up on attempting to twirl the fettuccine around my fork and grabbed my knife, cutting the pasta into manageable pieces.

"Problem is," I continued, managing to stab a nice piece of chicken along with a forkful of noodles, "getting to Hughes."

"There's no way we're going to be able to get in there without them knowing about it. The minute Hughes thinks something is off, he'll set the dogs on us, no questions asked," Jonas said, cutting straight to the heart of the problem.

"I'm willing to bet he's in charge on site. If I was a double agent, that's the position I'd go for. You're in on everything, can spy on everything, have access to everything and no questions asked." Jonas nodded his head in agreement with Mac.

"So basically what you're saying is there's no way to get to this guy, the one we have to talk to," Trinity said, throwing her fork down in disgust. "So now what? He's the only lead we have. Do we cut tail and run?"

"No," I answered, "we don't. We needed to know if Hughes was still in place

at the facility and we got our answer. If they have Brown, I'd be willing to bet he's somewhere nearby where Hughes can keep an eye him."

"If that's true, then we don't need to get into the facility to talk to him. We can just follow him right to Brown," Jonas finished for me.

"That's a lot of *'ifs'*. We don't even know for sure that Hughes is involved in this. Say he is, and you do follow him to Brown? What happens then?" Trinity asked.

"If Hughes has Brown and we find him, I intend to take him," I answered, surprised at the question. Maybe because the answer was obvious to me. I'd accepted that what we had once been, no longer existed. We knew things now that others didn't. I could do things that apparently no one else could. We were being hunted. The rules had changed.

"What do you mean *take him*? You can't just walk in and take someone. That's kidnapping and in case you forgot, it's illegal."

"You're right," I said, agreeing with her. "Let me correct myself. When we find Brown, I intend to kidnap him."

The silence was deafening. I waited, letting the idea sink in. We didn't have a choice really. At least I didn't. My mind jumped back to what had happened last night and the overwhelming emotions that had rolled over me. I knew deep in my soul it had something to do with what was going on. I'd been over it a dozen times in my head, and I kept coming back with the same answer, my gut telling me what my mind refused to accept. It had been Caleb Brown I had felt. His horror and fear. Worse yet, the unending blackness that had followed. Had they killed him? Was he working with them, or had they taken him against his will? I didn't know. The one thing I did know for sure was that he was involved because of me, and if he was still alive, I had to get him back.

TWO HOURS LATER, I was back up on the mountain, binoculars trained on the facility. Lying in the bushes, I was cold and fighting to keep my teeth from chattering and hold the glasses steady at the same time. Mac was spread out next to me, and Jonas had circled around to the south to get a different vantage point. Trinity and Mama D were back at the cabin packing up.

I glanced over at Mac, who had been pretty quiet since I'd announced my plan to kidnap Brown. Actually, they had all been pretty quiet. Killing people with your mind might be a legal gray area, but Trinity was right. There were laws on the books for kidnapping, and the penalties were pretty severe. I was dealing with a lawyer and a cop. Some things were going to be tough for them to agree to.

"You know there's a good chance he might already be dead if what you felt last night was any indication," Mac whispered to me now, keeping his eyes trained on the compound below. "Or we could be wrong, and Hughes isn't the guy. Or what if he is the guy and he doesn't lead us to Brown? Have you thought of that?"

I had to strain to hear him and wished I hadn't. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. A lot could go wrong, and probably would.

"If you have a better plan I'd love to hear it," I hissed back, his last words echoing down my spine in a series of shivers that had nothing to do with the cold. He blew out a long breath in frustration, which I took as a 'no', and I pulled the binoculars back up, training them on the main lodge.

There were a number of rooms on the second floor of the main building with lights on. According to Mac, these were the client rooms, with the Handlers in the East wing and the Trainers having quarters on the right. A smattering of lights in the lodge flicked on and off verifying there were people inside, and they were moving about freely. I had a good view of a large room on the main floor where a card game was in progress, people laughing and drinking.

Relief surged through me. I'd been afraid that Hughes, or whoever he was working for, had taken over the facility and was holding the Clients inside. My, how the mind runs amok when you're bordering on the edge of insanity.

We'd been near the airport in Denver when I'd picked up on what I assumed to be Caleb Brown. It was a logical place to keep him. Whether Hughes was in charge of security or not, there was no way everyone at the Agency was in on it,

and he would never be able to keep Brown on site there. Near the airport, he would have his choice of warehouses and storage facilities to keep Brown stashed away in, while he waited to locate me. A private jet, a night departure and he'd be gone with no one the wiser.

But I wasn't sure. It was all conjecture and no matter what Mac told me, I just wasn't ready to risk everything on my 'gut' feeling. It was too soon for me to trust it completely.

Apparently, it was business as usual at the Agency, at least from what we could tell. Mac grunted and gestured toward the outbuilding that Hughes had gone into earlier and I swung my glasses around just in time to see a black Hummer roll to a stop in front of it. The door opened, and Hughes climbed out of the driver's side, tossing the keys to the man who had come out to meet him. He'd been somewhere, and I was willing to bet he'd been with Brown.

"Can you make out the plate?" I asked as the Hummer pulled away, keeping my glasses trained on Hughes.

"No. Wrong angle."

We watched as two men came out of the building and stopped to talk to Hughes. Suddenly, he turned, and seemed to look right at me. I froze, fighting the instinct to run. I knew he couldn't see us at that distance, but something had spooked him. Had he felt us? Did he have some abilities?

The thought had my insides churning even as I tried to clear my mind. I had been able to pick up on intense emotion. What if the same was true of Hughes?

"Don't think," I ordered Mac, barely moving my lips. "Don't give him anything to focus on."

I willed myself not to panic and fought to bring the memory of the river, bright in the moonlight, to mind, letting the peaceful setting roll through me. Taking deep, slow breaths, I met Hughes' eyes through the glasses and watched until he finally shook his head and turned away.

I dropped my glasses and slumped to the ground in relief as my muscles relaxed from their cramped state.

I heard the disgusted grunt from the bushes next to me, and I didn't even bother to respond. I was too busy kicking myself. Why hadn't this occurred to me before? If the bad guys, whoever they might be, were collecting people with abilities, it only made sense that they had recruited some of them into their own ranks. There was no hard and fast rule that said people with special psychic abilities had to use their talents for good instead of evil. How could I be so naive? So stupid to not even think that was a possibility? Thank heavens we knew now, before things had gone any further. The game had just changed, and if the opposition didn't have the upper hand before, they sure did now.

I was so absorbed in kicking myself, I nearly jumped out of my skin when Mac tapped my shoulder and motioned for us to pull back.

“We’re about to have company,” Mac whispered as we stowed the binoculars back in the packs. “Those two guys Hughes was talking to just took off in a jeep.”

“You think they know we’re up here?” I checked my watch. We had agreed to meet Jonas back at a clearing a little further down the mountain, and we were running ahead of time.

“No. I think he got spooked and sent them to check it out. They aren’t in a hurry, but we need to move.” He checked his stride when he saw my hesitation. “Don’t worry. He saw what we saw. He’s on the move too. I promise.”

We kept low as we wound down the backside of the mountain. We were about halfway to the clearing when Jonas slid in through the woods from our left, startling Mac.

“Good way to get shot,” Mac hissed at him. “Where’d you learn to move like that?”

“Obviously, you’ve never hunted razorbacks,” Jonas whispered back, obviously amused. “We need to cut south to head down. Those two will likely come up the same path we did.”

I heard Mac’s grunted response, as he motioned Jonas to take the lead and I cringed at the thought of the descent we had in front of us. I would have never referred to the six-inch wide animal trail we had followed up in the dark of night as a ‘path’. I could barely imagine how difficult going down without even that small benefit would be.

As we scrambled down over rocks and wound our way through the trees, my respect for Jonas ratcheted up a notch or two. It was one thing hunting the enemy through the forests and swamps. Quite another hunting a wild boar with huge tusks that could smell you coming a mile away and rip you to pieces with a toss of its head. I even knew some hunters that were putting flak jackets on their dogs to try to protect them during the hunt. Jonas moved us down the mountain at a rapid pace, as quiet and sure-footed as a mountain goat.

We were almost down to the road when he motioned us to stop. I froze in my tracks, eyes searching the forest ahead for any indication of what Jonas had seen or heard. I got nothing. Obviously, I had never hunted pig.

“Feel anything?” Mac’s voice was barely a whisper on the breeze as he moved in next to me. I didn’t, but I wasn’t sure we should be relying on my so called “feelings”. I was out of my element and personally, I was way more confident in Jonas’ talents. I watched his head slowly turn as he tracked whatever it was he was hearing, waiting for it to move away. Finally, his

shoulders relaxed, and he motioned us forward again.

Ten minutes later we were at the car. Mac had backed the car off the road, into the cover of the trees when we'd arrived, not wanting the local police to come across it. Apparently, it had been hidden well enough because I could see the clear outline of the black jeep under the moonlight, sitting on the shoulder across the road, a mere 50 yards away. Mac threw the packs into the trunk, and I folded into the back seat of the Camaro, shivering both from the cold and near miss of getting caught.

It was going on 11:00 p.m. by the time we got back to the cabin. Mac and Jonas had exchanged looks, but kept quiet on the way back, picking up on my mood.

"What happened?" Trinity asked, eyeing me as I threw my pack into a corner of the room.

"Hughes knew she was there," Jonas answered for me, causing Trinity to gasp, her eyes as wide as I'd ever seen them. "He looked right at her."

"Well, to be totally accurate, we don't know that he knew it was her," Mac corrected him, "but he did suspect something was up and he sent some people to check. You can be sure he'll send them back up in the morning to see if they can find anything during the light of day."

He'd looked at me as he'd added the last part, making sure I got the message. Hughes would find something to indicate there'd been someone there. Whether it was crushed grass or a broken branch, he'd know someone had been lying in the bushes on the mountaintop watching the agency.

"Hold on a minute. How did he know you were there?" Trinity asked as she turned to help Mama D, who had appeared almost magically with a coffee pot in one hand and five mugs in the other. I met Mac's eyes and motioned for him to take it.

"Hughes may have just gotten spooked. Or he could be an empath." At her blank look, he went on. "Someone who can pick up on emotion from other people."

"That was one heck of a pick up then," Jonas cut in. "We were looking at him through binoculars, for Pete's sake, and he felt her? What kind of range does this thing have?"

Good question. I grabbed a mug of coffee and took a seat at the table, eager to hear Mac's answer myself.

"It depends on the ability. If Hughes actually felt something at that distance, he's got a lot of it."

Well, I'd heard better news. My gaze drifted over to the cabin window, and I couldn't help but wonder if Hughes was out there now, driving around, reaching

out with his mind, to try to pick me up again. I quickly tamped down the tingle of fear that thought had ignited, determined not to give him anything to hone in on.

I looked back to see Mac watching me, relief showing in his face when I got it under control. Trinity was watching him too, suspicion written on her face and I knew the jig was up. Better to come clean now before she worked up a head of steam.

“Mac can sense my emotions too,” I told her, snapping her attention back to me. “He’s an empath like Hughes.”

They all turned to look at Mac like he’d grown a second head. He just nodded at them in agreement.

“Well, that explains a lot. He’s better at reading you than I am. How long have you known about this?” she asked, looking me straight in the eye.

“He told me about it in Little Rock,” I admitted. “I’m not sure I really believed it, or maybe I just didn’t want to admit that it was possible, but there’s no denying it now. Hughes may have it. Mac does have it and apparently, I do too. At least to some extent.”

Mama D got up to bring out some sandwiches and put another pot of coffee on while I told them about what had happened on the road the previous night. It was as hard for me to tell as it was for them to hear. We were a team, and I’d kept information from them. By the time I was finished, you could have heard a pin drop.

“So Mac and Hughes can sense Taylor and Taylor senses,” Trinity paused searching for the right words, “someone who she thinks is most likely this Brown fellow. Do you pick anything up on the rest of us?”

The question seemed innocent enough, but I knew it wasn’t. What she really wanted to know is if Mac and I had been spying on them. I’d felt what they were feeling now. Just the idea of having your deepest emotions exposed to someone else was horrifying. Knowing it for a fact was even worse. It had been hard enough to accept the invasion of my privacy, and I trusted Mac. The thought of having Hughes inside my head was a violation of the worst kind.

“No. It’s not like that,” Mac jumped in to explain, throwing me a worried glance. “It’s more like what you sense, Jonas, when you know someone is lying to you, or when you know you’ve got the jury on your side.” He nodded to Trinity. “An empath is just better at it. They can sense the emotion.”

He looked over at me, and I gestured for him to finish it. They might as well know the whole thing.

“At least, that’s the way it usually works. With Taylor and me, it’s different.”

“Why doesn’t that come as a surprise?” Jonas snorted. “How exactly is it

different?”

“I don’t just sense her emotions. I actually feel them. Experience them. Even help her deal with them when they’re too intense.”

“So you felt Brown last night too? You felt what she felt?” Mama D asked, trying to understand.

“No. Last night, I felt her confusion, her anger, when she picked up on Brown. But what she was getting from him? That was her own personal hell. There was nothing I could do to help her except sit there and watch.”

Trinity just sat there looking at me as the impact of what he’d just told her sank in.

“You’re sure it was Brown?” Jonas asked me.

“I’m not sure of anything at this point. It’s just a feeling I had. I can’t explain it any more than I can explain the rest of it.” I pressed my fingers into my forehead, stretching the muscles up in a vain attempt to relieve the pressure I felt gathering behind my eyes.

“So, then. That’s it? No more hidden abilities you haven’t mentioned?” Trinity blew the hair out of her eyes, fatigue written on her face, as I was sure it was on mine.

“Yep,” I assured her, summoning up a smile and pushing up from the table. “That’s it.”

It was well after midnight, and we were all tired. I know I was. I was in the process of carrying the dirty mugs back into the kitchen when I noticed Mac was still sitting at the table, staring at the floor with a resigned look on his face. Trinity noticed I had stopped and followed my frowning gaze to Mac.

“Actually,” he said, when he finally noticed us all staring at him, “there is one more thing.”

I took a deep breath and gestured for him to go on, knowing from the look on his face that it was something I didn’t really want to hear.

“Back in Little Rock, when Mama D and I were in the vault at the Bank?” I nodded, frozen in place, the mugs dangling from my fingers. “I heard you talking to me. Every word. Plain as day.”

I looked at him with unbelieving eyes, knowing my mouth was hanging open and being able to do nothing about it. He’d never said anything about it. I remember saying the words, telling him to stay inside the vault. He had done exactly what I wanted, but I thought he was just picking up on my emotions, or it had been just plain dumb luck. Now he was telling me it was neither of those things.

He closed his eyes, unable to meet mine. “I didn’t say anything sooner because I knew you had about all you could handle on your plate already. I know

you don't agree with that now," he put out a hand to stop me when I started to refute his statement, "but I can feel you. I know when you're close to breaking."

I turned around and went into the kitchen, slapping the mugs into the sink. I clenched my now empty hands, which were starting to shake, my mind reeling with what he'd just told me. Was what he was saying even possible? I could feel my breath coming in gasps, my blood pounding in my ears and I was helpless to stop it.

"Taylor, sit down." I felt a chair being shoved under me as Trinity ordered me into it. I could hear Mama D telling me to take deep breaths, pressing a damp towel on my forehead.

"Mac, get over here!" Jonas ordered, but Mac was already there, his hands gripping my shoulders, the panic that had threatened to overwhelm me, dying back down to a manageable level.

"Taylor? Are you okay?" Trinity was kneeling down next me.

"No," I answered in disgust, raking in air, feeling better by the second. "But I will be."

Leaning back, I whipped the towel from my head and glared at Mac, who had obviously picked up on my displeasure as he was currently backing away. Before I had the chance to speak, though, Trinity was all over him.

"You *know* when she's at her breaking point?" She drew back and socked him hard in the arm, driving him back further. "What were you thinking, dropping it on her like this?"

Mac straightened and looked at me, remorse written across his face. "I'm sorry. I thought you suspected, but I wasn't sure. I had to tell you, and it had to be now. Taylor, listen to me. I can't read your mind, I don't know what you're thinking, but I *can* hear you talk to me if you focus hard enough on it." He was looking at me with such intensity that I put a cork on my anger and focused on what he was trying to tell me.

He was warning me again, but about what? I was way too tired to play this game. My mind searched for some sense in what he was saying and finally landed on the truth. Hughes could sense my emotions. Maybe not feel them like Mac, but he felt something. If Mac could hear me talking to him when I focused on him, it was just possible that Hughes could too. Now that was a sobering thought. He could be out there right now, driving around, listening for me.

Mama D and Trinity had packed up pretty much everything before we'd gotten back from our trip up the mountain. Now we threw the last of it into a box, grabbed the packs and loaded up. The plan had been to leave first thing in the morning, but considering the revelations of the evening, we all would sleep better, if we ever actually got to bed, with some distance between Hughes and

us. At the very least, I knew I would.

We'd pulled out of the motel onto an empty road, but by the second intersection, we'd met up with traffic. Within minutes, we slid into the flow, just one more vehicle in a line of cars heading down the canyon to the cities below. I watched the RV as it disappeared around a curve, several car lengths ahead and sank into the bucket seat, feeling safer and less exposed with each passing mile. Tomorrow we would re-group and figure out what to do next. It was with the knowledge that for now, we'd done all we could, that I closed my eyes and let the escape of sleep take me.

I WOKE WITH a start, unsure of where I was, the sunlight casting a ruby glow through the room. The memory of last night flooded back, and I flopped back into the pillows as I was reminded of the problems we now faced. How had I been so naive? How had I been so foolish as to think I was ready to go up against them? Glancing at the clock, I rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. The fact that it was nearly noon and no one had come to wake me told me volumes. I half expected to walk out of the room to find the others had chosen the wiser road and hightailed it out of town. I spent more time in the shower than was necessary, letting the hot water pound the aches from a body that was too out of shape to spend the night running up and down a mountain, much less lying in a bunch of bushes for an hour in the cold.

I discovered evidence of our fast descent down the mountain in my hair, in the shape of bits of leaves and twigs, and found myself laughing at the thought of what it must have looked like. Thank goodness I hadn't looked in the mirror, but the others had gotten a front seat view. I had, I was certain, looked like exactly what I was. A deranged lunatic, trying desperately to hang on to some shred of sanity.

My laughter dissolved quickly, though, as I stood in the stream of cascading water, and faced the facts. It looked like Hughes could sense me, and if he was able to pick up on my emotions too, it cut the odds greatly of being able to turn the tables on him. One wrong move or worse, one unguarded emotion and he'd be on the alert. I had nearly made the mistake of going into a gun battle, assuming I was the only one with a gun. It shouldn't have surprised me to discover that not only was the other side armed. They were better shots.

I cut the water and ran my hands over my head, squeezing the water from what was left of my hair, disgusted with myself. I needed to keep my distance from Hughes, that much was certain. I wasn't sure what all he could do, but if he had actually sensed me last night, he might have picked up on my emotion too. Anger, plain and simple. The minute he'd hopped out of the Hummer, I'd felt it flare up. Whether he knew it was me or had just picked up on the emotion flowing around him, he knew something was up and if he had half a brain, he'd be on the alert. I could practically guarantee he wasn't going to leave the safety of the facility now. More likely he'd stay put and wait to see what happened next.

A knock on the bathroom door snapped me out of my reverie, and I jerked a towel off the rack just as the door opened.

“You coming out of there anytime soon, or are you planning on drowning yourself?”

Trinity’s head appeared around the curtain, and she squinted at me through one eye.

“At least your hair looks better. Hurry up - food’s here.” She snapped the curtain back, and the door slammed shut before I’d even said a word. Apparently, they hadn’t decided to take off after all. I dried off and pulled back the curtain to find the bathroom swirling with steam, the mirror completely obscured. I wiped off a small circle of moisture only to watch it steam back up within seconds and knew I was facing a losing battle.

Frustrated, I grabbed up the hair dryer and proceeded to dry my hair without the benefit of being able to see what I was doing. Abandoning the brush, I felt my way with my fingers, trying to remember what went where in my new cut. I was halfway through when it hit me. There was another way to try to find Brown. One that didn’t involve Hughes. It probably wouldn’t work, but at least, we had something else to try. My mood considerably lighter, I gave up on the dryer, deciding to let it air dry. However it ended up looking, it had to be better than what it looked like last night. I pulled on the clean jeans and sweater I’d brought in with me, finding them somewhat damp from the steam. I ran my hands through my hair one more time, feeling more confident by the minute, and pulled open the door, finally ready to face the world.

I came out of the bathroom to find everyone stuffed into my room, two steaming pizzas on the table, such as it was. They’d been talking amongst themselves until I came out and then everyone clammed up. Suddenly famished, I wound past them and picked up a couple of slices of pizza, throwing them on a plate and made myself comfortable on the bed, suspecting they’d been talking about me and deciding to just ignore them.

“So what’s the plan?” Trinity demanded to know, just as I took my first bite of pizza. She waited impatiently as I grabbed the cheese that was stringing back to my plate and pulled it loose, popping it in my mouth.

“What makes you think I have a plan?” I asked, back on my way for a second bite.

“Well, that would be Mac, the human barometer,” Jonas said, slapping Mac on the back hard enough to stagger him. “You may keep your emotions bottled up inside, but they slide right across his face like film on a screen. It’s pretty easy, now that we know what to look for.”

I kept chewing, cocking a brow in Mac’s direction. Mr. Calm, Cool, and

Collected had no problem keeping his own emotions in check, but apparently, mine were an entirely different matter. Thinking of my reaction to being invaded with Brown's emotions the other night, I couldn't blame him, but it was good to know. Something we'd definitely need to work on in the future.

"That's right, *Samantha*." I leaned over to look around Jonas, who was efficiently blocking Mama D from view. They'd set her up at the desk, and she was happily munching away. "We knew when you woke up from the way Mac kept shaking his head."

"I have kind of a constant background buzz in my head when you're awake," Mac explained, twirling his finger around in a circle above his ear. "Takes a few minutes for me to get used to it."

I finished off the rest of my slice and started picking apart the second piece while I let that one rattle around in my head. If what he was saying was true, he was pretty much always aware of me. Bummer for him.

"Is there a limit as to how far away you can pick me up?" I asked, pulling off a chunk of sausage and popping it in my mouth.

"I don't know. It didn't use to work this way before you became active. Now that you are, we've been in pretty close proximity for the most part." He flipped open a box and grabbed a handful of slices.

"You feel it with anyone else? Any of these guys?" I bobbed my head in the general direction of the room while playing with a mushroom that was hanging half off the crust.

"No. Just with you."

"Hughes or Brown, maybe?"

"Noo..." He drew it out, pausing in his eating to look at me.

"Hmm. Interesting." I decided to quit playing with the pizza and picked it up to finish it off.

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Quit it, you two. Taylor, do you have a new plan or not?"

The others had been watching the back and forth between Mac and me, bouncing their attention between us like they were watching a tennis match. Trinity had reached the end of her limited amount of patience, which was practically non-existent in the first place.

"No. The plan is still the same. The goal is to find Brown." I dropped my plate onto the side table and dusted off my hands. "We just have to go about it differently now. Try and avoid Hughes, if at all possible."

"And just how do you propose to do that? Hughes is the only one who knows where Brown is."

"Wrong. There is one other person who might be able to tell us," Jonas said.

He got up to throw his plate in the garbage and threw me a knowing smile over his shoulder. He was catching on fast.

* * *

IT TOOK SOME doing, but we managed to convince Trinity to stay behind with Mama D at the hotel. In the end, Jonas had had to promise to phone in on a regular basis and that we wouldn't do anything without her.

Now, with me ensconced in the back seat of the Camaro and Jonas outfitted with detailed maps of the area, we were headed back to the section of the highway where I had picked up on what I assumed to be Brown, hoping I could do it again. I was doing my best to try to relax, but I'd be lying if I said it was easy. I wanted to find Brown, but I didn't want to go through what I'd felt the other night a second time. On the other hand, if this didn't work, we'd have to resort to our last option, and there was a really good reason it was our last option. Turning myself over to Hughes and hoping he'd take me to Brown had so many risks involved, I tried not to think about it.

I flopped over onto the back seat, such as it was, and closed my eyes, not wanting our surroundings to influence me. Mac had told me to try to keep my mind clear and see if I felt anything.

As I laid there listening to the sound of the road passing under the tires, I did feel something. Stupid. A lot like when I was sitting at my dining room table trying to move Grandma's spoons. What a debacle that had been. Almost as bad as when Trinity had shown up with her test kit that night. When she'd opened that bag and pulled out tha...

"Stop!" I yelled, jerking up. Pain radiated through my head, blinding me, and I felt my stomach begin to pitch and roll. "Let me out! Let me out!"

Mac slid to a stop, and Jonas barely got the door open before I was past him, running to the shoulder, violently ill. Mac was there in an instant, supporting me and dragging me back to the car when I regained some control.

He was talking, but I couldn't hear him, the noise and pain in my head drowning out everything else. I grabbed my head and slid down the side of the car into the dirt, trying desperately to escape the pain.

"Taylor!" Mac grabbed my face, forcing me to look at him. "Talk to him. Talk to him! Tell him to stop it. Tell him to back off!"

I understood finally what he wanted me to do, but I couldn't do it. Thoughts wouldn't form. My head was about to explode, my vision growing dark at the edges, when suddenly it stopped.

I collapsed against Mac, who was there, holding me tight. Jonas next to us, blocking us from the view of passing traffic.

"We need to get her back in the car," he said to Mac, keeping an eye on the passing traffic. "Taylor, can you stand up?"

I didn't even bother to answer, concentrating instead on trying to gain my feet. Mac helped lift me up enough for me to collapse partway into the back of the car. Then he ran around to the driver's side, flipping the seat up, to reach in and pull me the rest of the way over, as Jonas folded my legs in and then flung himself into the front seat, slamming the door.

"Oh man," he rasped out when Mac got back in behind the wheel. "I thought she was going to die. Was that him? Was that Brown?"

Mac shrugged, visibly shaken and leaned over to look back at me. "You okay?"

"No," I said, relieved to find I could still form words. I laid there, crammed into the small back seat, trying to gather my wits and get my shakes under control. Jonas passed me a bottle of water. It was still cool, and I held it to my face, hoping to get the nausea under control. After a few minutes, the dizziness and nausea passed, leaving me feeling weak and exhausted, but steady enough to sit up.

Jonas rolled down the window, and cool fresh air filled the interior, helping considerably to clear my head.

"Was this what it was like the other night?" Jonas asked, looking at Mac.

"Different." Mac met my eyes in the rear view mirror as he answered. "This was pain. The other night was terror. Fear. But it was as strong."

"He's dialed it back. Low buzz like a fly?" I asked Mac, who quietly nodded confirmation. "Okay then. Let's take the next exit. And let's go slow. I don't want a repeat of that."

Mac did take the next exit and immediately pulled into a McDonald's. He got in line while I washed up. I beat him back to the car and Jonas got out to help me back in. I was still a little shaky, but feeling better by the minute and able to think again.

Before long, I was settled in the back, armed with a huge Diet Coke and a large bag of fries. Mac had gotten some for himself and Jonas as well, and we sat there in the car, silently munching away. I reminded myself that the incident had been nearly as traumatic for them, as it had been for me. We all needed to recoup a little.

“You still getting him?” Mac asked finally, picking up that I was feeling well enough to be getting antsy.

I nodded at him, making a funny face while I was at it. The sound of Brown in my head was weird, to say the least, like having a fly trapped in your brain. I seriously didn’t know how Mac stood it all the time.

He pulled out and drove around to an isolated spot, where he parked the car and turned off the key.

“Try talking to him like you did to me in the bank. If he can’t talk back, maybe he can signal you somehow, but tell him to take it easy, not like last time.”

“Yes, by all means, tell him to keep it under control. I can’t take that again. Nearly gave me a heart attack,” Jonas added, winking at me.

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to add that.” I felt like three kinds of an idiot, sitting there in the car, trying to communicate with Brown. Mac and Jonas were turned around watching me like a pair of hawks, and I closed my eyes, shutting them out.

Can you hear me?

I put it out there and waited, getting nothing but the constant buzz sounding in my head. Frustrated, I opened my eyes, only to find Mac giving me a look.

“Taylor, we’re desperate here. You’re not even trying,” he snapped at me.

Jonas looked at him for a second and then turned on me too.

“He’s right. You’re just playing at this. This is the only chance we’ve got. If you don’t care enough to do this for yourself or us, think about Trinity. You supposedly care about her, so start acting like it.”

I stared at them in absolute disbelief. Did they think this was easy? I’d just been through hell, and now here they were questioning me? Anger rose up lightening fast, radiating through the car.

“Do it now,” Mac ordered.

Can you hear me? I snapped out the words in my mind, thinking of Brown, but glaring at Mac as I did it.

The surge inside my head was immediate, and I looked at Mac in shock as it died back to its former level.

“You were right, Mac,” Jonas said, realizing instantly what had happened. “It’s linked to emotion for her.”

I watched as Mac nodded agreement, watching me in the rearview mirror. He’d told me this thing was linked to emotion, but I’d thought he meant when it went haywire, and I threw things around. My mind instantly skipped back over the past, searching for the common thread. I’d been frantic about the keys, wet and cold when I dropped them. Absolutely desperate for that coffee, I

remembered, bringing a smile to my lips. Scared to death when the gun was pointed at Jonas. Terrified when we were attacked. No wonder the experiments hadn't worked.

I couldn't just talk to Brown in my mind. I had to put some force, some intensity, behind it and push it out there. Excitement rose inside me, as things began to click inside my head. This was how it worked. If I could get a handle on it, if I could talk to Brown, we could find him and get him away from Hughes. The thought of Hughes instantly sobered me, fear replacing the growing excitement. What if Brown wasn't the only one who heard me?

I fixed my mind on mind on Mac - *Can you hear me?*

"Say it again," he ordered from the front seat, and I all but screamed it in my head.

"Yes. I can," he assured me, feeling the fear running through me. Jonas looked at him in confusion, not understanding what was happening. "I think maybe you can direct it."

He had heard me and I'd gotten no response from Brown. In fact, the buzzing had quieted some, more like background noise now.

"Is she talking to you? What do you mean you think she can direct it? Oh, that's just great." Jonas moaned, finally catching on. "You think Hughes can hear her?"

"Only if she talks to him," Mac answered. "And maybe not even then."

"Well, don't risk it! Don't talk to him," Jonas ordered. "In fact, ask Brown if Hughes is there now."

Yeah, good idea. But I needed to clear up a couple of other things first.

Caleb? Getting nothing in response, I closed my eyes, remembering his photo and what he looked like. Focus on him, I told myself. Reach out and find him.

Caleb! I heard a quick spike in the buzz and knew I had reached him. *Caleb Brown?* Another fast surge, like the blip on a radar screen.

"It's him. It's Brown," I told them. "I can't hear him talk to me, but there's a surge from him, sort of like a ping when I ask him questions. Mac, did you pick up on any of that?" He shook his head and encouraged I went back to work.

One ping, yes. Two means no. Got it? Ping. I smiled. Finally, we were getting somewhere.

Hughes bad? I got a single ping. *Hughes there?* Three pings. What was that supposed to mean? Would have been nice if he could talk to me. I just had to assume at this point what he was trying to tell me.

"Okay, he says Hughes is our guy, but I don't think he knows if Hughes is there or not," I said, catching the guys up.

“Does he know where they’re holding him?” asked Jonas.

I checked. Brown had no idea where he was at.

“Great. How are we supposed to find him?” Jonas asked, not expecting an answer. “Maybe we should drive around, scope things out. Obviously, he’s in the area since this is where Taylor picked him up before.”

It seemed as good a plan as any. Mac pulled out from the parking lot and headed down the road in the direction of the airport while Jonas called Trinity to let her know everything was okay.

It was thirty minutes later that the buzzing stopped. I had lost Brown. I had Mac turn around and within minutes, I had him back. At the next intersection, Mac took a right and within minutes, I lost Brown again. Having Mac go back the other way, I picked him up again a few minutes after we passed the intersection where we had turned right. Incredible as it seemed, a pattern was emerging.

Hot or Cold? I asked. All I got in reply was a single ping.

Twenty minutes later, we had it narrowed down to three buildings. Warehouses filled with cargo and services companies, close to the main terminals. As Mac drove slowly up and down the rows between them, Jonas pulled his gun out and laid it softly in his lap, ready for action in case we blundered into something. Five minutes more and we were there.

“That’s it,” I told them. “He’s in there.” I pointed to an end unit on the third building of the complex. “That has to be it, but it looks deserted.”

“They probably have the cars inside, behind the bay door,” Jonas said. “It’s a good set-up. They can come and go and not be seen out in the open.”

“You’re sure this is it?” Mac asked as we circled around the back of the building.

I nodded. Brown had been so enthusiastic in his pinging, I’d had to tell him to back off several times, but he’d reached a new pitch each time we’d come close to the unit. The effort of communicating with him was taking its toll on me. My head was pounding, and I was physically exhausted.

“Tell him to sit tight. We’ll be back for him.” Jonas looked over at Mac. “She’s wiped, and we need time to plan how to get him and what to do after we have him.”

I could almost feel Brown’s disappointment when I told him we were leaving, but I was too tired to care. He was safe, and we knew where he was. It would have to do for now. Unable to keep my eyes open any longer, I laid my head against the seat back and let sleep take me.

* * *

I WOKE UP with blurry vision and a knifing pain behind my eyes. I stayed still until things came somewhat back into focus, hoping the pain would recede as well, but that wasn't to be the case. Groggy, I sat up and swung my feet over the side of the bed.

"Welcome back." Squinting, I saw Trinity sitting in the corner of the room, nearly hidden in the shadows.

"What time is it?" I asked, rubbing my eyes, willing the pain away without success.

"Ten in the morning," she replied, switching on a lamp, which actually caused me to tear up. "You've been out nearly 18 hours. Mac and Jonas had to carry you in."

Blinking, I let my brain try to process the fact that I'd lost nearly a day, but it wasn't up to the task. I felt like I'd been drugged, and I was having a heck of a time not rolling back into bed and pulling the covers up over my head.

"Take these." She thrust a glass of water into my free hand and shook a bottle of aspirin at me. I eyed the bottle with its child proof cap in disbelief. I'd never be able to get that off. I held out my other hand instead, palm up, waiting.

"Baby," Trinity said, sounding amazingly put upon, as she twisted off the lid and threw the pills into my outstretched hand. I closed one eye and watched her through the other one as she wrenched the lid back on the bottle. Someone was in a bad mood.

"Are you getting up or are you just going to sit there?" Lucky for her I couldn't stand up yet, or I would have punched her a good one. I felt like I'd been run over by a truck and Trinity was standing here giving me grief.

"Where is everyone?" I asked instead, choosing to ignore her.

"Mac and Jonas are out. Working," she snapped it out, obviously displeased. "Grams is getting some rest. We've all been taking turns watching you." She flopped back down into her chair. "I thought you were dead when they dragged you back in here and then you wouldn't wake up. Mac wouldn't let us take you to the hospital, so we all just sat here, watching you, waiting to see what happened next."

She was scared, I realized, as she reached over and picked up the phone. Bad enough to want to risk a hospital and Mac had overridden her. I was sure that hadn't gone over well.

“She’s awake,” she said into the phone. She listened in silence for a beat and slammed it back into the receiver. “They’re on their way back. Mac said to get some food into you.”

My stomach recoiled at the thought, but it had been a long time since my last meal, which if I recalled had been french fries. I needed to eat. And I needed to move.

I nodded agreement, and getting to my feet, shuffled to the bathroom and closed the door.

Hot showers and painkillers were wonderful things. Thirty minutes later, the pain behind my eyes was down to a dull ache and my brain, while still not 100%, was at least functioning.

I opened the door to find Mac and Jonas had joined Trinity in the room. Room service had arrived, and a covered tray sat on the table. Now that my head felt better, my stomach was thrilled to see food had arrived. I gave a nod to the guys and headed straight to the tray, happy to discover a steak with all the trimmings hidden under the cover.

“Fill me in,” I ordered as I pulled up a chair and picked up the steak knife. Trinity had ordered mushrooms to go with it, and I gave her a grateful smile as I dug in. She must have decided I was going to live, because she managed a smile back, which completely disappeared from her face when she turned back to Jonas. Oops. Mac must not have been the only one to side against her.

“We’ve gotten a lot done while you were napping,” Mac started up. “We rented another car, and a van, which we’ve been using for surveillance on Brown. As far as we can tell, he’s still in there.”

“He had a visitor last night, though,” Jonas chimed in. “Hughes showed up for a while, which verifies that you had the right location.”

I nodded as I forked up a particularly nice bit of steak. I had been pretty certain, but it was good to know for sure. Nothing like breaking in to rescue someone and finding the place empty.

“Trinity and I went house hunting this morning. Found a really nice cabin, up in the mountains, fully furnished. Nicely isolated, two ways into the property and a place to park the RV. We took it for a month.”

“Realtor?” I asked, pausing in my assault on the baked potato.

“Nope. Private classifieds,” he answered me, smiling at my nod of approval.

I’d found a lot of people through real estate companies. Not that they talked, but all you had to do was pull the comps of rentals and sales for the time period you were interested in. Then it was just a process of elimination until you had your answer. Private rentals were another matter altogether. Once the ad was pulled from the paper, it was tough to find someone who didn’t want to be

found.

Once we had Brown, we needed someplace to take him. We couldn't very well bring him to the hotel, and I didn't want to leave the immediate area until we figured out our next move.

"I've made a list of things we need to get in order to hole up there for a while," Trinity put in. "The utilities, internet, and phone are in the owner's name, so we're good there."

"Good work, guys," I said, pushing my plate away, amazed at the amount of food I'd devoured. Mac had been right. I'd needed it.

"What about you?" Jonas asked. "You okay now?"

I nodded. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but I was feeling better by the minute and was anxious to get underway.

"If everyone's ready, why don't we get started on the move. Trinity, Mama D and I can take the van to get supplies and Mac, you and Jonas can move the RV and take one of the other cars. We'll come back for the extra one later."

As it turned out, everyone was more than ready. Trinity went to wake up Mama D and gather the rest of their things while I packed up my own stuff. Mac and Jonas sat quietly, watching me throw my things into the suitcase I had opened on the bed. As packing was pretty much a mindless occupation, I went back over the information I'd gotten since I'd woken up. There was one point that kept sticking in my head that I thought needed clearing up.

"Mac," I asked, as I closed the suitcase and zipped it shut. "What was it you said that made Trinity so mad when she called you to tell you I was awake?"

Jonas and Mac looked at each other, confirming my feeling that he had, in fact, said something that had caused the phone slam.

"He told her we already knew and were on our way back," Jonas answered for him. "He felt you wake up."

"How far away were you?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"We were at the airport terminals," Mac said quietly. "Renting the other car."

The airport? I closed my eyes as the implication hit me. The terminals were a good ten miles away and further away than the warehouse where they were holding Brown. We'd had to drive yesterday to get close enough for me to pick up Brown's signal. Today, Mac had picked me up at twice that distance. Either Mac's ability was getting stronger, or mine was. I had a terrible feeling it was mine.

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“WE DON’T KNOW how many people are guarding him or what kind of condition he’s in,” Jonas pointed out for at least the third time. “Not to mention that we have no idea what we’re going to find once we get inside.”

I closed my eyes in frustration. We’d been debating various methods to extricate Brown from his captors for the better part of the evening and still didn’t have a viable plan. There were too many variables and not enough intel, but it was all we had, and we needed to make a move.

It had been late in the afternoon by the time we pulled up to the cabin. Jonas and Trinity had done a great job finding the place. Set back into the trees, you’d never find it if you didn’t already know it was there. We’d unloaded the cars and then Mac and I left Trinity and Mama D to put the house in order while Jonas showed us the lay of the land before darkness fell. The entrance we had taken to the house turned off a main road, but the second access to the house met up with a dirt road that eventually came out onto a paved main road and joined up with the highway. If push came to shove, we had a nice little escape route. Listening now as Mac and Jonas argued the pros and cons of various plans, I just hoped we wouldn’t have to use it.

“Wait. Just wait a minute.” I waved my arms, cutting into the argument going on between them. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Let’s take a break.” I picked up my cup and headed into the kitchen, topping off my coffee on the way out the back door. It was cold outside, but I needed the fresh air to clear my head.

What should have been an easy snatch and grab had become a huge undertaking when we added in the psychic factor. If Hughes had abilities, it stood to reason that whoever was in with Brown would too. If they were from the same group that had attacked the condo, I knew they’d be heavily armed and professionally trained. The warehouse unit Brown was in wasn’t large, but we had no idea where he would be once we were inside and it would take precious time to locate him. Time we simply wouldn’t have.

The door opened suddenly behind me, Mama D nearly knocking me off the small landing where I’d been standing.

“Here. Let me take that,” I said, setting my cup on the railing and relieving her of the trash bag she was toting.

“Make sure you get that can closed up good, now. Jonas said there were bears up here,” she cautioned as she headed back inside, the door closing behind

her.

I looked out and scanned what passed for a yard. It was barely illuminated from the lone bulb mounted on the side of the house. The front of the cabin was pretty as a picture, nestled in the side of the mountain, surrounded by towering pines. The back was where they'd put all the unsightly stuff that went with living in the middle of nowhere. The big metal trash enclosure was set away from the house near an enormous pile of firewood. I went down the steps, keeping an eye peeled for wildlife and made my way over to the bin. It took me a few minutes to figure out how to open the bear-proof container and by the time I had finally managed it, I was certain that any bear smart enough to need that much deterrent, would be smart enough to just sit by the door and wait for someone to come out with the garbage and nail them on the way to the bin instead.

It was as I was closing the door of the bin, that I caught sight of the hulking mass out of the corner of my eye. I jumped back, ready to run. My heart leaping into my throat in that split second before I realized the black mass I was looking at was a storage tank.

I shook my head, chuckling to myself in relief as I started back to the house.

"You okay?" Mac's voice startled me, and I looked up to find him coming through the door, heading in my direction. He'd obviously felt my moment of panic and was checking up on me.

"See that?" I asked, pointing to the tank in question.

"Yeah. It's a gas tank or propane maybe," he answered quickly, as he scanned the yard for trouble. "Why?"

"Thought it was a bear," I explained, heading back to the house, ignoring his laughter as he followed behind me.

I was reaching for the door, when I saw them, and stopped short, causing Mac to run into me.

"What?" he asked, looking around to see what had my attention now.

There, rising from the ground, the pipes ran up the exterior wall and into the house. Bright yellow. My gaze flew back to the tank. They were gas pipes. Marked with yellow paint.

I'd seen those pipes earlier at the warehouses. I remembered my panic of a few minutes ago and knew I'd found the answer. We had our way to get to Brown. Now if we could just manage not to blow ourselves up in the process, we'd be in good shape.

* * *

THE WAREHOUSE COMPLEX was amazingly busy when I pulled the van in at 4 a.m. It had been fairly quiet an hour earlier when I had dropped Jonas and Mac off across the street from the entrance, but now it was bustling with activity.

My hands tightened on the wheel as I followed a food services truck down the drive between the warehouses, slowly passing the Camaro where Trinity sat parked, waiting for the signal. We'd left Mama D at the cabin with specific instructions to call the police if she didn't hear from us before 6:00 a.m. She wasn't happy about being left behind, but it couldn't be helped. We needed someone to send in the cavalry if things went wrong. So far, everything had gone according to plan. With any luck, we'd have Brown and be gone within the hour.

The van in front of me slowed, and I used it as cover to back into the service bay entrance opposite the unit that held Brown, quickly cutting my lights. Within seconds, the side door slid open, and Mac hopped inside.

"We're all set," he whispered, as he climbed into the front seat. "We've got one canister hooked to the vent system. The other is hidden in the bushes by the back door. Jonas is in place, waiting for the signal. You're on."

I froze, knowing the next step was up to me. If I failed, it was over. We'd have to re-group and come up with some other way to get to Brown, and I wasn't sure there was one. Not and avoid Hughes in the process. There was a lot hanging on the next few minutes.

"Taylor, it's a good plan. We've been over and over it." Mac grabbed my arm, trying to reassure me. "It'll work. You can do this."

I nodded, going over the plan in my head one last time. The propane tanks had been Jonas' idea. We didn't need to break any of the gas lines. We just needed it to smell like a line was down, and the odor in the propane was good enough to handle the job with the added benefit of being more controllable. We'd stopped by a 24 hour Wal-Mart, picked up two big canisters and we were in business. Now it was time to contact Brown and set everything in motion.

Taking a deep breath, I centered my mind on him. From the lack of buzzing in my head, I knew he had to be asleep, and I needed to wake him up. We needed to know for sure he was there before we went any further, but most of all, I needed him to play his part.

Caleb. I reached out with my mind and heard nothing but silence. *Caleb!* I tried again, focusing my fear into it. *Wake up!*

It sounded something like a boat engine off in the distance, sputtering to a start. I waited, holding my breath, as it died completely and I pushed again, even

harder. *Caleb!* This time, he heard me and I listened, amazed, as the engine sputtered once more and then settled into a steady low purr.

“Got him.” Relief flooded through me, as I filled Brown in on the plan. From his responses, he seemed to understand what was about to happen. I looked over at Mac and gave him a nod. We were good to go.

Mac signaled Trinity to call in the gas leak and then slipped from the van to join Jonas and open the canisters. I rolled down my window in order to hear the sirens, my cue to signal Brown to sound the alarm inside, while Trinity would alert the other companies in the warehouse area, hopefully resulting in the confusion and panic we needed as cover.

Within what seemed like seconds, I could make out the sound of sirens in the distance and watched as people began running from the units behind me.

Now! I shouted to Brown, praying that he heard me as I started up the van. Within seconds, the back door flew open, and a man appeared, waving his hand in front of his face, trying to disperse the heavy scent of rotten eggs that was spewing from the hidden canister by the door as he witnessed the mass exodus from the buildings around him.

The sirens were growing louder, and the man, hearing them, rapidly disappeared back into the unit, slamming the door behind him. Suddenly, the huge delivery door began to roll up, and I caught sight of Jonas and Mac as they rolled under it, dark shadows disappearing into the blackness beyond. I threw the van into gear and quickly moved to block the escape route from the garage as the door fully opened revealing the black yawning cave inside.

Time seemed to stand still as I gripped the steering wheel, straining to see in the darkness. They had gone in alone, and I was useless to help them. Seconds ticked by and I waited blindly, Brown buzzing away in my head. Finally, I saw them, dragging Brown along through the dark.

“We’re in!” shouted Jonas from the back, as he slammed the door and I hit the gas, making a fast u-turn and rocketing down the length of the warehouse. I rounded the corner of the building nearest the exit only to squeal to a stop at the line of cars waiting to make their way out from the complex. I joined them, crawling forward as more trucks and cars lined up behind us, all the while watching the rear view mirror for any sign of pursuit.

Trinity was up ahead, waiting. As soon as she saw us, she moved the Camaro forward and then hit the brakes, effectively cutting off the flow of traffic. We cut in through the opening and shot out onto the street as emergency vehicles rushed past us into the complex. Within minutes, I was turning onto the highway and merging with rush hour traffic.

“Do you see her?” I asked Jonas, who was searching the cars behind us

frantically.

“No,” came the terse answer. I shot Mac a worried look and started to slow down for the next exit. I wasn’t leaving her behind. We were going back.

“Wait, wait! There she is.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror in time to see Trinity slide in behind me and finally let out the breath I’d been holding. We’d done it. We had Brown, and we had gotten away with it. It had almost been too easy.

As soon as the thought crossed my mind, I hit the brakes and swerved to make the exit. It was too fast a move for Trinity to follow and she blew past, carried along in the wave of cars around her.

“Call and tell her to go on,” I ordered Jonas. “Remind her to call Mama D.”

I swung into a grocery store parking lot as Jonas made the call. Driving behind the store, I found what I was looking for and sped past the delivery doors, sliding to a stop next to the dumpsters.

“Dr. Brown,” I said, not bothering to turn around and look at him. “I’m going to need you to strip. Quickly, please.”

The urgency in my voice must have cut through the shock of my words. Mac and Jonas had the doors open and Brown out of the van within seconds. I impatiently beat a pattern out on the wheel while I kept my eyes glued to the side of the building, prepared to see headlights bearing down on us. Even knowing they were coming, seeing the flash of light cut through the night had me sucking in my breath. I knew they’d be on us in seconds.

“Hurry!” I shouted as they threw Brown into the back. Mac jumped in the front, slamming the door as I drove the pedal to the floor. The van leapt forward, and we barreled around the building as the headlights behind us raced to catch up.

“They’re on us,” Jonas announced as I careened into traffic, ignoring the stop sign, and swung over to a highway entrance ramp, praying I could lose them in traffic. “There’s a second car. They’re right on our tail.”

I sped up the entrance ramp and merged in with traffic, which was heavier, but still moving. We had either turned around or were on a different Highway altogether, but it appeared we were heading back into Denver.

“Where are we? Where do I go? Bryan!” I yelled, barely remembering to use his alias in the panic of the moment. I glanced in the rear view and saw nothing but headlights behind me. “Do you still see them?”

“They’re still behind us,” Jonas answered, focused on the cars behind us. I looked over at Mac in frustration.

“Why am I driving?” I ground out at him as traffic around me began to slow. I would have much preferred him or Jonas to be behind the wheel.

“Taylor.” My head snapped around at the sound of Brown’s voice, and I found myself looking into a pair of calm gray eyes. “You can handle this. You can stop them. You just need to relax and do what I tell you.”

I jerked my head back around, ignoring him, to watch the traffic around me.

“Bryan, find him something to put on. I refuse to be run to ground with a naked man in the car.”

I heard Jonas rummaging around behind the back seat and glanced back in time to see him toss some clothes in Brown’s direction. I was cutting through traffic, moving forward as much as possible. Looking down at the dash clock, I saw it wasn’t even five yet. This was only going to get worse with time. I needed to get off the highway.

“Taylor,” Mac said, grabbing my shoulder. “You need to listen to him. He said you can stop this.”

I felt an instant drop in my anxiety levels and realized Mac was bleeding off the worst of my panic. Traffic around us was slowly but surely grinding to a halt. The lanes going in the opposite direction were flowing smoothly with a lot less traffic. I looked forward again only to be greeted with the sight of brake lights flowing in a ribbon of red straight toward us. Apparently, there’d been an accident up ahead. In my panic to escape, I had chosen the worst possible route. Great. Just fantastic. Where was all that psychic stuff when you really needed it?

“Fine.” I was resigned. We hadn’t come to a complete stop, but we might as well have. Considering the options, I didn’t have much choice but to listen to Brown. “What do you want me to do?”

“Change seats with Sean. You’re going to need to concentrate.”

I was blank for a second before I realized he was talking about Mac. Apparently, he was Sean when Brown met him at the Agency. He’d forgotten to mention that little fact.

“Okay, *Sean*,” I said, cocking an eyebrow at him. “Slide it over here.”

He had the decency to look somewhat chagrined as we managed to change seats without too much difficulty in the slow moving traffic.

“Where are they, Bryan?” I asked, buckling into my seat, ignoring Brown for the moment. “Can you see them?”

“Yeah. Black sedan, far right lane about five cars back. Three guys inside from what I can see. The other one is a little further back coming up in the fast lane though. It’s a light color, can’t tell too much in the dark, but there’s couple of guys in there.”

I felt the skin crawl up the back of my neck. They’d been ready for us. I didn’t know how, but they’d been ready. We’d hit them at 4 in the morning, and they had two cars and at least five men, dressed, gassed up and ready to go.

They'd been expecting us, and there was only one way they could have known.

He's one of them! I concentrated on Mac and sent the words of warning over to him. From the way his jaw clenched, I knew he had heard me. So two of us knew now. Problem was, what to do about it. Brown seemed willing to help us for the time being. That was our next step. Get rid of the tail. Then we'd see about Brown.

"So tell me," I asked him. "How exactly do I stop them?"

Brown was quiet for a beat or two watching me before he answered and I wondered if he had heard my mental warning to Mac.

"Get a visual on the car. You won't need it in the future, but it will be easier for you if you can see your target the first few times."

See the target? What was I going to do? Blow it up? I rolled down the window and reached out to adjust the side mirror until I had the car Jonas described in view. They wouldn't stay there for long, the way traffic was moving, but for the time being, I could see them.

"Okay. I see them."

"Good. Now focus on the car. Get it in your mind. What it looks like."

I stared at the car's reflection in the glass, memorizing the details as much as possible. They were slowly passing under a street lamp, and I could see the figures inside as the light glinted off the dark paint.

"Now keep the image fixed in your head and close your eyes." His voice was quiet and soft. "Open the hood and look at the engine. Picture it in your mind. See the wires running into it? The hoses? Reach out and wrap your hands around them. Feel them."

"Are you kidding me?" My eyes popped open, and I turned to glare at him. "Who do you think you are? Yoda?" I jerked back around to check on the car only to see it had managed to close the gap between us by another car length.

"Taylor, he's saying you can disable the car with your mind." Mac checked his mirrors as he forced his way into the next lane, giving us a little breathing room. "Focus on it in your head and lay waste."

"I can't lay waste!" I snapped at him as irritated at his second use of my former name as I was frustrated with what they were asking me to do. "I don't know where the wires are. Or the hoses! This isn't magic, boys. I can't just blink my eyes and it happens."

Brown let out a heavy sigh from the back, and I barely managed to stop myself from turning around and throwing him out onto the highway. It wouldn't hurt him much. We were barely moving after all.

"Do you think you know where the gas pedal is?" He was clearly as put out with me as I was with him. Ingrate. We had rescued him after all. Or had we?

Suspicious and angry, it was everything I could do to listen to him. At this point, though, what did I have to lose, except the two cars following us. I unclenched my jaw and nodded and heard him lean back into his seat, satisfied.

“Okay then. Wait until you see him start moving forward and tromp down on the gas. Just picture his foot on the gas pedal and press it down. Hard.”

I focused my attention on the car in the right-hand lane and thought hard about that gas pedal, waiting for an opening. Suddenly it was there. The two cars in front of them peeled off onto an exit, giving them a big opening and a chance to gain ground on us. The moment he started moving forward, I mentally pushed his right foot to the floor. The resulting crash into the light pole as he tried to avoid the car suddenly in front of him was more than I could have hoped for.

“Whoa,” Jonas whistled from the back seat. “That did it. Hood’s up, and steam is pouring out.” He leaned forward in his seat to pat my shoulder. “Way to feel the force. Now how about the other one?”

It took two tries. Apparently, the driver had caught on to what was happening and was riding the brake, but I could picture a steering wheel as easily as the gas pedal and before he knew it, he’d driven into the median. It wasn’t great, but it was good enough. We were still tied up in traffic, but now there was a bigger jam building behind us and our tails were going nowhere fast.

I nodded to Mac as he inched his way closer to the accident up ahead and leaned back in the seat to rest. The pain was back behind my eyes, and my vision was starting to blur. The constant buzz that had been in my head since I woke Brown up was quickly becoming annoying, and my mind was swimming with the fact that there was an excellent chance that he was working against us.

The nudge on my shoulder woke me, and I glanced over to see Mac bob his head, motioning me to look out my window. We’d reached the accident. Traffic had necked down to a single lane, and we had a front row seat.

A semi had hit a car, pinning it under its wheels. Rescue teams had arrived and were working to get the car door open. As we drew alongside, I could see a body pinned to the steering wheel, and I watched in horror as a small hand fluttered deep inside the car.

We’d been stuck in traffic for over 20 minutes, and I had to assume they’d been working the whole time, trying to extricate the people trapped inside the wreck. I sat up in my seat, as I watched them move the pry bars to make another attempt, my mind frantic to find a way to help.

“Don’t do it, Taylor. You’re not ready for this.” I heard Brown’s warning from a distance, a dim echo in my head and chose to ignore it. Ready or not, they needed help, and they needed it now.

I focused my mind on the crumpled door, grabbed hold and pulled. The door

flew open like it had been blown off. Suddenly, it was if I was inside the car, struggling to help free the child trapped in the back. I heard the creak of metal above me and knew it was too late. The weight was too much. We'd never get them out in time. I froze as I watched the metal around me begin to crumble and braced my mind against it.

"Sean, you need to move, you're holding up traffic," Jonas informed Mac. "The police are heading this way."

The car suddenly shot forward as pain pierced through my brain, taking my breath away. I wrapped my arms around my head, trying to cushion the pain, even as I rocked in my seat in an effort to escape. I heard the sobs coming from my own throat and struggled to gain some form of control.

"Her nose is bleeding. Bad." Mac's voice echoed through the car.

"Get her back here." It was Brown's voice I heard, as hands fumbled at the belt buckle and dragged me out of the seat into the back of the van.

Instantly, hands clamped onto the bridge of my nose, pressing the veins, trying to slow the flow of blood. It was Brown.

"No!" I yelled as I knocked his hands away, scrambling to escape him.

"Taylor, stop it." He grabbed my flailing hands, pinning them between us. "I'm on your side." I managed to get a hand free and brought it up in a fist, intent on doing damage.

"Stop it!" He caught my fist again, and I was trapped, pinned to the back seat, helpless against him. I stopped fighting and gathering my thoughts, pushed out with what little strength I had left.

IT WAS PITCH black when I came to, and I laid still for a minute, trying to take in my surroundings. Drawing in a deep breath, I inhaled the scent of clean linen and instantly recognized the signature aroma of Mama D's laundry soap. I sat up slowly and waited patiently for the room to quit spinning.

"Welcome back Sam. How's your head?" The question came through the darkness, and I jumped before recognizing it was Mac who was in the room with me.

"So it's back to Sam now, is it, *Sean*?" I was mumbling and groggy and not in a good mood. "My heads fine. I'm good. Except for you scaring me half to death lurking over there in the dark. I wish you'd quit sneaking up on me." It sounded whiny even to me, and his snort of disbelief didn't help. I threw a glare in his direction resentful that he was right, even though I knew he couldn't see it in the dark. I wasn't fine. My head felt like it was filled with cotton batting instead of brain tissue and threatened to fly off with every move I made.

"Wait. You're serious, aren't you?" He may not have been able to see me, but being able to sense my emotions was a dead giveaway. "You really don't know when I'm around."

"No. I don't." I swung my legs over the side of the bed and waited for the room to quit spinning. "Just why is that anyway? You can sense me. I can sense Brown. I can communicate with both of you, but you can't communicate with me, and I can't sense you." I could hear my voice going up in volume with each word, escalating quickly from merely whiny to near hysterics. I really needed to calm down.

"I'm sorry." His voice was right next to me, close enough for me to feel his breath on my face before he laid his hand on my arm, instantly lowering my nerves to a manageable level. "I made an assumption, and I shouldn't have. I don't know why you can't sense me. Can you sense anyone else?" I knew he was asking about Jonas and Trinity, and I shook my head. I didn't get anything from them, but then I hadn't really tried. Just assumed, like he had. "You should ask Brown."

"I'm not asking Brown anything. I don't like him." I grimaced at that. Sad that being back to whiny was an improvement. "Why does he call you *Sean*?"

"That's the name I go by at the Agency. I forgot to warn you about that." He, at least, had the good grace to sound contrite. "It's better that he keeps thinking

of me that way and of you as Taylor. That's the name he knows you by, and we should keep it that way until we know where he stands. You've established the Samantha White alias now. No reason to have to start a new one if we don't have to. I've talked to the others, and they understand. When Brown's around, it's Sean and Taylor. Jonas and Trinity stay with their alias. It doesn't matter if he knows their new names. We'll probably be changing them anyway. Candice hates hers."

His attempt at a joke fell flat, but he'd managed to answer my questions and calm me down to the point that my nerves, though still frazzled, at least were no longer borderline. I was mostly just tired. Tired of the whole thing. All the intrigue, all the lies, all the running. Tired of looking for answers and just getting more questions. He moved away at my sigh of resignation, his voice now coming from someplace above my head.

"I'm turning on the light. Watch your eyes."

"Jonas called you Mac in the van. Won't Brown know something's up?" I asked, hearing him move across the room to the switch.

"I doubt he even noticed. He kinda had his hands full at the time. Besides 'Mac' is a pretty normal generic for guys to throw around. If it's a problem, I have other names I can use."

Dim light suddenly flooded the room, making my eyes tear up. Blinking them away, I looked around, getting my bearings. We were back at the cabin, in my room. Mac moved near and in the light I could see the dark shadows and lines that marked his face. Apparently, it had been worse than I thought.

"How long this time?" I asked quietly, finally ready to face what had happened.

"Three days. Off and on. You kept fading in and out, but it looks like you're sticking around this time." The smile on his lips didn't quite reach his eyes. That he was exhausted was evident. I had no idea what had gone on while I was out, but it was obvious he'd had a tough time of it. I looked at him, afraid to ask the question that was burning in my brain.

"They got out, Taylor. You got them out, but it was close. Too close." He shifted on the bed and looked away, uncomfortable. I must have really scared him. "Why didn't you listen to Brown?"

"You know why I didn't listen to him," I said, thinking the answer should have been obvious. Why would I ever listen to Brown, was a better question. He'd been nothing but trouble from the minute we picked him up. For all I knew, he'd set us up. "Speaking of Brown, where is he?"

"He's not here. I'll fill you in on him later. Right now, you need to eat. I'll go get you some food." Mac headed for the door, but I waved him off.

The dizziness had finally faded, and I got to my feet. I was a little shaky and my head still hurt, but not so bad, all things considered.

“Don’t hurry. I want to clean up first, and that’s going to involve a long, hot shower.” I felt the muscles in my sore back flex in anticipation. “I’ll come down after I’m through.”

“Okay. Come downstairs if that’s what you want, but just don’t push it. You’ve been through a lot. If you need me, just call.” He threw me a cocky wink as he walked out the door, only to pop his head back around for a parting shot. “Oh and Taylor? Just so you’re prepared. It’s not a pretty sight.”

“Thanks for the warning.” I tossed back over my shoulder, not knowing if he was talking about the bathroom or me.

I flipped on the light and knew in an instant he meant me. I had one heck of a shiner. All blacks, blues, and purples, with a little yellow and green thrown in on the edges. My left eye wasn’t swollen shut, but it wasn’t open either. The split lip finished it off with a flourish. I turned on the water and stripped down, only to find myself covered in bruises. Every joint ached, and I was pretty sure I had a torn muscle in my left shoulder. I wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, but I had a pretty good idea who. I just hoped Brown looked worse than I did.

* * *

HE DID, I noted with no small amount of satisfaction. I was making my way through one of Mama D’s huge omelets when Jonas arrived in the RV, and Brown climbed out the door. I’d felt the buzz long before they’d arrived. I’d known he was coming, so the feeling of danger that snapped my senses into full alert when I saw him step out of the RV and begin limping toward the house came as a shock.

“Easy there. He’s on our side, ” Mac cautioned as he reached over to top off my coffee. “At least, that’s what he says.”

The Camaro roared into the driveway and slid to a stop next to the RV, causing Jonas to stop mid-stride. Trinity popped out of the driver’s side, and I watched as she slammed the car door, ignoring whatever he was telling her as she strode past him and Brown on her way to the house. She disappeared from view seconds before the kitchen door flew open, banging against the wall.

“You’re up, thank goodness!” She rounded the table and flopped down in the

chair next to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than I look, but not by much.” The lop-sided smile I gave her dying as Brown walked through the door.

Tension fairly crackled in the air as my gaze narrowed on him, and he backed toward the door that Jonas had just closed behind them.

“Taylor.” Mac nudged my leg in warning under the table. He had refused to tell me what had happened until the others arrived. The others apparently, now included Brown, who he had assured me, no longer posed a threat. I’d agreed to hear him out, but that didn’t mean I intended to drop my guard until I had judged that for myself. I nudged him right back but dialed it back a notch.

Brown visibly relaxed and moved to take a seat across the room from the table. I watched him pass by the table, limping badly. He was a big man, tall. Mac had said 6’4” and I could easily believe it. He was quite a bit thinner than I’d thought, but then he’d supposedly been being held captive for several weeks. He looked like he’d been beaten with a baseball bat, and I felt a moment of chagrin that I had probably been responsible for that, but it was fleeting at best.

Caleb Brown had some explaining to do. I could only hope that Mac and Jonas were right in their assessment and Brown was, in fact, on our side. He knew who we were and where to find us, making him a very potent threat.

“Okay, let’s hear it.” I tossed my fork down, pushed my plate away, finding I’d suddenly lost my appetite. I crossed my arms and leaned back in the chair, never taking my eyes off of Brown. “Convince me you aren’t working for them.”

“I can’t. I’m a victim here, just as much as you are. More, if the truth be told, but there’s no way to convince you of that.”

He gave me a look that said it all. If what he said was true, he was indeed a victim. And everything that had happened to him was my fault. His little dig was to remind me of that fact. Like I needed any reminding. If possible, I disliked him even more than I had before.

I sat and stared at him, slowly sipping my coffee, letting the silence hang in the air. I was perfectly happy to sit there and wait. I’d learned a long time ago that one of the best ways to get the information you needed was to keep quiet. Silence made people nervous. And nervous people talked too much.

Brown was good, I’d give him that much. He sat and met my stare for longer than most. When he finally started talking, it wasn’t what I had expected.

“I told them you were in the area. Hughes already suspected. He’s not without talent.”

I glanced over at Mac. We had figured that Hughes was part of it, and Brown had just confirmed it. I just wasn’t quite sure what all ‘it’ entailed.

Brown got up from his chair, agitated and went to stand by the window, the

buzz in my head from him rising sharply. It was a milder version of what I had felt the first time I'd come across him, but still intense. I instinctively flinched, ready for it to go full on, but he reeled it back in. No one else in the room realized what was happening, but I was impressed by the control he could exercise. Especially since I didn't have it.

Jonas had pushed away from the table, ready to go after him, but I motioned him back down to his seat as Brown turned to look out the window. He wasn't going anywhere and now that he was talking, I didn't want to do anything to encourage him to stop.

"I simply told him what he already knew. It didn't seem worth the risk not to. But that's all I told him. Nothing else. Not the rest of it. Hughes isn't stupid." He turned back around, his emotions in check, and leaned against the counter. "He figured Sean was with you, and you'd head to the Agency for help. That's pretty much SOP. Once he knew you were in the area, he planned on using me as bait to lure you in. He didn't know, and I didn't care to enlighten him to the fact that you were a couple of steps ahead of him."

By that, I had to assume he meant he hadn't told Hughes we were coming. It was the second time he claimed he hadn't done that. I wondered who he was trying to convince because I wasn't buying it.

"Not far enough, it seems," I said, holding out my cup for a refill as Mama D came around with a fresh pot. "They were on us pretty fast."

"You were far enough ahead to catch them off guard and get me out. Problem is, they had already implanted the tracking device, so it didn't take them long to find you."

I looked over at Mac, not sure I'd heard Brown correctly. He nodded at me, confirming what Brown had said.

So that was something new. I had already figured out they were still tracking him after we tossed his clothing, but thought it was mentally. Apparently, I'd given them too much credit, but I guess that was better than underestimating them. However, the fact that they'd implanted a tracker meant they knew what we were up to. Hughes might have guessed that we'd come to the Agency, but there was no way he would have guessed we'd come for Brown or that we would blunder onto him. Brown had told him everything or maybe I had it all wrong and Brown was the one calling the shots. This was getting more complicated by the minute, and I could feel the pressure build in my head. I needed help, but I couldn't trust this guy. He needed to go. Now. My decision must have shown on my face, or he was reading my mind because he jumped right back in with both feet before I could tell Mac to take him back to wherever they'd had him stashed.

“Look, Taylor. You’re absolutely right to doubt me. I knew they’d done it, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t really relish the idea of being tossed out onto the road or being left there at Hughes mercy. I wanted a way out, and I took it. I’m not proud of what I did, but I’d do it again if it meant getting away from Hughes.”

“Why you?” I came back at him, angry at being played. “Why would he take you? How could he even know we were still alive? I seem to recall a pretty bad fire back in Little Rock. One where we all died.”

The buzzing from him suddenly surged in my head, and I could practically taste his terror. He shook his head, and looked down at the floor, avoiding my gaze, without answering. I leaned back in my chair, coffee in hand, determined to wait him out as long as my head didn’t explode.

“You are not the only Client,” he said, finally breaking the silence. “There was a girl, named Abby. She had the amazing ability to find lost things. He used her to find you. I was her Handler. He needed me.”

I sat stunned as his words sunk into my mind. He wasn’t lying about this, although I wish he had been. There had been a girl... she’d had an amazing ability... Brown’s terror, the horror he felt? Suddenly the pieces all fell into place, and I knew.

She was gone. They had used her to find me and then if Brown’s terror was to be believed, Hughes had killed her. Killed a child to get to me. Brown knew it had happened. Maybe he’d even seen it. I knew the horror that he’d felt because I’d felt it too. I could feel it in him now, simmering on the edges of his mind. But he hadn’t stopped it. Whether he was in on it or not, he’d let it happen. The rage came fast and hot, flaring out and flowing through me. That I would find Hughes and make him pay was the last thought I had as blinding pain arched through my head, bringing me to my knees, screaming in agony.

“This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you.” Brown’s words were the last thing I heard as the darkness overwhelmed me.

* * *

I CAME TO on the sofa in the living room, disoriented and totally disgusted with myself. The pain behind my eyes was intense, substantially less than earlier in the kitchen, but it was definitely there. The sadness, however, the feeling of

guilt and loss was nearly overwhelming. A girl named Abby was gone, and I was to blame. Hughes may have killed her, and Brown may have let him do it, but I was the reason she'd been in danger, to begin with. I was the one responsible.

I was trying hard not to lose the omelet I'd just eaten when Brown leaned over the back of the sofa, looking at me with an 'I told you so' expression on his face, which was pretty much the last thing I wanted to see.

"You're going to have to learn to have at least a modicum of control."

If he'd known how badly I wanted to throw up right then, he'd have been very impressed with my control. He had a point, though. This passing out thing just had to stop.

"Go away," I gritted out, not wanting to see him. He moved back, but didn't leave, instead turning to talk to Mac like I wasn't there.

"Just how out of control is she? Can't you handle her any better than that?" he snapped at him.

"I don't *handle* Taylor. She's perfectly capable of handling herself," Mac shot back. "Frankly, I think she's holding it together pretty well, all things considered."

"Well, you think wrong. If this is how she holds it together, I'd hate to be around when it falls apart."

I spotted a book lying on the coffee table next to me and had a sudden impulse to throw it at Brown's head. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than the book was flying through the air, disappearing out of view behind the sofa.

"Good shot," Trinity mumbled, as I heard cursing and a thud as the book hit the floor. I leaned up on one elbow and wiggled around to see her sitting next to me on a chair. Jonas was parked on the fireplace hearth across the coffee table from me, grinning.

"Do that again, and I'm out of here." Brown leaned over the back of the sofa, glaring at me.

I glared right back and reached out for another book, only to have Jonas snag it mid-air.

"Well, now. Barely even had to think about it that time, did you?" His tone changed completely, and he walked around the sofa, past Mac, who'd been standing by my feet, to go and sit on the hearth near Jonas.

Feeling at a distinct disadvantage, I sat up, propping myself in the corner of the sofa, and tucked my legs around me. Mama D appeared and handed me a cup of coffee, heavily laced with cream. I raised my brows in question and took a cautious sip. She'd put something in there besides cream, and it was really good. Really good. She just smiled as I looked up in appreciation and settled in on the

other end of the sofa.

"I'd watch myself, if I were you, Dr. Brown." Trinity had her lawyer voice on, deep, deliberate and threatening. "The jury's still out, and you're not doing so well. Perhaps instead of creating problems, you might try to resolve a few instead."

Amen to that. I couldn't have agreed more. Brown looked as though he might argue for half a beat, but the open hostility in the room reinforced both her words and his precarious footing and he wisely chose to keep quiet. She waited long enough for him to become uncomfortable before she went on.

"Now that the crisis is over, I'd like you to explain what happened in there. Is there something wrong with Taylor?"

"There's so much wrong with her, I don't even know where to start." Jonas slapped his thighs and started to pull himself up from the hearth, his intention to thrash Brown obvious to everyone in the room, including Brown himself. "Look, don't get mad at me for telling the truth. It should be pretty obvious there's a problem. She's been thrown in at the deep end of the pool, and she's been flailing around, trying desperately to stay afloat. Problem is, all that flailing around? It's going to kill her."

"What do you mean it's going to kill her?" Trinity was all over him. "I want to know exactly what is going on, and I don't want any more analogies, Mr. Deep End of the Pool. We may not be a genius like yourself, but neither are we heaped in a pile at the other end of the intelligence scale. So explain yourself. What, exactly, is going to kill her?"

Trinity was in rare form, spitting the words out like a machine gun. She'd watched me hit the floor in the kitchen, and she was stepping up to the plate, taking the lead. I was perfectly content to let her run with it. If anyone could ferret the truth out of Brown, it was Trinity. If she had any problems, Jonas was standing right there, more than ready to beat the truth out of him and Mac looked more than ready to lend a helping hand. Brown was in big trouble and genius or not, I wasn't sure he was smart enough to know it.

Apparently, he was smarter than I thought because he stood up and moved away from the hearth, keeping an eye on Jonas as he answered Trinity's question.

"She doesn't know how to use what she's got. She's forcing it, and when she does, it damages her." He moved over to the sofa and sat down on the opposite end, redirecting his focus to me. "Think about it, Taylor. Did your head hurt worse when you threw the book at me?"

He paused waiting for an answer. He was going to wait a long time because I had no intention of supplying one. He was here to supply answers, and he either

had them or he didn't. I had no intention of helping him out. I just stared at him and waited. Eventually, he got the drift.

"Fine. I'll answer for you. No. It didn't hurt. Why? I'll answer again. Because you used it properly, without even thinking about it. Thinking about it is what gets you in trouble because you're forcing it. That and not controlling your emotions. They're tied together, Taylor. If you can't control one, you can't control the other, and it will destroy you. The brain can only take so much, and you're fast approaching its limits."

"Can you teach her?" Jonas asked finally, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room and lowering the hostility level immensely.

"If she'll let me." Brown leaned back into the cushions, never taking his eyes off me. I met his stare dead on, knowing I would never trust this man. "But it's not going to be easy, and it will take a long time."

"How much time?" Trinity asked.

"Months. Years maybe."

"Well, that's too bad," I said, uncurling from the sofa and managing to get to my feet while retaining some amount of dignity. "Because you have one week. Then we're going after Hughes."

I had decided to let him stay. Better here where we could watch him than out there where he could run amok and tell everyone where we were. The prospect of finding another place and starting the process over again was not something I wanted to contemplate. So, I'd give him a week. Maybe he could teach me something. Heaven knew, I needed help. It just rankled that he might be the one to do it.

I wound my way past them and left the silent room, wondering if I had just lost what little of my mind I had left.

“YOU’RE NOT CONCENTRATING, Taylor. You’re doing it wrong. Still.”

I looked at the feather sitting on the kitchen table and hated it with every ounce of my being. The past four mornings at six a.m., Brown had set it down on the table and then picked it up two hours later from exactly the same place, only to put it back down and start all over again immediately after breakfast. This morning looked to be no different. My goal was simple. All I had to do was to push it off the table, without using my hands. So far, I hadn’t even been able to make it move. The deadline was fast approaching, and my frustration was mounting with each passing second.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe you’re teaching it wrong?” I shot back, shoving myself back from the table to glare at him.

“No,” he answered back, completely unruffled. “The action is an extension of the thought and it rides on the emotion. You want it. You reach for it. You take it. Not by force, but by simply doing it.” He stood and picked up the feather, giving me a raised eyebrow look that clearly said I was the problem, and left the room, passing Trinity and Mama D on their way in to make breakfast.

I blew out a long breath of frustration, closed my eyes and counted to ten under my breath.

“What’s wrong?” Trinity asked, slapping down a placemat in front of me.

“I hate that feather,” I answered her, “and I’m not real fond of Brown.”

“Well, there’s a surprise.” She fairly dripped with sarcasm. “So I take it there’s no progress, huh?”

I shook my head and took another deep breath. The smell of coffee in the air had my head swimming. I looked over to see Mama D pulling eggs and bacon from the refrigerator, the frying pans already on the stove, ready and waiting.

Brown had been preaching at me from six in the morning until midnight for the past four days, and all I had to show for it was an even more intense dislike of the man. It looked like I was in for another day of the same and I wasn’t looking forward to it all. In fact, I had to keep from shuddering when he followed Jonas and Mac back into the kitchen.

“So what have we learned today, Dorothy?” Mac quipped as he pulled out a chair. I stared at him. For a guy who picked up on my emotions, he had to know he was playing with fire. He just chuckled and sat down.

“From the look she’s giving you, my guess is she still hasn’t moved that

feather.” Jonas pulled back his own chair. “I wish you would just hurry up and figure it out. Maybe we could eat sooner. I’m starving.”

“Talk to Brown. He’s the one that insists we do this before breakfast. Or coffee.” I glanced over at Brown, who shrugged and plopped down next to Jonas, just as Mama D sat a steaming mug in front of me.

“You’re an addict.” Brown’s voice was dry and accusing.

“And you’re a pain in the keister!” I shot back, causing Trinity to gasp and Mama D to burst out laughing.

Brown lifted a glass of orange juice in a mocking salute, as I glared at him over the rim of my coffee cup.

We sat quietly after that little exchange, listening to the sound of bacon sizzling. All I could think about was all the time I had wasted with Brown when I could have been focusing on a plan to get to Hughes. I had given Brown a week. Four days were already gone, and we had accomplished nothing. To top the whole thing off, I didn’t think I could stand one more hour with Brown, much less three more days. Not at this rate. I wasn’t sure whether it was that I still didn’t trust him, that I just didn’t like him, or the sneaking suspicion that he was right, and I was the whole problem, but I was pretty certain I’d had about as much of him as I could take.

By the time Mama D and Trinity sat hot plates loaded with eggs and bacon down in front of us, I’d finished my coffee and was in a better state of mind. Jonas went over and got the coffee pot and refilled my cup before setting it down on the table.

“So,” Mac broke the silence, “if you don’t mind me asking, what seems to be the problem?”

“She’s not listening. That’s the problem. She thinks she knows it all.” Brown dove right in before I even had a chance to open my mouth. My better state of mind was gone in an instant. “I knew she was ignorant, but I didn’t think she was stupid.”

I didn’t mind being ignorant. That much was true. I didn’t have the knowledge I needed, and that’s what he was there for, so I could let that one pass. It was the stupid part that pushed me over the edge. So far as I was concerned, the stupidest thing I’d done was waste four whole days trying to move a feather. I gave his plate a mental shove and watched in surprise as it slid off the table into his lap.

“Good girl.” Brown ignored the plateful of food in his lap. Instead, he whipped his hand up and almost magically the feather appeared on the table. “Now the feather.”

I gave it a push and watched as it sat there where his plate had been moments

before.

“Taylor,” Brown called quietly, drawing my attention. “Did you feel the difference?”

Yeah, I felt the difference. I enjoyed dumping the plate into his lap. Couldn’t wait to do it. Could feel my hands on the plate. Could feel the plate start to slide, feel the slick edge of the plate move past my fingers as it disappeared over the edge of the table. I couldn’t care less about the feather, but coating him with steaming eggs and greasy bacon? That was great.

I was about to tell him that very thing, when it hit me, freezing me in my tracks. That’s not what he meant. The difference wasn’t in how I felt. It was in how I directed what I felt. I had wanted to move that feather with every ounce of my being, just so we would move on and I wouldn’t have to deal with it anymore. I wanted it as much if not more than I wanted to dump that plate of eggs into Brown’s lap. The difference was I tried to force the feather. With the plate, I just reached out and did it.

I felt my muscles clench up, my breath coming rapidly. Could it really be that simple? I looked over at the feather and gave it a flick, watching in amazement as it floated up in the air, a smile of satisfaction spreading across my face as it slowed wafted down to settle back on the table and cheers erupted from my supporters.

“By Jove, I think she’s got it. Finally. ” Brown’s mocking whisper wiped the smiles off everyone’s faces, including my own. He stood up, tossing the plate back onto the table and scattering bits of scrambled eggs around in the process. “I would appreciate it, however, if you would desist from throwing things, although, it does seem to be your forte.”

He gave his pants a shake, trying to dislodge a few particularly clingy pieces of egg and looked down in disgust at the dark spots left behind by the grease and butter. He threw me one last steely look before he huffed out of the kitchen.

“Gee, what a killjoy,” Trinity blurted out as soon as Brown was out of the room. I was pretty sure he could hear her. She’d said it loud enough. “He really doesn’t like you, does he?”

“Feeling’s mutual.” I shrugged, getting up to grab a broom and clean up the mess I had made before Mama D beat me to it. It didn’t matter to me whether Brown liked me or not. I had bigger problems than that to deal with. Such as why I couldn’t get into his head anymore. I’d been able to communicate with him before we’d rescued him, been able to pick up on his feelings, his emotions, but for the last few days, it was like he’d put up a brick wall. The only thing I got from him was that irritating buzzing noise, which was slowly driving me crazy.

“Well, regardless of Brown, I’m impressed.” Jonas’ words had me turning back to the table in surprise. “Oh, you’ve done bigger things, but you made a breakthrough this morning that you’ve been working hard to do and got insulted for doing it. I just want you to know, we all appreciate how hard this is for you and how hard it is to put up with Brown. We know you’re doing this for all of us and we do appreciate it.”

I bobbed my head, mumbling something incoherent and turning around to sweep before he could see the tears well up in my eyes. He’d caught me completely off guard. Jonas was my biggest skeptic and he’d just given me the support I hadn’t even known I’d needed.

Brown’s incessant harassment had gotten to me more than I’d realized. Even his acknowledgment of my success, his scornful imitation of Henry Higgins from *My Fair Lady*, had been a dig. A reminder of his superiority and my reliance on him to teach me. Not unlike Eliza, the poor, uneducated flower girl.

He’d been teaching me, if you could call it that, and whacking away at my self-confidence at the same time. Not your usual teaching methods, for sure. I needed to learn, but there was a limit as to how much Brown could get away with, and he’d reached the limit. Blinking away the tears that had threatened to spill over, I decided it was time to change the rules.

I finished cleaning up just as the buzzing from Brown began to increase, which meant he was on his way back in. I grabbed my plate and threw it in the microwave to heat it back up, just as he came back into the room.

“There’s more on the stove if you want it,” I told him. “Grab a plate and dish it up.”

I retrieved my plate from the oven and headed back to sit down. I’d cleaned up the mess and figured my responsibility ended there. I sure wasn’t going to serve him a new plate. I took my seat and noticed Mac and Jonas eying Brown and felt better that they didn’t trust him any more than I did. I knew they were never far away during my supposed training, and it felt good to know they had my back.

“Now that you’ve finally figured out some measure of control over this, we’ll work on honing your skills after breakfast,” Brown announced as he settled back down at the table with a full plate.

“No,” I answered, stopping his fork halfway to his mouth. “I don’t think so. We need to work on something else.”

“Oh? You think so?” His eyes narrowed, but his fork started moving again. “And what, in your opinion, would that be?”

“Today, you’re going to teach me how to block my mind from others, like you’re doing now.” His reaction was almost imperceptible, but I’d caught it. He

might be blocking me mentally, but I had eyes, and I knew what to look for. Can you say, *Investigator*, Dr. Brown? Didn't take a rocket scientist to know that there had to be some way to protect yourself and that someone had figured it out. That Brown hadn't mentioned it before and that he wasn't happy that I knew about it now could mean a lot of things. None of them good.

"You need to improve on your kinetic abilities first. We can save the rest for when you've got a better handle on it." He kept his gaze down, pushing food around on his plate. "One thing at a time, Taylor."

Jonas sat his coffee down and slid his chair back, eyes trained on Brown as Mac leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. I got the distinct impression that they weren't happy with Brown's resistance to my plan.

"Well, Dr. Brown, I disagree. We'll be working on how to shield ourselves today." I sat back in my chair and pushed my half finished breakfast away, finding I'd lost my appetite. "And Sean, here, will be joining us. I am sure there are times he'd like a little peace and quiet too."

Mac nodded in agreement, watching Brown over the top of his coffee as he took a long sip.

"You know, I'd kinda like to sit in on this too," Jonas piped in. "See how it works. Knowledge is always a good thing."

Brown was clearly not happy, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He'd just gone from one on one to three on one. He was smart enough to figure out that the tables had turned and why. He stood up, resigned to his larger and definitely hostile class and headed for the living room.

We worked through lunch, had a late dinner and finally called it quits at ten p.m. Brown had rambled on for over ten hours, and most of it was worthless information. I could only hope that there were bits of truth hidden somewhere in the middle of all the nonsense that Brown had doled out. We'd done countless mental exercises with no success whatsoever. My brain had turned to mush nearly two hours before we ended, and I found I was running on autopilot alone as Brown droned on. The only thing I knew for certain when we finally stopped for the night was that lessons from Brown were officially over. He had nothing more to offer. At least nothing he was sharing.

By 10:30 I was standing in a hot shower, letting the scalding water pound into muscles that had stiffened from sitting in a chair for hours on end. After ten minutes of steaming hot water, my muscles felt almost as limp as my brain did. I did a half-baked job of drying off, content to let the sheets finish the job as I crawled under the covers. I snuggled down under the plump quilts, making a comfortable nest. Still warm from the shower, I was asleep before my head had settled on the pillow.

It seemed like minutes later that I woke up. As much as I could tell, I hadn't even moved, and I was still so tired that I didn't want to. I lifted my head just enough to see the alarm clock, which told me it wasn't time to get up. Nowhere even close to time. It was just after midnight. I'd been asleep less than an hour. No wonder I was still feeling groggy.

I listened, trying to make out any sounds that might have woken me up. The house was quiet, with the exception of the light buzzing sound coming from Brown. Apparently he was still awake, but I wasn't too concerned. Mac was on watch and would keep an eye on him. Reassured, I closed my eyes and wished myself back to sleep, trying not to think about anything. The last thing I wanted was to start thinking about things. If my mind got started up, I'd be awake the rest of the night.

Instead, I just laid there listening to Brown's endless buzzing, trying to block it out of my mind. We had him bunking downstairs, but I could still pick him up. Punching my pillow into shape, I regretted that we couldn't just put him outside somewhere so I wouldn't have to listen to him. On the upside, at least he wasn't in one of the neighboring bedrooms. I really didn't know how Mac got any rest, sleeping on the same floor. Maybe that was why he always volunteered for night duty. Poor guy.

I'd been listening for a few minutes when I suddenly realized that his buzzing was changing. It was gradual, but it was definitely there. I listened for a few more minutes, hearing the small changes in pitch and strength. I'd heard them before, but it had always been extreme swings when Brown's emotions were off the chart. These were small variations, but now that I'd noticed them, they were obvious. Brown was not only awake, but he was either worried or nervous about something. After the past few days of torture he'd put me through, I couldn't help but hope it was something I'd done to give him a sleepless night. I smiled at the thought and snuggled down into the bed, intent on getting back to sleep, when the buzzing from him surged.

Suddenly, I was wide awake. Something was wrong. I rolled out of bed so fast I made myself dizzy and had to stop for a second to let the room settle back down. I'd left my clothes on the floor where they'd dropped earlier and quickly threw them back on. I didn't know what Brown's problem was, but I knew I wasn't traipsing down there in my pajamas. Not bothering with the light, I stuffed my feet into my shoes sans socks and moved quickly to the door. The house was dark and quiet as I stepped out into the hallway, easing the door closed behind me. I stayed there, frozen in place, waiting for my breathing to slow and my heartbeat to return to normal, listening intently for Brown.

I was at the end of a hallway that ran the length of the cabin with two other

bedrooms and a bathroom separating me from the stairs at the far end. Trinity and Mama D shared one room and Jonas and Mac had the other. We'd made a bed in the study downstairs for Brown, and that's where he was supposed to be now, sound asleep. Except he wasn't. The buzzing was getting louder by the second, which, if I was right, could only mean one thing. Brown was coming up the stairs. Slowly and in the dark. He had no business on this floor. No reason for him to come up here.

I stepped back into the far corner of the hallway opposite the door to my room and melted into the shadows, waiting to see what he was up to. I was pretty much positive it was nothing good. As he moved quietly up the stairs, I drew in a deep breath and held it, praying I was wrong. Then I crouched down and waited.

I STARED AT the landing where Brown would appear. The curtains must have been open downstairs, letting in some light, because the opening was a few shades lighter than the pitch black of the hallway. I knew the instant Brown reached the top stair, his shadow a darker black for an instant before he stepped into the hallway and disappeared into the blackness completely.

The buzzing that accompanied him grew louder inside my head, and I could just make out the faint sound of his footsteps as he made his way down the hallway toward me. I pressed back into the darkness and willed myself to disappear, wishing desperately for something to hide behind. He stopped suddenly, and I held my breath as he stood quietly, mere feet away from me.

I couldn't see him. The hallway was too dark, but I knew he was there. I could feel his presence, and I was certain he must be able to hear the loud buzzing he was setting off in my head. I pressed back further and braced myself against the wall, holding my breath.

He stood there for what seemed an eternity, frozen in place. Then I listened in disbelief as I heard the doorknob turn quietly, and felt the brush of air as he slipped silently into my room, closing the door behind him.

There were a number of things that went streaking through my mind as the door clicked shut, the first being that Brown had just snuck into my room in the middle of the night. A close second was that he hadn't known where I was. Either he wasn't able to pick up on me, as I had feared, or I had somehow managed to block him from sensing me and had no idea how I'd done it. Now I was afraid to move, afraid I would somehow undo whatever it was I had done and expose myself. Something I really wasn't ready to do yet, because the third that had registered with me was that I had no idea where Mac was. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on Brown. He should have been on him before he was halfway up the stairs, but he wasn't. That fact probably bothered me the most, because the last thing I'd noticed was the gleam of light that bounced off the gun in Brown's hand as he disappeared into my room.

I instinctively reached for my gun, intending to follow him in and surprise him, only to find empty air instead. For a second, I was stunned before the realization hit me that in my haste, I'd left it behind, safely tucked away in the nightstand.

The one thing I knew for sure was that Brown was going to be coming back

out that door as soon as he realized I wasn't in there and he'd be on alert. There was no surprising him now. I had to move and move fast. I just prayed that I stayed invisible to him while I was doing it.

I pushed away from the wall, making my way as quickly and quietly as possible down the hallway. I could feel Brown moving around my room and knew the instant he headed for the door. I grabbed the handle to Jonas' room, and slipped inside, quickly easing the door shut, just as the buzzing increased in my head, telling me that Brown was back out in the hallway. I still had the handle in my hand, afraid to let go for fear that Brown would hear it, as I held my breath, waiting for the inevitable. Brown moved quietly down the hallway. He hesitated by the door, and I braced, but he kept moving. He still couldn't sense me, but I could hear him, the buzzing fading as he moved toward the stairs.

Jonas' hand closed over mine on the doorknob, causing me to jump in reaction. If he hadn't had his hand over mine, I probably would have jerked the door open. We were so close I could smell the oil he had used to clean the gun that was now in his hand.

He waited a second and then pulled back on the door, easing it open. I could just make out Brown's outline as he poised at the top the stairs, listening for movement below. I'd been hesitant before, unsure of myself, but with Jonas beside me for backup, I felt safe in doing what I'd ached to do earlier. I gathered my thoughts and shoved Dr. Caleb Brown headfirst down the stairs.

Jonas flung the door open and flew past me heading after Brown. I followed close on his heels, hitting the lights at the top of the stairs. Brown was at the bottom, staggering to his feet, the gun still somehow in his hand. Jonas launched himself off the last few stairs into Brown as a shot rang out and they both went flying out of sight into the living room. I heard a door opening behind me and whirled to find Trinity charging out of her room, armed with her taser. I held up a hand in defense as she swung it toward me. She drew up instantly and dropped in behind me as I raced down the stairs toward the sound of battle.

As we reached the bottom, the sound of fighting suddenly stopped, and an eerie silence filled the void. Suddenly, Brown appeared from around the doorway, and Trinity let loose with the taser. She missed, but not for lack of trying. Brown dove back into the living room, rolling away from the pronged spikes, giving us time to cut into the kitchen, taking the first cover we came to.

I looked at Trinity, her eyes big in disbelief as she looked at my empty hands and realized that I was unarmed. I couldn't blame her a bit. Mac was missing, and Jonas apparently was out of the picture. Brown was on the loose with a gun, and here we were, hiding in the kitchen and me without a weapon. I was none too pleased myself.

I motioned her to keep quiet and to move further down the wall of cabinets we were hiding behind. I didn't think Brown would rush us, or he probably would have done it by now. As far as he knew, I was armed and dangerous so he wouldn't expose himself, but I wanted her out of the way just in case he came running through the doorway. She slid down the wall and crab crawled quickly to the corner of the kitchen between the refrigerator and the stove. She reached up and grabbed the skillet that had been sitting on a burner, ready to fry up the mornings bacon and gave me a nod that she was good. I gave what I hoped was a reassuring nod back and waited for Brown's next move. We didn't have to wait long.

"Taylor," Brown called out. "We need to talk."

I didn't bother answering. I could feel Brown moving around in the living room. He didn't have much room for cover in there. It was a fairly small room, with basically three walls. Where the fourth wall would normally be was pretty much open access to the entrance door and stairway. There was very little wall space to provide any cover so he was limited as to where he could go, which was a good thing. I might be able to throw something at him, but not if I wasn't sure where he was. That was the problem with this kinetic ability. It had limits. You couldn't just do things. You had to know what and how and where and when. I might not know much about it, but I knew that much.

"Taylor, there's no sense in anyone else getting hurt. Just come out and let's talk."

Anyone else getting hurt? I didn't dare look at Trinity, afraid to see my own thoughts mirrored on her face. I had no idea where Mac was or what had happened to Jonas, but Mama D was still upstairs. Brown could get to her in seconds, and there was nothing I could do to stop him.

I glanced behind me at the kitchen, searching for options. I was just inside the open doorway to the left, squatting down behind cabinets. The table was across from me, sitting between me and another wall of cabinets and the sink. On the far end of that wall was the door to the outside. The end furthest away from where Trinity now hovered with her frying pan.

We had a way out, but to get to it, we'd have to cross the open doorway and skirt the table, and I was pretty sure that wherever Brown had holed up, he'd made sure he'd have a good view of the outside door. We were pretty much trapped.

"Where's Sean?" I asked, stalling for time, frantically looking for a way out.

"I'm afraid Sean met with an unfortunate accident."

He was moving again, coming forward through the room. I could feel him, almost see him in my mind. I tried to ignore what he'd said about Mac and

concentrate on escaping, but his words had shaken me. I didn't dare ask about Jonas.

I looked back over at the kitchen entrance, hoping something had changed and saw the dishes piled up on the drying rack next to the sink. Dishes, pots, pans and *knives*. I could see the handles peeking out from under the pots that were air drying. I felt Brown still moving forward through the living room. He'd figured out that if I hadn't made a move by now, I wasn't going to.

I gave Trinity a look and nodded my head towards the drying rack and then the back door. She looked over, frowning and then understood. She turned back nodding. I shifted position, ready to move. I had no idea where Brown was but had to think that the sight of a knife coming at him would have him diving for cover. If he was distracted, I might be able to get to him and buy Trinity enough time to get out the door.

I looked back over my shoulder and reached out for a knife. I saw the handle wobble and closed my eyes. *God help me*, I prayed as I grabbed hold of one of the knives and threw it where I hoped Brown would be standing. I watched as it sailed through the opening and lunged to my feet, ready to follow. The sound of it striking the fireplace, followed by Brown's laugh stopped me in my tracks. Trinity had started moving for the door as soon as the knife flew, but I motioned her quickly to stop and go back. I had clearly missed.

"Very good, Taylor. That was actually quite close but not close enough." I felt him move closer and knew he was nearly on top of us. This had gone on long enough. I motioned for Trinity to head out the back as I made my decision.

I stood up and stepped out into the entry, coming face to face with the barrel of Mac's gun in Brown's hand. I looked up into Brown's face and knew he had made a critical mistake. He had Mac's gun. A nice, deadly, semi-automatic that I was quite familiar with. That meant the bullets were in a clip. It fed the bullets into the gun, one after another, so you didn't have to stop and load them by hand. You could carry multiple clips and have a nice supply of ammo. You just had to press the release button and watch the clip drop away and ram another one up into place.

Brown's problem was two-fold. He didn't have an extra clip, and I knew where the button was. I reached out mentally and pressed down on the release, hearing the click as the clip disengaged and dropped from the gun.

The shocked look on Brown's face was priceless. I grabbed the gun and jammed it upward as he fired, the bullet missing me by inches. I twisted the gun from his hand and gave him a knee in the groin. He bent forward, doubled over in pain and I brought the same knee up into his face, breaking his nose and spraying blood over the wall. I brought the gun around, clubbing him in the side

of the head with it and he went down like a ton of bricks. He'd barely hit the floor when I let loose with a hard kick to his kidneys, making sure he was down.

I was out of breath by the time I'd finished with him, but I dropped to my knees to grab the clip and ram it back into place, chambering a round in one fluid motion. He wasn't moving, but I was ready for him, just in case. I staggered back to my feet and put some distance between us, keeping the gun trained on him. Trinity came up beside me, still holding her frying pan and I heard her gasp. Following the stricken look in her eyes past Brown, I saw Jonas' body on the floor by the fireplace, his face bloody and a red pool staining the rug beneath him. He wasn't moving. For all I knew Brown had killed him. My thoughts flew to Mac. He was out there somewhere, and I needed to find him, but I had to take care of Brown first.

"Candice, get the duct tape," I ordered. She looked at me in confusion, tears streaming down her face. "Candice! Duct tape. Now!" She snapped out of it and ran back into the kitchen, jerking open drawers in rapid secession, searching for the tape.

I heard a noise from the floor and looked down to see Brown had come to and was trying to get to his feet. I kept the gun on him as he got to his knees and struggled to stand and motioned him to move into the kitchen intending to tape him to one of the sturdy kitchen chairs for safe keeping.

"Well done, Taylor." He grimaced as he took a breath, and I sincerely hoped I had broken some of his ribs during our fight as well as his nose "You're good, but once again. Not quite good enough."

He turned to face me, a smile on his face and suddenly I was flying backward through the air. I slammed onto the floor, sliding into the stairs behind me so hard the gun was torn from my hand, and I watched helplessly as it went spinning across the floor back towards Brown. I was momentarily stunned as realization seeped into my rattled brain. Brown had just thrown me across the room without ever laying a hand on me. Dazed, I scrambled to my feet, as he picked up the gun, and turned it on Trinity.

"No!" I screamed, desperate to somehow stop him. My gaze was focused on Trinity, and I saw her eyes widen in fear, fixed somewhere behind me.

"Say, goodbye," he said, and I watched in horror as his finger tightened on the trigger. In a distant part of my mind, I heard the sound of a shell being racked into place behind me and managed to fling myself flat on the floor just as Mama D cut loose with the shotgun.

The impact took him off his feet and pinned him to the wall, where he hung for a minute before sliding onto the floor. At such close range, there wasn't a chance he'd survive, but I scrambled across the floor for the gun he had dropped,

just in case, and felt immediately better once I had it safe in my hand. My ears were ringing, and I was covered in blood. I looked at Brown and from my vantage point on the floor, he seemed dead enough. I rolled over and saw Mama D had dropped the gun and collapsed in a heap on the stairs, obviously in shock. I tried to get to my feet without much success and then suddenly, Trinity was there helping me up. She was patting me down and hugging me, and I finally figured out that she thought Mama D had shot me too. I looked behind me at holes in the wall, the grouping still tight, just a couple of feet above where my head had been. It had been close. Too close.

Then again, I thought as I struggled to my feet and made my way to the stairs, Mama D was pretty good with that shotgun. I picked it up, securing Mac's gun in my waistband, as Trinity checked on Mama D. She had a bad case of the shakes, but that was to be expected. I wasn't too steady myself. I motioned for Trinity to stay with her while I went to check on Jonas.

He hadn't moved. There was blood on his face and on the floor beneath him. I couldn't tell if he was alive or not, couldn't see him breathing. I knelt down and checked for a pulse. It was there. Surprisingly strong and steady. I quickly checked him over, and the only damage was a large gash on his head which accounted for all the blood and a huge bump on his head that accounted for him being out cold. He probably had a concussion, but at least the swelling was on the outside and not inside his brain. That was something, at least. I rolled him over into a recovery position, made sure his airway was clear and went back to check on Trinity and Mama D, grabbing a blanket off the sofa to cover Brown's body on my way. Trinity had moved Mama D into a kitchen chair with her back to the carnage. She looked up in question when I came in.

"He's alive," I assured her. She breathed out a sigh of relief, and I knew she'd been terrified that Brown had killed him. I'd been worried too, and I was still worried about Mac, who I had yet to find. "He got hit on the head and is out cold. You may want to go throw some cold water on him. See if you can get him to come around."

"Okay." She was shaky but got to her feet in spite of it. "Where are you going?"

I handed her Mac's gun and put the shotgun in easy reach on the kitchen counter. "I'm going upstairs to get my gun, and then I'm going to look for Mac. You work on Jonas and stay in the house." I pointed at the gun in her hand. "Keep that with you. The safety's off."

I leaned down and gave Mama D a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She was still in shock and probably would be for a while. I had no idea when she'd managed to get the shotgun. Didn't know if she'd found it here already, or taken it from

our stash. What I did know was that this was the second time she killed a man, and that was something you never got over. She'd just saved all our bacon. It was a fact that dimmed in light of such a violent action, but it might help her be able to live with what had happened. She had done what she had to do, but that didn't make me any less sorry that she'd had to do it. Not for the first time, the thought crossed my mind of how much better off they would all be if they'd never known me. They would be home, happy and safe. I had given them the choice, but that didn't change the facts. This had happened because of me, and I had to find a way to live with it.

I headed quickly upstairs, giving the cabin a once over on my way up. By the time I reached my room, I was pretty certain Mac wasn't in the house, which meant he was somewhere outside the cabin. I pulled my gun out of the drawer, slipping an extra clip inside my pocket. I figured that if Brown had help coming from the Agency, he would have waited to make his move until they were there, but I wasn't positive. Maybe he had waited, and they had been outside taking care of Mac while Brown was busy with us inside, but there had been enough time and gunfire for them to come running if that was the case and no one had showed up.

In any event, I wanted to be ready in case I ran into some of his friends out there in the woods. I'd already nearly gotten everyone killed tonight underestimating Brown and leaving my gun behind. Once was more than enough.

When I came back down, Jonas was awake and sitting up in a kitchen chair. He might have been awake, but he wasn't focusing yet and looked like he was going to pass out again at any second, so he was of no use.

"Keep watch," I told Trinity, as I grabbed a jacket and threw it on. "He might not be alone." I gave her a nod and slipped out the door into the night.

I STEPPED OUT to be greeted by a sky full of stars and a nearly full moon. At high altitude, the sky seemed almost close enough to touch and without the smog from the distant cities, gave off enough light not to need a flashlight to search the clearing around the house.

Whatever Brown had that made him buzz, Mac didn't have. I had been happy about that but now would have given anything to hear it. It would have made it much easier to find him now that I'd figured out how to hear the minute changes in the buzz.

I might not be able to hear him, but I knew Mac could hear me. I'd gotten through to him in the bank. He said it was like I was talking to him. If he was alive and awake, I could get through to him now. I sat down on the porch and tried to clear my thoughts.

Mac, if you can hear me, make some noise. I waited, listening, hoping to hear him call out and got nothing. I tried again and got the same result. Either he couldn't answer, or I couldn't hear him, which was a distinct possibility given the ringing that was still going on in my head from the shotgun blast.

I couldn't just sit there waiting for something that wasn't happening. I got up and made a slow, careful trek around the house, still calling out in my head for him, praying he would respond. I moved my search 10 feet further out with each rotation of the house until I'd covered a path 30 feet wide and I'd still not found him. I had really hoped that I'd find him before I reached the tree line. Now the hunting was going to be a lot tougher, and I still wasn't up to speed. My head hurt, and I suspected that I'd caught some of the shotgun pellets.

I went back into the house to check on the others and found Jonas sitting at the table with Mama D, an ice pack on his head. Trinity had made coffee and was pouring a cup when I came through. She looked up, and I shook my head that I hadn't found him yet as I passed through the kitchen to get the flashlight.

When I came back, she held out a cup of coffee, and I took it, stowing the gun in my jacket pocket to free up a hand. I hated putting the gun away, but I was fairly sure if anyone was out there, I would have run into them by now. I was desperate to find Mac, but I needed both the kick from the caffeine and the warmth it provided, so I was taking it with me. Jonas just watched me as I strode by, too groggy to come with me, and obviously hating the fact. With one hand full of coffee and the other holding the flashlight, I kicked the door open and

headed back out into the night.

* * *

AN HOUR LATER I was still looking. My frustration had mounted with each passing moment, and I found myself eventually yelling out loud for him, as well as in my head. I had searched the out buildings and been through the trees along the driveway. It had been a long, slow search and still I hadn't found him.

I flopped down on a big rock and yelled at him mentally for ignoring me. Exhaustion and shock had been grinding on me, and I was about at the end of my rope when I finally heard him. It took me another 10 minutes to actually locate him, even with his help. If he hadn't woken up, I would have never found him. As it was, I wasn't sure I could help him, now that I finally knew where he was.

He was alive. I was thankful for that. But Brown had used the power that he had kept hidden from us and thrown Mac off the side of the mountain. I crawled on my belly to the edge and shined the light down to find him lying 20 feet below me on the ledge that had broken his fall. It had broken him too. Mac was trapped on the mountain and couldn't move his legs. He was paralyzed. I took off my coat and dropped it to him along with the flashlight and started back to the cabin at a run.

"I found him," I announced, throwing open the door to the kitchen and startling everyone. I saw the gun in Jonas' hand, but barely even gave it a thought. He could barely even focus after that knock on the head, much less aim a gun. "He's alive, but we've got a problem."

"What? You mean bigger than the problems we already have?" Trinity asked, pouring me another cup of coffee.

I wrapped my hands around the cup, grateful for the warmth. It was colder outside than I realized and I had no idea how Mac had survived so far with his injuries. The thought had me hopping back up and gathering supplies.

I grabbed a Thermos and started filling it with coffee for Mac as I explained the situation. As I moved around the kitchen gathering food and supplies, they listened quietly. I was nearly finished when Trinity left the room. I heard her running up the stairs and within minutes, she was back.

"What should we do?" she asked, piling me down with the blankets she had

ripped from the beds. “We can’t call the police. Not with this mess. How do we get help?”

Well, now there was the million dollar question, and I didn’t have an answer. I just left them sitting there, dragging blankets behind me as I headed to the tool shed in search of a rope.

I was heading back to the cabin thirty minutes later. I had lowered the blankets, coffee, and some food down to Mac with the rope I had found in the shed. The rope itself was in bad shape, and I had doubts it would even hold the weight of the supplies I had lowered down, much less anything heavier, but it had surprised me and done the job.

From above, it was impossible to see what other injuries he had incurred. He seemed to think that his back was the main problem, but I was worried that with a fall that bad, we were looking at possible internal injuries not to mention other broken bones and injuries that he wasn’t feeling yet. We needed to get him out of there, but Trinity was right. We couldn’t call in the police. There was only one place we could turn to for help. It was crazy, but it was the only thing I could think of.

“How’s he doing?” Jonas asked as I came back in the door.

I looked over at him. He still looked pretty bad, but his eyes were clear, and he could make complete sentences, so I figured he’d survive.

“He’s alive. For now. But I’ve got to get him off the mountain.” I braced myself for the next part because I already knew they weren’t going to like it. I didn’t like it either, but there just wasn’t any other way. “You all need to pack your things and get out of here. Trinity, you go pack your and Mama D’s stuff up, and I’ll take care of getting Jonas packed. You need to be on the road. Now.”

“What about your stuff?” Trinity asked, moving to clear the table.

“Leave that,” I told her, stilling her hands. “Go pack. My stuff stays here. I stay here.”

“What do you mean you’re staying here?” she said, freezing in place. “We need to get Mac and get out of here. Together.”

“We can’t get Mac. There’s no way I can get him off the mountain. No way any of us can. We need help. People who can go down there and get him. There’s no point in you being here, being involved. You need to leave. The sooner you’re gone, the sooner I can get to him.”

She wasn’t happy but seemed to understand. She set the dishes back down on the table and headed upstairs to start packing.

“What are you going to do after we leave?” Jonas asked as soon as she was out of earshot. The anger in his voice was palpable. It wasn’t helping things although I knew he was angry at the situation and not at me.

“As soon as you’re gone, I’m going to set this place on fire. Once it’s burning good, I’m going to call the Agency and tell them to come and get us.”

Jonas closed his eyes, and I could see his jaw grinding, but when he finally looked at me and nodded, I could tell he didn’t see any other way out. He may not have liked it, but it was the only way to get help.

I left the room and ran upstairs to pack. It took me all of 5 minutes to throw his things into a bag and head back downstairs with it. By the time Trinity had finished packing up her and Mama D’s things, and piling them all into the RV, I had filled Jonas in on the plan. He still wasn’t happy, but he was thinking clearly enough to help iron out some rough spots. It was a huge risk, but it was all we had.

I walked outside with them and helped Trinity get Mama D and Jonas into the RV. We said our goodbyes and I watched until their tail lights disappeared into the distance, sad to see them go, but grateful that they were safe and out of the line of fire. At least for now.

I swung by the shed and grabbed the gas can I’d found while looking for the rope. It was a two-gallon can and was over half full. Not much, but I didn’t need much to get the job done. I headed back to the house and dropped the can off in the kitchen and grabbed the guns off the counter, placing them outside, before heading upstairs to take one last look through the house. I wanted to make sure we’d removed all evidence of Jonas, Trinity and Mama D having been there and make sure the scene was set for what was coming next. I stopped by my room to pick up my cell phone, checking to make sure it was charged and that I had service before slipping it into my pocket. Then I headed back downstairs to finish up.

I checked the small study off the living room where Brown had been staying. There was nothing of his there. He hadn’t had anything but the clothes on his back when we’d picked him up, and I’d made him throw those out the van window. I stripped the sheets and blankets off the sofa where he’d been sleeping and dragged them through the living room to pile them on top of the blanket already covering his body. I looked around one last time and decided I’d delayed enough. Trinity had had plenty of time to be well away from the area. All I was doing now was putting off the inevitable.

The smell of the gasoline was almost overpowering as I poured it over the pile of blankets, trying not to think about what I was doing. I dropped the empty can into the pile and pulled out the matches.

I stood for a moment, taking one last look, the book of matches in my hand. Never in my life did I ever think I’d be doing something like this. *God forgive me*, I prayed, as I lit the match and tossed it onto the soaked blankets. The flame

caught immediately with a loud whoof and within seconds, the blanket was engulfed.

I went back outside, retrieved the guns, and stood back to watch until I was sure the flames had taken hold of the house. It happened faster than I'd thought it would. Within minutes, the entire first floor was in flames, and smoke was barreling up into the sky.

Satisfied, I broke into a slow run and headed back to Mac. By the time I got there, I was winded from expending too much energy at too high an altitude, so I didn't have to pretend to be out of breath when I pulled out my cell and dialed the Agency begging for help. I hung up and laid down at the edge of the cliff, calling down to Mac that help was on the way. Then we went to work setting the scene.

I shined the light down as Mac struggled to shove the blankets and supplies off the edge of the ledge. I waited until he was done before tossing the guns over the side, and watched as they disappeared into the blackness below. I had no idea if they would be visible when the sun came up, but if things went as planned, we would be long gone before that happened. Once I was sure he was set, I tossed the flashlight onto the ground and laid down on the rocks and the dirt to watch the house burn, as we waited.

By the time Hughes arrived with the troops the house was fully engulfed, the surrounding area awash with light from the flames. I watched as Hughes got out of the lead car and started directing his men to fan out and start the search. It had taken them nearly thirty minutes to arrive. I was shaking badly from the cold and knew Mac had to be in far worse shape. I closed my eyes and prayed that they would find us quickly.

IN THE END, it took longer than I'd planned. I was sure the flashlight I'd left on and lying nearby would be a pretty good indication of our location, but the batteries started going, and the light was pretty dim by the time Hughes got there. I was about to the point of getting up and staggering over to them when one of the men finally saw me lying there and sounded the alarm. Within minutes, there were people swarming all over. Medics had been brought from the Agency as well as an unmarked ambulance, which I was hustled into while they brought Mac up the mountainside. All in all, it was quite impressive.

I sat huddled in a thermal heat blanket while they checked my vitals, managing to keep an eye on Hughes despite the interference of the medic. We'd seen Hughes with a couple of guys, the night we watched them at the Agency, but there were substantially more people here tonight. I doubted everyone was in on it and looking out over the group that was working so hard to help us, I figured that worst case, maybe half of them were in league with Brown. Problem was I didn't have the faintest idea who.

So far, everyone had pretty much left me alone, with the exception of the medic who was fast becoming annoying. I was playing the role of shell-shocked victim, which wasn't much of a stretch, but I made sure to keep a vacant, confused look on my face, discouraging anyone from pelting me with questions. I preferred to wait and see what they came up with than volunteer information to them.

The house fire had pretty much burned itself out and so far, no fire trucks or police had shown up, making me wonder if they just didn't know about it, or if they had been warned off. The implications of that possibility sent a shiver through me that had the medic swarming all over me again, rechecking my vitals for the umpteenth time.

The absence of flames had sent the area back into a moonlit darkness. They had pulled some cars around and were using the headlights to illuminate the area. Movement from the house caught my eye, and I watched as a hulking figure dislodged itself from the smoking remains and slowly made its way over to the group gathered by the cars. It was the fire suit that gave him the slow plodding gait and large mass. I cringed as he reached up to pull off the helmet that had allowed him to go inside the house despite the heat that was still radiating from the burned mass. I hadn't counted on a fire suit, hoping I'd have a

few more hours before they were able to get in and find Brown's body. I knew that was not to be the case as he stared over at the ambulance for a few minutes and then headed off in Hughes direction. It didn't take long before they started walking toward me.

"Who's body is in the house?" Hughes demanded. I ignored him, choosing to watch the rescue scene instead. They had finally brought Mac up, and now the other two medics were finally able to get to him. The group was clustered around him, and I couldn't really see anything, but at least, they had him off that ledge, and he was getting some help.

Hughes snapped his fingers in front of my eyes. Not once, but twice. How rude. I slowly turned to look at him working hard to keep the irritation from showing on my face. The man with the fire suit stepped up next to him. He was big even without the additional bulk from the suit. With it, he managed to block out most of the rescue scene I had been watching.

"What?" I mumbled, sounding completely confused.

"There's a body in the house." Hughes spoke slowly and enunciated every word like he was talking to an imbecile. "Who is it?"

If they didn't know who it was, I had no intention of telling them. They could figure it out on their own. I hesitated just a moment and then burst into tears, muffling my sobs in the blanket.

"I don't think it's a good idea to question her right now, Sir." My medic, who had retreated to the background when Hughes arrived, was now pushing him aside to check my pulse rate again. "They're bringing in Sean right now, and we need to get her ready to roll."

He was helping me to my feet and onto a seat that was tucked into the back of the ambulance before turning away to help load Mac onto the gurney secured against the opposite wall.

Safely away from Hughes, I lifted my head to watch. Mac was deathly pale, and I couldn't see if he was breathing or not. They had left him strapped in the rescue basket and were loading both him and the basket onto the gurney. Not a good sign.

The other medic climbed in, and the doors swung shut behind him. Mac's lips were blue, and I prayed that I hadn't had him throw the blankets off too early. It had taken longer than I'd expected for Hughes to get there. The medics were ripping open drawers, pulling out needles and tubing at record speed. I pressed back, trying my best to stay out of the way as they worked on him. By the time we started moving, they had started an IV and had him hooked up to monitors. I let myself breathe again as the faint, slow beat of his heart filled the air. He was alive. For now, that was enough. I would worry about the rest later.

* * *

IT TOOK ONLY twenty minutes to get back to the Agency. During the drive, Mac had warmed up, and his pulse rate had grown steadier. He was still very pale, but at least he wasn't blue anymore. I looked out the windshield as we pulled through the gate. The sun had come up during the drive, but the complex was still dark, lost in the mountain shadows. I hadn't been able to see if Hughes had left people on site or not, but had to assume that he had. I just hoped they were concentrating their efforts on the house and not the mountainside where Mac had gone off. I glanced down to check on Mac and was startled to find him looking back at me. The medics were busy packing things away in preparation for transferring us and hadn't noticed he was awake. He threw me a quick wink and closed his eyes again as we rolled to a stop.

The fact that Mac was awake made me feel a little better. My stomach had been in knots from the moment they'd closed the ambulance doors. Hughes was nothing short of a monster, and I'd just served us both up to him on a silver platter. The door opened, and medical personnel moved quickly, transferring Mac out of the back, basket and all, onto a waiting gurney, the medics following him out with the IV bag and monitors in tow. I moved to the door, pausing to look up at the mountainside that flanked the underground entrance. It had been nearly four hours since I'd made the call to Hughes. If things had gone according to plan, it was entirely possible Jonas was already in place, somewhere on that mountain, keeping watch and waiting. *Be there, Jonas*, I prayed, counting on Hughes only being able to sense my emotions. If he could read my thoughts, it was over before it started.

I took the hand that suddenly appeared to help me step down out of the back and was shocked to feel the vibration that traveled up my arm. I flinched in response, trying to pull away only to have a second hand grasp my elbow to hold me in place.

"Easy there, Ms. Morrison. We wouldn't want you to fall out." I looked down into a pair of startling green eyes, instantly recognizing the voice. The Director of the Agency. The man I had spoken to on the phone, begging for help. Small and compact, I doubted he reached 5 feet, but the energy was coming off him in waves, giving him the presence of a man twice his size. To say he was intimidating was a gross understatement. I found myself hoping with every ounce of my being he was on our side. If he wasn't . . . I couldn't even finish the

thought. The implications were too immense.

“I’m so glad you called,” he whispered, guiding me to the wheelchair waiting nearby, dismissing Hughes who was hovering nearby with a wave of his hand. “You’ve had us all very worried.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder sending a pulse of energy surging through me. I had no idea what it was, but it was powerful. More powerful than anything I’d encountered and it scared me to death.

He moved quickly to the entrance door and held it open as the nurse wheeled me through and then proceeded to turn the chair around to back me into the waiting elevator. The Director stood there waiting, watching me as the doors closed quietly between us, leaving me to wonder what on earth I had gotten us into.

* * *

THE ELEVATOR SHOT down in a trip that was longer than I wanted to contemplate. When Mac had said there were underground facilities, I was thinking “root cellar” underground. Not “bowels of the earth” underground. I had to remind myself that this wasn’t Cheyenne Mountain, and we weren’t at NORAD, but I wasn’t sure it was all that different. The aboveground facilities gave the impression of isolated luxury. This reeked of secret government installations, sending shivers down my spine. The elevator doors opened to a main corridor from which several hallways branched out. We took the one to the right and ended up in what I had to assume was considered the medical wing.

They may have been underground, but the medical facilities at the Agency rivaled any hospital I’d ever been in and the room they put me in rivaled most luxury hotels. Obviously, the government had spared no expense. I had to wonder if the local authorities knew about all this and what kind of relationship they had with the Agency. Not that I necessarily wanted the locals involved, but it’s always good to know who your friends are.

Three hours after we arrived, I found myself lying in a hospital bed hooked up to an impressive array of monitors and machines and the inevitable IV drip. I’d been the victim of endless poking, prodding, scans and x-rays and the only thing they’d found wrong with me, aside from the bumps and bruises one would expect from being thrown around, was a concussion that was making its

presence felt in the form of a throbbing headache. What I had assumed were shotgun pellets had turned out to be splinters of wood that had flown from the impact of the shotgun. They had quickly dug them out and covered the spots with band aids. Everything said and done, I had been incredibly lucky.

The nurse left, promising to return with some pain killers for my head, after informing me that my blood pressure was high and my pulse rate, way too rapid. Big surprise there after the night I'd had, and now I was trapped underground in a hospital gown. One of my least favorite things. They'd taken my clothes, although I had to admit, what with them covered with Brown's blood and other things I didn't want to think about, I was happy to be rid of them.

I could forgive them the hospital gown, though, simply because of the bathroom. After all the tests, they'd brought me back to the room, and ushered me into the private bathroom. The towels were heated along with the floor, and the shower was a thing of beauty. I'd left the nurse waiting outside for a good 45 minutes while I indulged in what had to be the best shower of my life. I don't know if it was because of the multiple streams of hot water, the aromatic soaps, and shampoos or the fact that I could finally get rid of the grisly reminders of the hours before. Whatever it was, I decided to relax and enjoy the moment. It might not come again for a long time.

As soon as I got out, I asked again about Mac, but no one seemed to know anything yet. I had to be content for now that he was being taken care of. While I'd been lying there in the cold, waiting for help to arrive, I'd had moments of doubt. Big ones. Fears that once Hughes had me, he'd just finish Mac off while he was helpless. Hughes had killed a child trying to find me. I didn't think he'd balk at taking Mac out if he thought he needed to.

That he'd been acting his role as Head of Security was a comforting thought. He might have others working at the Agency for him, but not everyone. Right now, there were doctors and nurses keeping an eye out for us, and while that certainly didn't guarantee our safety, it was going to make it a lot tougher for him to get to either of us.

The nurse came back in, bearing promised pain medications. It had been a rough night, and now that the adrenaline and the effects of the hot shower had worn off, I was definitely feeling it. Mix in lack of sleep and tons of stress and I was pretty much dead on my feet. Hughes and the Director hadn't shown up yet to question me, but I knew that had to be on the agenda soon, and I needed to be able to think clearly. I knew the drugs would mess with my head, but I also knew I needed rest, and this might be the best time to get it. The events of the night had been unexpected, and I was pretty certain Hughes hadn't had time to plan out his next move yet. Feeling at least somewhat secure, I downed the pills and

waited as the nurse took my vitals, yet again, and then began messing around with the strange paper like blanket they had on the bed. She attached a hose at the bottom and reached over to a nearby machine, flipping a switch. Warm air immediately began to flow into the blanket, puffing it up to the size of a regular comforter, but amazingly light and toasty warm.

State of the art, I thought, my eyes beginning to droop already from the effect of the pills. I hoped Mac was getting the same treatment I was. I reached out a thought to him, not knowing if he could hear me, to let him know everything was alright and drifted off to sleep.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I WOKE WITH a start, completely disoriented. It took a minute to remember where I was and why. The room was dark and had an unusual smell that I couldn't put my finger on. The monitors were quietly beeping away, their lights casting strange glows around the room. I slowly lifted my head from the pillow, pleasantly surprised to find my headache gone and my neck and back nowhere near as sore and stiff as I had expected. I slowly sat up, wondering where the light switch was when I realized that the room was gradually growing brighter on its own.

"It's set to respond to your movements." I looked over to see a young woman who had slipped quietly into the room while I was watching the lights. "The lights are tied into the monitors. They dim when you're tired, encouraging you to rest. Go dark when you're asleep and gradually come on when you wake up."

She'd come across the room as she'd explained and was now checking the monitors and noting figures on my chart. The fact that her entrance was timed perfectly wasn't totally lost on me. Apparently the lights weren't the only things tied into the monitors. I sincerely hoped I hadn't talked in my sleep.

"You're suspicious." She said it as a statement, a smile in her voice. I just watched her as she finished up with the chart and slid it back in its holder. "I don't blame you. I would be too, but I assure you, you have nothing to worry about."

She had no clue how much I had to be worried about, but I wasn't going to contradict her. The less I said, the better, as far as I was concerned. My continued silence didn't seem to bother her. In fact, she seemed to take it in stride.

"My name is Jenny. I've been taking care of you," she informed me softly. "How's your head feeling? Any pain?"

"You're a Doctor?" I asked, shaking my head in answer to her question. She didn't look like one. There was no lab coat, no stethoscope. No attitude.

"We prefer the term Healer. Doctor is too limiting a word for what we do here." She checked my eyes and seemed satisfied.

"How is ... Sean," I asked, barely catching myself in time. Mac had said they

only knew him as Sean here. I had no idea if that was his real name or an alias, but it didn't matter. She knew who I was talking about.

"His injuries are severe, as I'm sure you had guessed. It will take time."

That was hardly an answer, and she knew it, but it was obvious she wasn't going to volunteer anymore, so I let it go. For now.

The door opened, and the Director walked in, his presence filling the room. His hair, which had looked brown in the early morning shadows, was actually a deep mahogany red. He wore it longer than most people holding an executive position would have, but then most executives didn't work in jeans and sneakers. That he did and still managed to exude power and authority was a testament to his ability. Frankly, I was surprised he could be in the same room with the monitors as much power as he gave off, but maybe it didn't effect machinery the same way it had me.

"How's our patient, Jenny?"

"Your patient wants to know how Sean is doing," I said, cutting her off. "In fact, I'd like to see him."

"I'm afraid that's not possible." He waited for me to respond, but I stayed quiet and just watched him, waiting. "He's alive, Taylor. That's all I can give you for now. It will have to be enough."

It wasn't enough, and I wanted to tell him exactly that, but there was something about the way he said it that stopped the words from leaving my mouth. I looked over at Jenny, who hadn't said a thing since he'd come into the room and was surprised to see her give me a barely perceptible shake of her head. I might have imagined it, but it had me wondering enough that I decided to keep quiet.

"In the rush to get you and Sean to medical attention, I neglected to introduce myself," He continued, drawing my attention back to him. "I'm Dr. Alex Connors, and I'm the Director here at the Agency. We spoke on the phone when you called in. I can't tell you how relieved I was to hear from you. We'd heard that you and Sean had both perished in the fire in Little Rock."

My brain must have been more rattled than I had thought because his words were swimming around in my head. The fire had been days ago. The police had had plenty of time to figure out that the bodies they'd found weren't ours, and yet Connors was standing there telling me that he didn't know we had survived until I phoned in. We had assumed the police would be searching for us, wanting some answers. If Connors really didn't know we were alive, that meant the police didn't know either. Someone had covered it up.

Before I had time to think about who that someone might be, the door swung open, and Hughes came sliding through. I took one look at him and knew my

reprieve was over. The inquisition was about to begin.

“Dr. Connors, Jenny. Ms. Morrison.” He nodded a greeting to the others before turning his attention to me. “I’m Matthew Hughes, Head of Security here at the Agency. I’d like to ask you a few questions if you’re up to it?”

He was smiling and pleasant, and if I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought he was one of the good guys. I nodded at him and watched as Connors moved to take a seat, apparently intending to stay.

“She’s had a severe head injury, and she’s still suffering the effects of shock,” Jenny informed Hughes, moving up closer to the head of my bed to see the monitors better. “I don’t want her upset.”

I still wasn’t exactly sure what was going on here, but the fact that my concussion was now being labeled as severe, and I was in shock wasn’t lost on me. I settled back into my pillow and tried to look the part.

“I don’t want to upset her, Jenny, but there has been a fatality, and I need to ask some questions. I’ll try to be brief.”

I could actually hear the heart monitor speed up as he mentioned fatality and tried to slow my heart rate, as the realization hit me that I was essentially tied up to a lie detector. Best to stick to the truth, or as close to it as possible.

“We found a body in the house that we haven’t been able to identify yet,” he stated, pulling a chair up closer and settling into it. “You have any idea who it might be?”

The presence of the monitors wasn’t lost on Hughes. He may have asked me the question, but his eyes were glued to the monitors, waiting for my answer. Fortunately, there were several reasons to account for my rising blood pressure and racing heart rate. The best of which had been conveniently supplied by Jenny.

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s probably Dr. Brown,” I said, putting a catch in my voice.

“Dr. Brown?” Hughes asked, leaning forward in his chair. “Dr. Caleb Brown? From this Agency?”

I nodded, nearly in tears. Jenny patted my shoulder and handed me a tissue, throwing Hughes a warning look.

“Dr. Brown has been missing for nearly a month, Taylor.” Connors stood up, clearly agitated. If he was in on this, he was doing a good job of hiding it. “Are you’re saying that he was with you, and he’s been killed?”

I shook my head and tried to look confused. “It all happened so fast. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I think they found us.”

“Who found you?” Hughes demanded.

“The men who are after me. The men who kidnapped Dr. Brown.”

“Brown was kidnapped?” Hughes finally looked at me, and I could see the question in his eyes before he said it. “If that’s true, how did you two end up in that cabin?”

“We rescued him. Sean and me. Then we hid at the cabin. They must have followed us there.”

Hughes looked at me unblinking while I batted the tears away.

“Who is after you, Taylor? Who kidnapped Brown?”

I cleared my mind, the best I could. I was pretty sure Hughes couldn’t read my thoughts. If he could, he wouldn’t be in here asking questions, but I wasn’t ready to take any chances. Everything hinged on Hughes believing that we had no clue that he was involved. I wasn’t taking this risk just to get to Hughes. He was just part of a bigger picture. One I couldn’t see yet, but it was getting clearer by the minute.

“Who kidnapped Dr. Brown?” I repeated finally. “I’m pretty sure it was the same people who attacked us in Little Rock. Dr. Connors?” I turned my attention to him, ignoring Hughes for the moment. “I think you have a traitor in the Agency.”

Jenny gasped, and Connors’ jaw dropped open. I refused to look at Hughes, afraid I wouldn’t be able to keep the condemnation off my face and give myself away. I let my statement hang out there in the air, waiting to see which way people jumped. Hughes wasn’t the only one looking for answers.

I watched Connors instead and caught his furtive look at Jenny. He’d already known. They both did. I didn’t see her as the mastermind here. She just didn’t have the presence, but Connors did. In spades. How easy would it have been for the Director of the Agency to be selling his star pupils to the highest bidder? It was possible, but it just didn’t feel right. The only thing I knew for sure was that Hughes was definitely involved, and if Connors and Jenny were in on it with him, there wouldn’t be any need for all this subterfuge. Hughes would have just walked in and taken me.

“Taylor, what makes you think someone here is responsible for this?” Hughes broke into my thoughts, and I looked down, choosing to pick at the air blanket rather than risk looking at him.

“Because the man the Agency sent to watch me, attacked me. He threw coffee on me and followed me around. Sean told me he worked here. He told me he was called back to the Agency after things started happening with me. That’s when this guy showed up. Someone here had to have set it up.”

“How did Sean know who he was? Did he see him?”

I wasn’t about to tell Hughes that Sean had hunted Marcus down and killed him, although I was sure he suspected as much and was just fishing to see if I’d

bite.

“No, but he didn’t have to. He saw the police sketch, and I guess he recognized him.”

“The police were involved?”

“He tried to kill Jonas,” I explained, barely remembering to use the name they knew him by. “He shot at him. Everyone was looking for him.”

I leaned back into the pillow and closed my eyes, waiting for Hughes’ next move. My head was starting to hurt, and I was tired and hungry. I hadn’t had anything to eat since dinner, and it had been a busy night.

“This was what I was worried about.” Hughes stood up abruptly, his fingers tapping his pants leg as he turned to face Connors, effectively cutting me out of the loop. “I hadn’t said anything because there wasn’t any proof, but I suspected someone here in the Agency was selling secrets, and it turns out I was right. She’s talking about Marcus Adams, who was sent to replace Sean while he was being debriefed.” He turned back to me. “Taylor, what happened in Little Rock? What about the fire? We thought you had been killed. There were bodies.”

“I know. I know there were,” I answered, the emotion in my voice real this time. “Marcus disappeared, and I don’t know, maybe he told them about me, or they panicked or something, but they attacked us. Jonas and Trinity were there, and they just attacked us. They cut the power and came crashing through the door. Jonas tried to fight back, but they were all over us. They were going to kill Jonas and Trinity. They were dragging me out the door, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.”

“Sean got there in time. He killed them to protect you,” Connors chimed in, and I nodded in agreement. Mac and I had already decided to reveal as little as possible about the extent of my so-called talents and that he was going to be the one responsible for the deaths in the condo. That was what I was going to tell them, but Connors beat me to it.

I felt my anger rise, remembering what had really happened and knowing that Hughes was to blame, if not fully, then at least to some extent. I’d killed to protect the people I cared about, and I’d been forced to do it. I didn’t dare look at him, as I struggled to tamp it back down. The last thing I needed now was to give in to my emotions and go after him.

“It’s alright Taylor. It had to be done.” Connors’ voice was soft and oddly comforting. “Where are Jonas and Trinity, now? Were they with you at the cabin?”

“No.” I shook my head and tried to gather my thoughts. *Stick to the truth, as much as possible*, I reminded myself. *Get the names right. Don’t mess this up*. Too much depended on them buying my story. “They went after Trinity’s

grandmother when they lost us. We barely got her out in time. They're not safe with me. I sent them away. We got them some money and sent them away, so they'd be safe."

"Why didn't you just call the Agency?" Hughes asked accusingly. "We'd have kept them safe."

"Sean wanted to. He knew I needed help, but I was scared. Someone sent Marcus after me. Someone here at the Agency. I didn't want to come, but Sean was right. I needed help. We were on our way here when we found Dr. Brown."

"Yes, I was wondering about that, Taylor." Hughes cut in. "How exactly did you manage to find Brown?"

"That part was pretty easy, actually," I answered him back. "He told me where he was."

"He told you?" asked Hughes, like he didn't already know. "Brown knew you were there? In Denver?"

"I guess so." He'd just slipped up. I hadn't said where we'd found Brown. Just that we'd found him. Nice to know he wasn't infallible. "I don't know how this works, but I heard him. I guess he could hear me too because he knew who I was. He told us he'd been kidnapped. I assume by the same men who attacked us."

"So you decided to rescue him."

"I couldn't just leave him there. Sean had told me Dr. Brown had handled my case. They'd taken him to try to find me. It was my fault. Besides, it was Dr. Brown who we were going to see. Sean told me that if anyone could help me control this thing, it was him."

"How did you break him out?" Connors asked. "There must have been guards."

"There were, but it wasn't hard. I think they wanted us to find him. They had a tracking device planted on him. I guess they figured if he got away, he'd lead them right to us. Sean found it and got rid of it, but I guess it was too late. They found us anyway."

The room was quiet for a minute, as what I had told them started to sink in, letting them draw their own conclusions. I could practically see Hughes' mind twisting around, trying to put the pieces together. He was the one that put the tracking device on Brown. He knew it wasn't working. The only way anyone could have found us was if Brown had told them where we were. He knew Brown hadn't been in contact with him, so who did he tell?

Hughes was sitting there, right now, wondering that same thing. Had Brown double crossed him and sold me to a higher bidder, or had his boss decided to cut him out of the picture entirely? Either way, it was trouble for Hughes. He might

not be needed anymore. I'd be lying if I said the thought of Hughes walking around scared that the next minute might be his last wasn't appealing, but I knew it wouldn't last for long.

I didn't know of any professionals that used shotguns. Hard to conceal hardware that large and they were exceptionally noisy. I could attest to that. Not the best choice in covert situations. I had no way of knowing how much they'd be able to tell from what was left of Brown, but I knew that once they started sifting through the wreckage, they'd find evidence of what really happened. It was just a matter of time before they got suspicious.

"Tell me something, Taylor," Hughes finally asked. "How is it, with Dr. Brown dead, and that's supposing the body is actually Dr. Brown, and Sean incapacitated, that you escaped?"

There it was. Finally. The question I had been dreading. Now we'd see how good a liar I really was because the answer wasn't going to be anywhere near the truth.

"Dr. Brown stopped them," I paused, hearing my heartbeat race across the monitor, unable to control it. "He stepped in front of the gun and told me to run. That's when they shot him."

"Dr. Brown told you to run?" he asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"Yes. So I ran and hid in the woods." I nodded, sick at the need to paint Brown as a hero, and waited for him to put it together. I was beginning to think I'd given Hughes too much credit when a smile slowly spread across his face. He thought he'd figured it out. That Brown had told me to run meant that he hadn't known the attackers, indicating to Hughes that he was still a player in their little game.

"Taylor, I don't think the men that killed Dr. Brown were after you."

"You don't?" Now I was the one that looked puzzled. In both my scenarios, the bad guys were after me. Hughes had apparently come up with something else. I could hardly wait to hear it.

"No. I think this was a robbery, plain and simple and Dr. Brown got in their way."

Okay, that came out of nowhere. I suppose, now that I thought about it, it was possible. I thought Hughes would jump to the conclusion that Brown had double-crossed him because I had already made that assumption. After all, our good Dr. Brown was prowling around the house on his own when all he had to do was make a simple phone call for help. No, Brown had been up to something, something that didn't involve Hughes, but for whatever reason Hughes wasn't seeing it. Or maybe he was and didn't want anyone else to know. What a tangled web we weave.

“Dr. Brown probably thought the same thing you did. That they were the same men who’d taken him and he stepped in to protect you from them. It’s my guess that when they realized you’d gotten away, they panicked and torched the house to try and cover up what had happened.”

“You think this was a robbery gone bad?” Connors asked.

“I do. It’s fairly common up here in the mountains, but we’ll know more once my men have had time to gather some evidence. In the meantime, Taylor is still in substantial danger. There’s no doubt, someone is after her, and we need to take precautions to make sure they don’t succeed. I’d like to place a guard on her, around the clock.”

“You think that’s necessary? The Agency is well protected. If this was a robbery, then they don’t know that she’s here. Surely she’s safe enough.”

“There’s still the fact that someone here is selling information, Dr. Connors. Until we know who it is, she’s no more safe inside the Agency than she was outside it. I’d rather err on the side of caution.”

“Alright, Hughes. I trust your judgment. Why don’t you go and get things started and I’ll meet up with you in a bit to go over things.”

Hughes hesitated a second, obviously not happy about being dismissed, but he finally went. The mood lightened dramatically with his exit, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Any evidence they came up with would support Hughes’ theory about it being a robbery. Robbers used shotguns after all and I didn’t care what they thought as long as it bought me some time. Or it would as long as I’d done my job right and gotten all traces of Mama D, Trinity and Jonas out of the house before I torched it. I needed Hughes to believe them to be gone, and that Mac and I were the only ones he had to deal with.

“You must be very tired after that.” I jerked my eyes open to see Dr. Connors standing by my bedside, a small smile playing over his face. “Hughes can be ... quite exhausting.”

“Actually, I’m more hungry than anything. Don’t you feed the inmates?”

I heard Jenny chuckle behind me and realized she was removing me from the monitors. Or them from me. I wasn’t sure which, but it felt good to be rid of them.

“You’ve missed breakfast service I’m afraid. Might I suggest, if you’re feeling up to it, that you join me in the lodge restaurant. Perhaps, I can take you on a tour of the Agency afterward. Maybe answer some of your questions.”

“I’m hardly dressed for a date, Dr. Connors. I may be starving, but I have no intention of wandering around with my backside exposed.”

He laughed and handed me a bag that I hadn’t seen him bring in.

“I foresaw this as a problem and came prepared. I think you’ll find what you

need in here. I'll wait for you outside in the hall."

Connors had managed to find a sweat suit that was close to the right size. There was a pair of socks, but no undergarments. I didn't really care. Anything was better than the hospital gown. Jenny stayed while I got dressed, waiting to cut the id bracelet off my arm before letting me out of the room.

"Hughes will give you a different one later on," she informed me. "He likes to know where the Clients are while they're here, and he'll particularly want to know where you are. For now, you're off the radar, so don't get lost. We won't have any idea where to look for you."

I jerked my head around to look at her, wondering if she had warned me on purpose or was just chatty. Either way, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of being leashed by Hughes. Irritated, I shoved my feet into the slippers that the hospital had provided and tossed the hospital gown into the trash.

"Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure and stay with Dr. Connors." She nodded and led me outside the room to where Connors was waiting for me. We made our way through the hallways and into the elevator, Connors delivering a running commentary on the medical facilities and the work they did there. Clients who exhibited any kind of healing ability were brought there to test experimental treatments utilizing their abilities in addition to traditional medicine.

"Is that what Jenny meant when she said they prefer the term Healer? That she isn't a doctor?"

"Jenny is a doctor and a very good one at that, but she also has the power of healing. The ability to sense a problem and be able to direct her energy to it. There are others with similar powers, but not many, making it a limited resource. What they can do, though, has opened doors that otherwise would have stayed closed. What we're doing here is learning to involve the mind in the healing process. We've had some fascinating results."

The doors opened, and we stepped into the foyer, which was flooded with sunlight. I wished the bag he'd given me had contained some good sunglasses.

"Yes, it's always a little hard on your eyes when you first come up," he said when I flinched from the light. "No matter how much light we provide down below, there's just no substitute for the real thing."

He held the door open for me, and I moved through into the fresh mountain air. He pointed the way to the lodge, and we headed off down the path.

"Jenny mentioned that Hughes tracks the Clients. Any particular reason why?" I asked, still wondering how I was going to get out of that one.

"It's not always easy to adjust to having the kind of abilities we work with here, Taylor. We try to bring Clients in as soon as their power starts to manifest, but even then, it can easily become an emotional upheaval that is difficult to

accept. Hughes feels it's in their best interest to observe them, even if it's from a distance. Just to ensure their safety." He turned to look at me. "I'm sure you can understand that."

My mind flashed back to the lives I had changed, the men I had killed, and I could understand all too well. I nodded and he gave me a sad smile.

"At least, that's what he claims, but after the story I heard this morning, I'm not so sure." He stopped just outside the lodge and stood quietly, looking out over the grounds. "Taylor, is Hughes involved in this?"

"Are you involved in this?" I asked back, even though I was fairly certain he wasn't.

"No. At least, I hope not." I stopped walking and looked down at him. I'm 5'7" and Connors barely came past my chin. In the sunlight, his hair sparkled with shots of vibrant red. His green eyes were still startling, but now I could make out the fine lines etched around them. When I'd first met him, I'd pegged him to be in his 30's. Young to hold such a high position, but stranger things had happened. Now, I wasn't sure. He spoke like someone older, carried himself differently. "Taylor, I thought you were dead until you phoned last night. Hearing your story today, learning that the Agency is somehow complicit in this astounds me. As the Director, I am ultimately responsible. I need to know if you think Hughes is involved in this."

I hesitated, unsure whether to trust him. Fact of the matter was, Mac was out of commission, and I was on my own in here, unlike Hughes, who had heaven only knows how many people working for him. I needed to even the odds. At the very least, I needed someone to make sure Hughes didn't get to Mac. Connors would be a powerful ally. Or a powerful enemy. I needed to make a decision, though, and now. Time was short, and I might not get another chance. I decided to just go with my gut. It hadn't failed me yet.

"No, Dr. Connors, I don't *think* he's involved. I know it for a fact." I watched his face closely when I told him, looking for any sign that I was wrong to trust him, but he took it like I'd hoped he would. He was shaken, but the flash of anger in his eyes was unmistakable. "Marcus Adams worked for him, and so did Dr. Brown."

I watched amazed, as his body suddenly seemed to shimmer in front of me. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths as energy poured off him like heat off a desert highway. I'd never seen anything like it, and I took a step back, putting some distance between us.

The shimmering stopped as fast as it started. He had it under control in seconds, but it had been an impressive display while it lasted. His eyes popped open, and he looked over at me, a look of confusion on his face, I assumed

because of the look on mine.

“Ah. You can see that, can you?” I nodded. He stepped over to me and motioned me up the stairs to the lodge entrance. “You felt it last night when I helped you out of the ambulance. That surprised me. You’re only the second person I’ve come across that can. ”

“Does Hughes know?”

“No. He doesn’t. No one else knows. Except Jenny.”

Jenny, the Healer. I wondered how much else she knew and if she could be trusted.

“How do you hold that much energy without burning out?” I asked, feeling the pulse of energy on my back as his hand guided me through the door into the lodge.

“I was born to it, Taylor. Just as you were born to yours.”

THE LODGE WAS everything a luxury mountain hideaway should be. Everything in it was large, from the massive roof beams to the enormous fieldstone fireplace. Just like the medical facilities, no expense had been spared. The floor to ceiling windows flanking the fireplace opened out to a stunning vista of the mountains.

The dining room was all but empty by the time we arrived. If there were any Clients in the house, they'd already eaten and gone. We had our choice of tables, and I took one where I could see anyone coming in from the lobby. The last thing I wanted was Hughes sneaking up on me.

"Taylor," Connors began, when the waitress had taken our order.

"How many clients do you have here," I asked quickly, cutting him off before he could continue. He looked at me in question, and I gave him a pointed look, which he thankfully interpreted correctly. I was pretty sure that if Hughes was tracking the Clients, he'd have bugged the place too, especially the dining room. I needed to watch what I said, but there were some questions that I was sure would alert him more by their absence than by me actually asking them. Besides, they were things I was going to need to know for later.

"It varies," he replied slowly, the reality of the situation dawning on him. "but it's never very many. A handful at most. The majority of people with the potential for special abilities never even realize they have them. It's the rare individual that senses there's something more going on. Rarer still to find someone like you."

"Lucky me," I said, not feeling lucky at all. I watched as the waitress sat a huge mug down in front of me and began pouring the coffee. Maybe a shot of caffeine would help. "How do you find the Clients?"

"Believe it or not, we find most of them through the internet. Odd things start happening, things that can't be explained. People notice, and they start looking for answers. We monitor a variety of websites and forums. We even host a number of sites, forums, and blogs. Social media is a great resource for finding people. As you well know, as an investigator, there's not much people won't chat about if someone will listen. We listen and once in a while, we find someone that interests us."

I reached out and grabbed the waitress's arm as she turned to go, indicating that she should leave the pot on the table, fairly sure I was going to need more

coffee. *A lot more.* Connors was right. I'd searched the internet for answers, but not until after the incident with Marcus and according to Mac, he'd been in place long before that. Connors might get most of his Clients via the internet, but that's not how he found me.

"What about the Watchers? Sean said there were others like him, but surely there aren't that many. When do they come into play?"

"That's something entirely different," Connors explained, watching me closely. "Not everyone has a Watcher. They're only used when there is someone that we feel certain has abilities, but they haven't come out yet."

Someone we feel certain has abilities? How would they know? What was going on here? Mac may have been in place for seven years, but they'd put him there. They'd been watching me long before that. Gee, that wasn't ominous at all. I looked at Connors, the question in my eyes.

"The Agency has been around for a long time," he said, fiddling with his cup. "Not in its current form, of course, but the idea, the concept, has existed for decades. I've only been the Director here for five years, and you were already on the radar when I arrived. According to your file, both your parents were gifted with abilities. I have to assume that somehow they were involved, at least for a time, with the Agency, but I haven't been able to find any information on them other than that mention in your file. A child from two gifted people was bound to pique their interest. I'd think it would be safe to say that they've had eyes on you since birth."

Shell-shocked, I think they call it. I honestly couldn't think, and I certainly couldn't talk. My brain refused to accept what Connors was telling me. Surely that couldn't be right. This couldn't have started with my parents and been going on for decades. *They've had eyes on you since birth.* His words swept, unbidden through my brain, time after time, and I was helpless to stop them.

Suddenly a jolt went up my arm, and I gasped, looking down to see Connors holding my hand. He'd shocked me. How he'd done it, I had no idea, but it had gotten my attention. I glanced up and saw him nod in warning towards the security camera in the corner. That's right. Hughes was watching. I needed to hold it together.

"When your Aunt died," Connors continued, as if nothing had happened, "they instructed me to assign you a Watcher. We have found that trauma is often the spark that ignites a person's ability. A chemical change in the body perhaps, due to stress. Or maybe the brain is distracted enough to allow the ability to gain a foothold. Why, is something we're still looking into, but the point is, it was felt that it would be better to keep a closer eye on you after that, so Sean was sent in."

“Okay,” I mumbled, trying to remember what we’d been talking about when Connors had dropped his bombshell. “What’s next? What happens after you find these people?”

“We invite them to the Agency. Offer them testing, the opportunity to participate in experiments and yes, research, but it’s all on a volunteer basis. No one is forced to do anything they don’t want to. The truth is, most of them are as intent on finding out what’s happening as we are. They want answers too, and we try to provide those, along with confirmation that they aren’t losing their minds and imagining things. They are instead, something special and unique, and we treat them that way. They stay here until they feel comfortable, and then they leave us.”

“And you just let them go? It is a government facility. I would think they would be somewhat concerned about the Clients being out there just walking around.”

“Yes, well. They do require we keep tabs on them.” He stopped to refill my coffee mug, which I’d already drained. “You do know that all that caffeine isn’t good for you?”

“Well, I’m just not as peppy as you are,” I said, a look of innocence plastered on my face. “I need it.”

“Ah. Touché, my dear. But you might want to pace yourself a bit.”

“You were saying... about security?” I decided to ignore his warning and concentrated on adding just the right amount of cream instead.

“Yes. We managed to convince the government that the sight of armed soldiers roaming the grounds would be off-putting. Hughes was their answer. Private security, but ex-military, so they understand the chain of command. I’m the Director, but the Agency is funded by the government, and I answer to them. They keep close tabs on what we do here, but we don’t have much interference in our operations. Probably because we don’t have much success. At least not the type of success they’re looking for.”

The waitress arrived with our food, giving me time to get my bearings. The fact that Connors kept referring to the government as *them* wasn’t lost on me. Whether it was intentional and he was trying to tell me he wasn’t part of it or he subconsciously didn’t agree with what was going on, I had no way of knowing, but he was definitely disassociating himself from what was happening at the Agency.

Connors cleared a space on the table in front of him as the waitress deposited his plate. He had ordered a muffin. It was big, and that was about all I could say for it. It looked suspiciously tasteless and dry. I sincerely hoped mine was better than that, and it was. The waitress sat a huge platter of scrambled eggs, bacon,

and hash browns down in front of me. I had ordered my toast buttered and uncut. It was homemade, full of nuts and seeds and smelled like heaven on earth. I grabbed up a piece and started piling my food onto it. “Go on.” I prodded Connors, when he just sat there watching me. “What is it they’re looking for?”

“Proof,” he said, shaking his head. “Something tangible that they can use to justify the millions of dollars they’ve poured into the Agency. It’s what they want, and we haven’t been able to give it to them. It’s very difficult to substantiate these abilities in a scientific manner..”

“Don’t you mean impossible?” I finished loading my toast and grabbed the other piece to top it off. “There have been others that have tried and failed. You’re not the first.”

“No. I think it’s entirely possible. It just hasn’t happened yet.”

“Why do you think that is?” I asked, looking around for something to wrap my sandwich in. Connors caught on and reached over to the next table, snagging a large napkin and handing it to me.

“That is the question, now, isn’t it? The obvious answer is that they don’t really exist, but we both know that’s not the case, don’t we?” I finished wrapping my sandwich up and topped up my coffee.

“Yes, we do,” I agreed. “ So why can’t you prove it?” I stood up, and he joined me, grabbing an extra napkin, his muffin, and his coffee. I snatched a piece of egg from the plate that had escaped and popped it into my mouth before grabbing my cup and heading outside.

“I think, Taylor, that it’s because it is more than science. It can’t be replicated and authenticated in a lab because there’s no reason to do it other than to prove it can be done and that’s not a good enough reason. There has to be emotion involved. There has to be need.” He got to the door, pushed it open with his foot and held it, waiting for me to pass.

“If that’s true, your work here is kind of precarious, isn’t it?” I headed toward a bench and then changed my mind, deciding that Hughes had probably bugged it simply because it was the only place to sit down. I zeroed in on a nice grassy area instead. “They can pull the funding out from under you anytime they want.”

“Yes they can, and I seem to spend most of my time giving them reasons not to do just that. The fact is, they know it exists. They can’t deny it, just because we haven’t been able to prove it in a lab, and they aren’t ready to give up yet. They have too much riding on it. To tell you the truth, it’s frustrating and if that was what it was all about, I’d have thrown in the towel long ago, but it isn’t. Testing and experiments are only a small part of what we do here. People have to know how to handle it, and we can help them with that. Granted, it’s mainly

lectures and ‘what if’ scenarios, but at the very least, they know they’re not crazy, and they know they’re not alone. That’s why I’m here, Taylor. To help those people. To help *you*.”

Connors wanted to help me. Help me how? Help me get a handle on this thing, or help me find out who was after me? Maybe it was both. The thought cheered me up a bit. I hoped I was right, and he wasn’t involved in this because I was really starting to like the little guy. We settled down on the grass, and I hunted for a flat spot to set my coffee before starting in on my sandwich. It was just as good as I’d anticipated.

“Now?” he asked, and I nodded that it was safe to talk. “You think Hughes has listening devices in the lodge?”

“I think Hughes does whatever makes his job easier and uses his position to cover it up. If he has access to the equipment and I’m willing to bet he has, then yes, I think he’s done it and not just to the lodge. Probably medical and anywhere else he thinks it might be beneficial.”

Connors looked down at his clothes in dismay.

“I think you’re safe, Dr. Connors. Even if Hughes did bug you, the energy you put out would take care of it, but I wouldn’t count on anyplace else being safe.”

He picked up his muffin and broke it in half, exposing its insides. It was full of berries and nuts and some oozing dark purple substance that looked delicious.

“What is that?” I asked, munching away on my sandwich.

“It’s a high energy muffin. They make them especially for me. There’s probably three times the amount of calories inside as what you’re eating there.”

I looked down at what was left of my sandwich which wasn’t much. Full of butter and fat, nuts and seeds this was one high calorie meal and not something I would do on a regular basis, but right now I needed it. I had a feeling those special muffins were something Connors needed on a regular basis.

“How many of those in a day?” I asked.

“It would stagger even your mind,” he said, managing a smile.

We finished eating and got up to walk. I didn’t feel real comfortable staying in one place for long. Not with Jenny’s warning that Hughes would be looking for me. We strolled out toward the perimeter, making our way through the gardens.

“How much of your story was true?” Connors asked as we made our way around to the back side of the lodge.

“Most of it.”

“You think Hughes was right about the men who attacked you being thieves or do you think Brown doubled crossed him?”

“Neither.” I paused, thinking about just how much I wanted to tell him. I trusted him, or I wouldn’t have risked my life, telling him as much I as I had, but I just wasn’t prepared to risk the others. If nothing else, I had to protect Trinity, Jonas and Mama D. I owed them that much.

“I think that Brown decided to take matters into his own hands. He attacked Sean and came after me.” I didn’t state the obvious and Connors didn’t need me to fill in the blanks. He was smarter than that.

“So Hughes has no idea you’re onto him?” I shook my head no, and pretended to stop and look around at the grounds. “You think he’s the one calling the shots?”

“That’s what I’m here to find out. I do know that he’s not working alone. He has others here that are involved, so you need to be careful. Hughes is dangerous.”

He nodded at my warning, and we started back toward the lodge. I’d gotten a good look at the security Hughes had in place during our walk. I didn’t discover anything new that we hadn’t already known about from when we’d cased the place before. I’d had the advantage of both Jonas and Mac then and even from a distance, we hadn’t missed much. I looked up at the mountain where we had been before, and felt secure that Jonas or Trinity were up there now, watching my every move.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand, Taylor.” Connors had interrupted my thoughts, and I turned to him, waiting for him to explain. “It’s Brown. The man was a teacher, an educator. He wore tweed jackets. I can’t see him besting a fly, much less a trained military man like Sean.”

I looked him in the eye, confident he was kidding, but he wasn’t. Connors didn’t understand. He might be the Director of an agency that investigated paranormal abilities, but he had no idea what he was dealing with here. For a split second, I was jealous. I used to be like that too. I knew there were bad people. Really bad people. But I’d thought there were limits. At least in my realm of existence. Now I knew better. I hated to be the one to burst his bubble, but he needed to know. For his own protection and mine.

“Dr. Connors, Caleb Brown wasn’t what you thought he was. He wasn’t the only one here keeping secrets. He had abilities, powers that no one knew about. Apparently not even you. You saw what he wanted you to see and nothing more. Not everyone uses the power they have for good. Brown was bad, but Hughes is worse. He’s an animal, and you need to realize that. There’s nothing he won’t do.” I paused, regretting what I was about to do, knowing it needed to be done. “Tell me about Abby.”

He stopped so fast I ran into him. It was like running into an electric fence.

“What do you know about Abby?”

“That she could find things. Lost things. I know that she’s missing.” Connors looked at me, fear etched on his face, waiting to hear the rest and I forced myself to finish. “And I know, she’s not coming home again.”

His face crumpled in grief, his eyes suddenly awash with tears.

“It’s my fault. They were trying to find me and used her to do it,” I told him, trying to ease both his pain and mine. “I’m sorry. You can’t even begin to imagine how sorry I am.”

I walked on back towards the lodge, stopping to admire the gardens along the way, giving him some space to deal with it. It wasn’t long before he joined me, having pulled it back together.

“Tell me what you need me to do.” His voice was strong and determined, and I knew he finally understood what we were facing.

“I need to know that Sean is safe. That Hughes can’t get to him.”

“Done. What else?”

“Be careful and keep your eyes open. You know what’s normal around here, and I don’t. Let me know if something doesn’t jibe.”

He nodded that he understood. We’d reached the main entrance to the lodge, and he stepped up, opening the door for me. His hand fell gently on my back, guiding me through the door. The spike of energy pulsed through me at his touch, and I was relieved to find that it no longer startled me.

Whatever relief I felt was short-lived, though, as we came through the doors to discover Hughes entering the lobby from the dining area, heading toward the stairs. I stopped short, blocking Connors from his view.

“Ah, Ms. Morrison, there you are,” Hughes said, as he changed direction and headed toward us. “I thought I’d find you and Dr. Connors in the dining room.”

Connors was behind me, but as soon as he heard Hughes, anger erupted off him in waves of energy. I’d seen Connors angry earlier in the garden, and that was nothing compared to what was happening now. It was my fault. I hadn’t expected to run into Hughes so soon. Connors’ emotions were still too raw from finding out about Abby to deal with the situation.

The heat was so intense I was surprised that my clothes didn’t burst into flames. Hughes might not have been able to feel the heat or see the energy coming off Connors, but he could certainly feel the anger being directed toward him and I could tell from his narrowed gaze, that he assumed it was coming from me. Either he hadn’t noticed Connors behind me, or he’d dismissed him, not knowing about his ability. I had plenty of reasons to be angry at Hughes, but none I wanted to share with him. As far as he knew, I didn’t suspect him, and I wanted to keep it that way, but I needed something. Connors was having enough

trouble dealing with his anger at Hughes. I didn't want to give him the chance to explain it to Hughes in person.

My mind was desperately searching for a logical reason for me to be furious with him, when I spied the bracelet dangling from his fingers and remembering Jenny's warning, felt my temper flare. We were going to have it out about that anyway, and this was the perfect time to make my feelings clear on the subject. Fate had dropped the answer right in my lap.

"I know about the bracelet, Hughes, and you should know right now. I'm not wearing it. You could have saved yourself the trip over here." I ground out the words, and braced my legs, my attitude definitely hostile.

Connors was still standing frozen behind me, and I was hoping, trying to get his anger under control. The heat was still pouring off him, and I could feel the sweat gathering at my hairline.

"Jenny told you?" he asked, although if my suspicions were right, he already knew. I didn't even bother to answer. "It's for your own protection, Taylor. We can protect you better if we know where you are."

A second man entered the lobby from the dining area and came to stand next to Hughes. He was dressed in black, like the rest of the security team I had seen and was armed with a gun and a radio. My watchdog, I assumed. This was just getting better by the moment.

"Protect me? So far you've done a poor job of that. If I'd left it up to you, my friends would be dead now, and I'd have been sold to the highest bidder."

He'd been able to keep his cool pretty well, but my insult about his ability to do his job pushed his buttons. That I'd done it in front of one of his men, certainly didn't help the situation.

"I am in charge here, Ms. Morrison, whether you like it or not. I run the security, and you will do as I say."

"I. Don't. Think. So." I clipped the words out along with a determined mental shove that sent the magazines and books in the lobby scattering onto the floor. The effect on Hughes was instantaneous. For the first time, I saw a shadow of fear cross his face. He knew what had happened the last time I'd gotten angry and lost control. I hadn't lost control this time, but he didn't know that.

The sudden absence of heat behind me felt almost like a cold wind blowing against me, but its effect paled in comparison to the relief of knowing that Connors had finally pulled it together. His face was a mask of concern as he stepped around to face me.

"There, there. Taylor. No reason to be upset. Hughes is only concerned for your safety. I can assure you, he is very, very proficient at his job. You can trust him completely."

I could only imagine how it must have grated for him to get the words out, but he did a convincing job. It was a smart move on his part to side with Hughes on the issue. If Hughes considered him an ally in controlling me, he was more likely to keep him in the loop.

"It may have escaped your attention, Dr. Connors, but there's someone inside here that's gunning for me and you have no idea who it is. Neither of you do. If you know where I'm at, they could too. If I wear that," I pointed over to the bracelet still in Hughes' hand, "I'm a sitting duck."

Connors breathed out in exasperation, his shoulders slumping in defeat as he turned to Hughes.

"She does have a point, Hughes. We don't know who is after her. It could be anyone here. How can you protect her from that?"

"We're working on finding the person responsible, but until that time, she needs protection. She has to let me do my job, Dr. Connors."

"Fine," I snapped out. "Do your job. I assume he's here for me?" I pointed again, this time to the guard standing next to Hughes. He hadn't flinched a bit at the flying books, instead keeping his eyes fixed on me. He could well be a problem, but an easier one to fix than being tagged and tracked. "Isn't that a radio on his belt? I'm sure he can contact you if there's a problem. I'll accept the guard, but I'm drawing the line there."

"I can have you restricted to quarters," Hughes threatened.

"Stop!" Connors interceded before I could dare Hughes to try it. "This is getting totally out of hand. Hughes, if Taylor is that opposed to the bracelet, there's no reason to force her. She's agreed to the guard, and I think that's sufficient." Hughes glared at me, refusing to give ground and Connors went on. "She's come in of her own free will and she's free to go whenever she chooses. I'd prefer she stay."

I hadn't said anything about leaving, but I wished I had. The wind went right out of Hughes' sails as the implications hit him. There was no way he could keep me here against my will, not with the audience we had attracted. The kitchen staff was gathered in the doorway, and there were people along the banister at the top of the stairs looking on. The last thing he wanted was to lose track of me again. Connors' had successfully cornered him.

"I think it's a mistake, but if that's what she wants, then most certainly, we'll accommodate her." He'd done a complete about-face, the anger gone and in its place nothing but understanding and concern as he turned to me. "I hope you understand, Ms. Morrison. It wasn't my intent to upset you and I apologize for getting angry. It's just you've been through so much already, and I'm to blame for that. I should have known and stopped him before it got this far."

I didn't answer him, just nodded my head and waited quietly while he stepped away to give instructions to the guard. Connors' stood quietly next to me with his eyes closed. I wanted to talk to him, and this was perhaps the only opportunity I would have while the guard was busy with Hughes.

"I suppose I should go clean up my mess." I sighed and headed into the sitting area to collect the magazines that I'd thrown on the floor. Connors followed and knelt beside me, to help.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in my ear. "I lost it back there."

"It's all right." I gathered up a handful of newspapers and sat them on the table. "I've lost it a few times myself. You got it back together, that's what counts."

He smiled sadly and lifted the armload of books that he'd stacked. I followed him over to the bookcase with my own stack of books and started re-shelving them.

"You know anything about this guard?" I took a book from him and stretched up to put it on one of the higher shelves.

"He's fairly new. Just came on a few weeks ago. Hughes said he came highly recommended."

"After all this started?" He nodded, as I placed the last book and turned to find Hughes coming toward us, the guard following on his heels.

"Thanks for your help, Dr. Connors," I said as they joined us. "Again, I'm sorry about the mess. I... ah... have ... well, there's a ... things like this seem to happen when I'm upset." I stumbled over the words and kept my eyes down, seemingly embarrassed, watching as Hughes shoes came into view.

"Nothing to worry about, Taylor. Things like that happen here all the time." He picked up the last book and shoved it onto the shelf.

Hughes cleared his throat to get our attention. "This is Lars Jorgensen, Ms. Morrison. He'll be taking the first guard rotation. You met him last night, but I don't think you were ever formally introduced."

I raised my eyes to get a good look at Lars. Hughes was right, we'd met before. And I'd been wrong. It wasn't the fire suit that made him look enormous. It was genes. Pure and simple. Standing next to Connors, he was a giant. That he wasn't happy being saddled with me was written all over his face. I wasn't too thrilled about it either.

"Lars will escort you back to the medical facility. I'm sure you need some rest after the busy morning you've had."

"Actually, I'd like to get a cup of coffee, and then, if you have time, Dr. Connors, I'd like to see the rest of the lodge."

"If you're feeling up to it, I'd be delighted." Connors offered me his arm and

we headed into the dining room with Lars in our wake, leaving Hughes standing by the fireplace. I hated to admit it, but he was right. I was tired, and I had a splitting headache, but I wasn't about to let Hughes order me around. Plus there was the little fact that I needed to get a look at the whole facility before Hughes made his next move, which I suspected would be pretty soon.

Another hit of caffeine would get me through the rest of the morning, and I had a pretty good idea that Connors needed another muffin after expending so much energy. Maybe two or three. He called over to check on Mac while we waited for our order to arrive and gave me a nod of assurance. He'd make sure nothing happened to him. They brought my coffee and two muffins for Connors. He might frown on my need for a hit of caffeine, but he obviously had no such reservations regarding his own energy hit. I slowly sipped my coffee as he wolfed down the massive muffins in what had to be record time. All the while, Lars stood in the background and watched us like some big bird of prey.

To say it was irritating was the understatement of the year. It would have been easier to just throw the tracking bracelet over the fence, but a lot harder to explain. With Lars, I could shake him and then simply blame it on him for not doing his job. The thought of Hughes ripping him up for losing track of me brought my irritation level down a notch, and I threw him a tight smile as we got up and prepared for the rest of my tour. He just stared at me. Real social, this guy.

The rest of the lodge was much like any other hotel. There were several large meeting rooms on the main floor, a few of which had been divided up to smaller, more intimate areas. Connors' office and private quarters were located on the second floor along with a couple more meeting areas, with housing for the teachers in the adjoining wing. The third floor was restricted to rooms for the Clients.

He took me to Brown's room, and I looked in, giving it a fast appraisal. I doubted that anything implicating him would be found there. Hughes had access to the room and I was sure he'd done a thorough job of tossing it when Brown had turned up missing.

Security was as tight inside the lodge as it had been outside. Hughes wasn't just worried about people getting in. He was worried about the Clients and kept a pretty close eye on them. The number of cameras scattered about the place was staggering. They must have a whole bank of monitors and a raft of personnel to keep track of everyone. Not a good sign. All in all, I was pretty discouraged. I kept reminding myself that not everyone there was in on it. Surely most of the people in the security force were there to actually guard the property and protect the Clients. The fewer people who knew what Hughes was doing, the easier it

was to keep it quiet. Maybe the odds weren't as bad as I thought.

Lars followed along in our wake the whole time, checking in with Hughes periodically. By the time we'd covered the third floor, I was ready to head back. I was tired, my head was pounding, and I wanted to get some rest before tonight. I didn't think Hughes would wait long to make a move. He'd more than likely wait until late evening when most of the staff was off duty, and he could manage to have his men in place. I planned on being awake and ready for him when it happened.

We arrived back at the entrance to the medical facility and got into the elevator to go back down to my room. I turned to watch the sunlight disappear as the doors slowly slid closed and sincerely hoped I wasn't seeing it for the last time.

I WOKE MID-AFTERNOON feeling better. My headache had ratcheted down from blinding to bearable, which was a vast improvement as far I was concerned. The extra sleep had improved my outlook substantially, and although I couldn't say I was entirely positive about things, at least I wasn't feeling the ax of doom hovering over me. The lights were still on, which puzzled me until I remembered that Jenny had said they were hooked into the monitors that, fortunately, were no longer hooked up to me.

I rolled out of bed and padded into the bathroom to splash some water on my face in an effort to clear my head. My hair was a complete mess, and the sweatsuit looked like I'd slept in it, which I had. I ran damp fingers through my hair in an effort to tame it, thankful for the shorter length as it fell into some semblance of order. I jammed my feet back into the hospital slippers and quietly opened the door, slipping out into the empty hallway.

"Going somewhere?" I looked back over my shoulder to find Hughes standing behind me. Where he'd come from, I had no idea. He hadn't been there a minute ago. Now there he was, bigger than life, holding a steaming cup of coffee and waiting for an answer.

"Yes, I am," I answered him, trying not to let my annoyance show. "I'm going to find Sean and see how he's doing. You can tag along if you like."

"I'm afraid that will have to wait until later, Taylor. Right now, arrangements have been made for you to go into town and get some clothes and whatever else you might require during your stay here."

I'd expected Hughes to make a move, counted on it in fact, but I'd thought I'd have a little more time. Getting me away from the protection of the Agency, small as it might be, would give him all the opportunity he needed. I wasn't quite ready to 'disappear' though.

"Don't you think that under the circumstances, it would be better for some clothes to be brought out here? Or have you forgotten that there are bad guys out there looking for me? I think I'll pass on the shopping for now, but thanks anyway."

I turned around and started back in the direction I'd been heading only to find Lars blocking the hallway. I met his stony gaze and felt my stomach drop. Apparently I was going shopping whether I wanted to or not. He'd changed into a pair of jeans and a turtleneck, along with a leather bomber jacket to conceal the

shoulder holster I was sure he was wearing underneath.

I turned back to Hughes, finding he'd moved closer while my attention was on Lars. Caught between them, I felt like a trapped animal.

"Oh, Taylor, you're up!" Jenny ducked around Lars, the smile on her lips not quite masking the concern in her eyes. She reached out, taking my arm, and guided me around Hughes and past my room, in the direction of the elevators. "Dr. Connors thought you might like to go into town and pick up a few things if you're feeling up to it."

"I was on my way to find Sean, actually. I wanted to see how he's doing."

"I'm afraid you can't visit him yet. Here," she said, shoving a piece of paper at me, quickly changing the subject. "I made a list of things you'll need while you're with us."

We got to the elevators and stopped, Jenny's grip still firm on my arm. I could feel Hughes and Lars coming up from behind and felt myself tense. The doors opened, and Jenny all but threw me inside. She just smiled and punched the button to send the elevator up, barely giving Lars and Hughes time to crowd in.

"Dr. Connors said to tell you not to worry. You'll be perfectly safe. Lars will be with you the whole time, and Mr. Hughes will have people deployed in town in case there's a problem."

The elevator stopped, and we stepped outside to find a car already parked and waiting. Jenny stepped up and opened the passenger door, hustling me inside, as Lars went around the car and slid into the drivers seat.

"What about money?" I asked, stalling for time.

"It's taken care of. Dr. Connors called ahead, and the store is expecting you," she assured me, as I buckled the seat belt. "I'll see you when you get back."

The door slammed shut, and I flinched as the door locks snapped down. I looked over at Lars, who stared back at me in silence as he put the car in gear and I prayed she was right.

* * *

THE STORE WAS bright and cheerful. Estes Park was first and foremost a tourist town, its main street littered with shops offering everything from cuckoo clocks to salt water taffy and beyond. The shop Lars had driven to was well off

the beaten track and catered to the people who lived and worked there.

The two sales clerks were busy with other customers, so I roamed around getting a feel for the place. On my best day, shopping was a chore and one I wasn't keen on. With Lars following close on my heels, it was nearly impossible. He hadn't said a word the entire way into town, and I had the definite impression he wasn't enjoying this any more than I was.

"You don't have to follow me around," I said, feeling crowded. "You're a big guy. I'll bet you could just go stand over there and see the whole store."

He just looked at me and stayed planted where he was. I tried to stare him down, but it was pointless. I grabbed up a couple of pairs of jeans and shoved them at him, irritated.

"Here. If you're going to trail me, you might as well be useful."

By the time one of the clerks hurried over to us, I had his arms piled with clothes.

"I'm so sorry about the wait. You must be from the Lodge. We've been expecting you. Oh dear," she said, eyeing the tags on the pile of clothes Lars was holding, "these aren't even your size. Let me take these."

She grabbed the armful of clothes and handed them off to the other clerk who had joined us while Lars gave me a stony look. The clerk turned back in time to catch it and threw me a wary glance.

"Don't mind him," I explained, pointing to the wire running from his ear and disappearing under his jacket. "He's listening to some game and would rather be anywhere than here. I have a list here. I'd appreciate any help."

The sight of the sizable list distracted her immediately from Lars. A woman with a mission, she motioned the other clerk over, and they set off together, in search of their prey.

"Listen up, Lars," I hissed when they were out of hearing range. "You need to go over there and wait for me." I pointed to a spot by the front door and gave him a pointed look, which he completely ignored. I leaned in closer, up near his ear where his radio was. "Hughes, tell him to back off. There's no one hiding in the racks in here waiting to jump out and get me."

Lars' eyes narrowed at me, but he moved. It wasn't where I had pointed, but it was something, and he actually stayed there when I moved away to follow the clerks. Armed with the list, they moved through the store at a rapid pace, collecting pieces as they went. I tagged along, an unnecessary participant until I gave up and went to wait by the dressing room entrance. Lars strolled over, and propped himself against a nearby pillar, giving himself a clearer view of the area.

I didn't have long to wait. Moving faster without me there to slow them down, the women appeared, arms loaded down with clothes, in record time.

“Stay,” I mouthed at Lars and headed back to the dressing rooms. I promised the clerks I’d ring the bell if I needed anything and closed the door in relief. Alone at last.

Or not, I recanted, as I looked down in time to see Trinity’s head pop out from the gap under the wall of the adjoining dressing room.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, dragging her the rest of the way into the small cubicle. “Are you crazy?”

“I missed you too!” she hissed back, struggling to gain her feet.

She grabbed me, pulling me into a tight hug. She smelled like home and Mama D, and I found myself hugging her back, despite my fear and anger at the risk she was taking by being here.

“Why are you here?” I asked quietly, sure Lars would hear us. “How did you know I would be here?”

“Lars told me to come.” She nodded at my look of astonishment. “He’s working with Mac.”

“Wait a second.” I stole a look at the door, certain that it would be ripped open at any second and Lars would be standing on the other side. “How do you know that?”

“He caught me on the mountain. Scared me to death.” She turned and started sorting rapidly through the clothes. “He’s talked to Mac and Mac told him where to find us.”

“I haven’t even talked to Mac. How did he manage it?”

“I don’t know, but he has. Mac called him when he started getting suspicious. Wanted him to check things out at the Agency. That’s what Lars is doing there. He’s helping Mac.”

She was pulling out clothes as she talked and putting some of them into a separate pile. I just stood there watching her, trying to make sense of what she was telling me.

“Why are you here, then? Why did he tell you to come?”

“He can’t talk to you. Hughes is watching him all the time. He said to tell you he’s here. He has your back. He also wants to know about someone named Connors?” I nodded at her that I knew what she meant. “Who’s he?”

“The Director at the Agency. You’ve seen him. Short guy. Red hair.”

“The leprechaun?” she asked, pausing with a leather jacket in her hand. “He’s the Director?”

I nodded at her. I hadn’t thought of Connors in terms of a leprechaun, but I guessed the description was as good as any.

“I never would have guessed that.” She went back to sorting through the clothes.

“You haven’t met him. Connors is clear. He knows about Hughes, and he’s on board. I’m pretty sure a woman named Jenny is okay too.”

“He mentioned her. Said she was the one that got him in to see Mac.”

“Everything okay in there?” The voice came floating through the door. “Anyone need anything?”

“I’m fine,” I told the clerk, my heart going a mile a minute. “Just making my way through everything.”

“Me too,” Trinity called out.

“Okay, ladies. Just ring if you need something.”

We waited for a moment to be sure we were alone. Then she motioned for me to try on the leather jacket.

“Okay, everything in this pile should fit. The jacket’s big, so get a small in that. You need shoes, makeup and stuff for your hair. Otherwise, you’re set.” I shrugged out of the jacket and put it back on the hanger.

“Jonas should have never agreed to this,” she whispered as she pushed the remaining piles of clothes onto the corner of the bench and collapsed onto the emptied space. “If I had known what you two were up to, I’d have stopped it.”

She sounded exhausted and discouraged, and I realized that the decision to go to the Agency had caused a problem between them. We had made it without consulting her because she was right. She would have been against it, and there hadn’t been time to try and convince her otherwise. It had been faster and simpler just to do it and deal with the consequences later. Only I wasn’t dealing with them where Trinity was concerned. Jonas was.

“Don’t blame him for this. It was my decision. He was just following orders.”

It took a moment, but she finally seemed to accept that things were the way they had to be.

“Well, at least you’re not alone in there.” She stood up, knowing it was time to go. “Lars gave me a phone. That’s how he let us know you’d be here. You think we can trust him?”

She obviously already did, or she wouldn’t be here, but I knew she needed to hear it from me. Needed the reassurance that she’d done the right thing.

Could we trust him? He’d caught her and let her go. He’d told them how to find me and was sitting out there now, knowing she was in here and doing nothing about it. It would have been the perfect opportunity to hand us over to Hughes, but he hadn’t done it.

“Yes, we can trust him. You did the right thing,” I assured her, even though I wasn’t sure myself. “We’ve got friends inside now, and that will make all the difference.”

She sat down on the floor and pushed herself through the gap.

“Be careful,” she whispered, as her head disappeared from view. Within minutes, I heard her throw open her dressing room door and call out to the sales lady as she left the area.

It had all happened so fast, it was almost as if I’d imagined the whole thing. Here I’d thought they were safe, and no one knew they were around, and now I find out Lars has been out there, snooping around, scaring her and that Mac had told him where to find them. Worst of all, I hadn’t been able to talk to Mac at all. I had to get my information third hand.

Frustrated, I kicked off the hospital slippers and stripped off the oversize sweats eyeing the pile of clothes Trinity had picked out. I was sure there was underwear in there somewhere, and sure enough, Trinity hadn’t let me down. Minutes later I was back in my hospital slippers, but now I was clad in jeans and sporting a very comfortable knit pullover. I checked the price tag on it, and my mouth fell open. Trinity had excellent taste. Gathering up the stack of clothes she’d set aside, I carried them out of the dressing room, just as the clerk was on her way back to check on me again.

“I’ll take these. I like the leather jacket, but I need a smaller size.” She took the clothes from me and dropped them at the register before heading over to hunt for the jacket.

“I need to go find some shoes,” I said over my shoulder to Lars, who had come to stand next to me. “Then I need a pharmacy and we’re done.”

He didn’t answer. Just walked past me to the register where the clerk had begun ringing up my purchases. I joined him, handing her the tags for the clothes I was wearing and stood quietly next to him.

I had never even heard him speak and yet I was supposed to trust him, not just with my life, but with everyone else’s as well. He took the bags, and we made our way out to the car to drop them off before heading down the street to the shoe store.

By the time we had finished shopping, it was dark and chilly. The wind that had kicked up while we were inside making it seem colder than it actually was. I had forgotten how the temperature dropped along with the sun in the mountains and was definitely regretting having left my new leather coat in the car. I looked down at my feet, now toasty warm in my new trekking shoes and thick socks, grateful that at least I wasn’t tromping around through the cold with nothing but slippers on.

Lars started the car, leaving me inside while he stowed the bags in the trunk. I sat there for a while fiddling with the heat settings before I realized that it had suddenly gotten quiet. I looked around to find the trunk closed and Lars nowhere

in sight. The thought barely had time to register when a tap on my window had me twisting back around, ready to face Hughes, only to find Lars standing there, both of his hands full.

Coffee. He'd gone for coffee. I rolled the window down and relieved him of both cups, grateful for the heat that radiated into my icy fingers. I settled the cups into the holders and raised the window up fast, before whatever warmth the heater had managed to emit, escaped to the wind outside. A cold blast of air sailed into the car as Lars quickly got in and latched his seat belt. He picked up the cups and handed me one of them before shifting the car into gear and pulling out of the lot.

I wrapped my hands around the hot cup and took a tentative sip. Expecting the acrid taste of strong black coffee, I wasn't prepared for what I was tasting. It took a second, deeper sip before I realized what I was drinking. A white chocolate mocha and a touch of cinnamon. My favorite coffee. Mac had made them for me. Something special. Something only Mac would know.

We pulled to a stop, and I looked over at Lars, his face bathed in red from the traffic light. He turned to me and nodded before turning his attention back to the cars around us. Mac had told him. Was telling me to trust him. Wherever Mac was, whatever condition he was in, he was on the job, and he'd secured reinforcements.

In less than a day, everything had changed. Where once I'd been alone in the enemy camp, I now had allies. Where there had been doubt and fear of failure, was the conviction we would succeed. The knowledge that if I failed, there were others who would make sure Hughes paid for what he had done. The people he had sacrificed, the lives he had ruined.

I settled back in the seat and closed my eyes, inhaling the deep scents of the coffee, chocolate and cinnamon and reveled in the moment.

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THE AGENCY WAS ablaze in light when we returned, the grounds busy with security guards.

“What’s happened?” I asked Jenny, who had run to meet the car.

“Dr. Connors is missing!” She was nearly in tears and clung to my arm. “No one’s seen him since he left you this morning. They’re combing the grounds now.”

I barely had time to think before Lars grabbed my other arm, wrenching me free only to drag me through the door and into the waiting elevator.

“Hey!” I managed to gain my feet and jerk free of his grip just as the doors closed, trapping me inside. “Don’t you dare push that button. I’m getting out.”

I shoved him aside, intending to open the doors only to be jerked to the back of the car and held there while he sent the elevator streaking down to the lower floors.

“Hughes has ordered you be secured in your quarters.” It was the first time I’d heard him talk, and it froze me in my tracks. Low and gravelly, his voice came out more like a growl from some animal than anything human, so faint I questioned whether I had heard it at all. The look on his face told me I had, and before I could stop myself, my eyes flew to his neck and the turtleneck that covered whatever damage had done this to him.

Before I could say anything, the elevator came to a stop, Lars dragging me out as soon as the doors opened wide enough for us to squeeze through. His long strides ate up the distance to my room so fast, I had to run to keep up, nearly slamming into the guard that was waiting there for us.

“Hughes wants you topside,” he informed Lars. “I’m to stand guard here.”

Lars nodded, pushing me into the room. The other guard slammed the door shut, and I stood there in shock as I heard the key turn in the lock. They’d taken Connors and I was locked in my room. Didn’t get better than that. I tore off my jacket and threw it across the room in frustration. I’d been so relieved that Hughes hadn’t tried to take me while I was in town, I hadn’t even stopped to think about why he hadn’t. I hadn’t counted on this. It wasn’t part of the plan. I hadn’t just underestimated Hughes. I’d never even seen this one coming, and now Connors was paying for it.

I paced off most of my anger and flopped down in one of the chairs to wait for Hughes. I’d been locked up for nearly thirty minutes, and unless I was totally

off the mark, he'd be coming for me soon.

Hughes didn't disappoint me. Within ten minutes, I heard the key in the lock and stood up in an attempt to be ready for whatever came through the door. The last time Hughes had tried to take me, he'd sent men armed with guns and tasers to do the job, and I'd lost control. Something I couldn't afford to do this time. I *had* to go with him. I had to find out who he was working for and who else was involved. It was a risky plan, but the only one I could think of that would give me the answers I needed.

I just hadn't anticipated it being this difficult to go with him. I tried to still my growing sense of panic as the door began to swing open. Hughes came rushing through the door, and I felt the power snap through me with each beat of my pounding heart. Fight or flight. The response was instinctive when faced with an enemy, and the battle to contain it was raging inside me.

Hughes reached to grab my arm, and I jerked back avoiding him. If he touched me now, I would lose it, no doubt about it. I would end up killing him before I found Connors, found out the information I needed. We would be on the run forever, constantly looking over our shoulders, waiting for the next attack. It was a sobering thought, and one I wasn't prepared to live with.

He started forward again, reaching out, but as his hand closed around my arm, it was as if the universe suddenly shifted on its axis as a moment of total clarity engulfed me. *I was afraid I would lose control and kill Hughes too soon.* Somewhere, deep down, I knew I could actually kill him if it came to that. I was the one with the power here. Not him. I wouldn't allow panic to force my hand. Hughes was going down, but I would be the one to pick the time and place.

The drop in my anxiety level was so unexpected that I was momentarily stunned, and I stumbled, my legs refusing to work as Hughes started to pull me toward the door. I quickly recovered my feet and looked up to see Jenny standing there with her arms wrapped tightly around my leather jacket, an encouraging, if fearful, smile on her lips.

"Here, Taylor, you'll need this." She shoved the coat at me, managing to give my hand a hard squeeze in the process.

"Did they find Dr. Connors?" I asked, dislodging Hughes' hand and sliding into my jacket.

"No," Hughes answered for her. "We haven't, and that's why we're moving you. The Agency's been breached, and we can't keep you safe here."

"What about Sean?" I stepped out of the room to find Lars standing at the ready, car keys in his hand. Whatever Hughes had in mind, Lars was coming along.

"Sean's gone, Taylor," Hughes said roughly. "He didn't survive his injuries."

Stunned, I whirled back to Jenny, the unspoken question in my eyes.

“He’s right, Taylor,” Jenny confirmed, sadness in her voice. “Where Sean is, no one can hurt him anymore.” Hughes hadn’t bothered to turn around when Jenny answered me, so he never saw the hatred in her eyes as she stared at his back. Nor did he see the cunning smile and knowing look she threw my way before she followed him out into the hallway.

I doubled over, my hands braced on my thighs for support, taking in deep breaths, as I absorbed what she’d just told me. Sean wasn’t dead, but Hughes didn’t know that. Wherever Jenny had stashed him, he was safe. For the second time that day, Jenny had surprised me. She was much more devious than I’d given her credit for.

“I’m sorry,” Hughes said, the toes of his shoes coming into sight. “I know you two were close, but we don’t have time for this. We have to move.”

I nodded and stood up, sniffing and wiping at my eyes as I moved away from him. Lars led the way down the hallway, and I followed, Hughes bringing up the rear. I shuffled along, trying to look the very picture of misery. I turned around to see Jenny waving goodbye from down the hall as the doors slid closed. Within seconds we were gone, speeding to the surface and whatever lay in wait beyond the gates of the Agency.

Lars was driving, and Hughes took the seat next to him in the front, leaving the back seat free for me. I stared at the back of his head as we sped down the mountain in silence, wondering how he had become the monster he was. Was he born that way or had he, at some point in his life, stepped too far over the line and got sucked into the dark abyss of evil. Because there was no doubt in my mind that Hughes was evil.

The lights of Estes Park disappeared into the darkness behind us, and the thought passed through me that somewhere back there, Mama D was praying for us all, praying for me, and the thought brought me immeasurable comfort. Tonight, God willing, it would be over. I could never put things back the way they were. I knew that. But maybe, just maybe, I could put things right. *Dear God, don’t let me mess this up. Don’t let me be blinded by anger or hate. Please don’t let me lose control.* I joined my voice with Mama D’s as we emerged from the mountains onto the plains that stretched far into the distance and prepared myself, the best I could, for the battle to come.

* * *

WHEN WE FINALLY arrived, I knew we had moved up to a whole new level. Technically, it was just another warehouse, but that was the only similarity it had to the last place Hughes had used. This one sat separately, isolated from the others by high walls topped with razor wire, a massive gate restricting not only who got in, but who got out as well. An important point in my case.

We waited as the gate opened and the guard waved us through. A lone lightbulb marked the single door entrance, and Lars rolled to a stop next to it. Hughes got out and opened my door, standing silently while I got out and stretched, taking the opportunity to look around and get my bearings. It wasn't good. Scattered lighting illuminated the wall and from what I could see, the only point of access was the main gate. There might be something in the back, but running behind a building without a sure way out wasn't something I was willing to tackle. I couldn't see any security cameras or alarms, but that didn't mean there weren't any.

"This is so much better than where you kept Dr. Brown, isn't it, Hughes?" I asked, taking my time to survey the building. "Those walls are a real asset. Easier to secure. Which is good because you don't have as many men at your disposal as you used to, do you?"

"You had help there," he snapped out. My reference to his failed attempt in Little Rock had obviously irritated him. "You're all alone this time."

As if to prove his point, Lars opened his door and got out, drawing his gun out from under his jacket as he rounded the car and pointed it in my direction. The sight of the gun didn't bother me as much as the cold look of determination in his eyes. A glimmer of doubt passed through me, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

Had I misread him? Lars knew where Jonas and Trinity were. Mac had told him. Told him how to convince me that he was on my side. What if the whole thing had been a sham? How did I know that Mac wasn't working against me the whole time? How did I really even know if he was actually hurt? He could have been working for Hughes the whole time. What did I really know?

I heard the warehouse door open behind me, the light from inside casting long shadows around us.

"Put the gun down Lars. We don't want any accidents, do we?" The bottom of my stomach dropped out at the sound of his voice, and I froze, afraid to turn around and see what my gut was telling me was the truth.

"Hello, darling." His voice brought echoes of the past surging through my mind. I knew that voice better than I knew my own. It was the voice of love and security. The voice of happiness and tender moments. The day I realized I would never hear that voice again had been devastating, but it was nothing to what I

was feeling now. The pain that ripped through me nearly brought me to my knees. *Anything, anything, God, for this not to be true.*

I braced myself, slowly turning to face him, and looked into the eyes of my dead husband. Shock left me speechless, unable to do anything but stare at the smiling face that mere moments ago I would have given anything to see again.

“What? No loving embrace for your husband, back from the grave?” He held out his arms as if he actually expected me to rush into them, assuming a hurt, pouting look on his face when I didn’t. I felt a tremble roll through me at his mocking words and Lars moved up so close behind me, I could practically feel his heartbeat through the back of my shirt.

“Inside. Now,” he ordered, dropping his arms, apparently tired of the game. Lars shoved me forward, and I stumbled, barely managing to stay on my feet. He grabbed me by the arm, hoisted me back up and pushed me through the door.

Once inside, Lars dragged me over to a chair propped against the far wall and I collapsed onto it as he took up station next to me.

“Cuff her to the chair,” Hughes ordered. “We don’t want her to run.”

I offered no resistance as Lars grabbed my right wrist and clicked the cuff tightly around it.

“Snap out of it,” he hissed in my ear as he leaned past to latch the other end of the cuff to the chair back. I looked at him, dazed. I understood what he wanted, but couldn’t seem to muster the energy to do anything. I felt dead, my arms and legs heavy, as if I was drowning, my brain fogged over in mist.

“Taylor.” It was Keith. His voice sounded like he was underwater, where he was supposed to be, instead of standing in front of me. I easily tuned it out, along with everything else, and stared at the floor, safe in the cocoon of nothingness that I’d retreated to. I was so tired of dealing with all this, and I so didn’t want to deal with him and all the things his being here meant. I didn’t even want to think about it.

The slap sent me out of the chair and onto the floor, and I looked up to see Hughes, standing over me, a smile on his face as he drew back to hit me again. My right hand might have been cuffed to the chair, but there was nothing wrong with my left, and I put everything behind it as I came up on my feet and caught Hughes in the throat with my fist. He went down like a sack of potatoes, gasping for air, as Lars stepped quickly between us effectively stopping either of us from doing any more damage.

He grabbed the chair and sat it down hard enough to smash it and shoved me down on it, while Hughes rolled over onto his hands and knees, struggling to get to his feet. I watched him as blood dripped from my chin, my feet braced to move as soon as he came at me again.

As he gained his feet, I wrapped my cuffed hand around the metal frame of the chair and waited. No way was he going to hit me again.

“Enough!” Keith barked the command, stopping Hughes in his tracks. “You should have learned the first time Hughes. Why don’t you make yourself useful and get Dr. Connors.”

Hughes threw a threatening look my way, and I had no doubt that if he got the chance later, he’d finish what he’d started. I hoped he didn’t get the chance. I’d gotten in a lucky hit. He’d be ready the next time, and I doubted I’d get that lucky again. I used my sleeve to wipe the blood off my face as he stormed out the door we had come through and slammed it shut in a fury.

“Get her a towel and some ice,” Keith ordered, looking at me in disgust.

Lars hesitated, giving me a warning look before he walked off, disappearing behind some crates.

“You’ve been a lot of trouble, Taylor. A lot of trouble.” He walked over to a table that was set up against a concrete column and poured himself a cup of coffee. He lifted the lid to the box of donuts and perused the contents for a few minutes, before deciding against one. “Let’s hope you’re worth it.”

I sat quietly watching him, trying to reconcile the man I knew with the one standing in front of me now. The problem was, I wasn’t sure if I’d ever really known him. I had the sinking feeling the man I thought I knew was one that had never actually existed.

Lars came back with a bag of ice and a cool, wet towel. I took it and wiped my face, putting pressure on the cut Hughes had gouged along my cheekbone. My eye felt puffy, and I could feel the skin tightening around it. Hughes had gotten me good, completely off guard.

“Guess that depends on how much they’re paying you, doesn’t it.” I removed the towel and checked to see if the bleeding had stopped. It hadn’t, but it had slowed down enough for me to put ice on it. I refolded the towel to a clean spot, filled it with ice and settled it gently in place.

“Ah. She finally talks. And that’s what you want to know? Your dead husband suddenly turns up and all you want to know is how much they’re paying me? Fascinating. But then you always were a little odd.” He drained his coffee and threw the cup across the room to bank it off the wall into a waste basket. So calm. So cool. So alive.

“I’d be interested in that answer myself.” I looked up to see Dr. Connors come into the room, Hughes trailing close behind him. “What is the going rate on betraying the woman you love these days?”

“Not much, Connors. The people I work for don’t put much value on love. But then again, you’re assuming that I actually ever loved her.” He looked at me

as he said it, wanting to see if his barb had hit the mark. “Keep him over there, Hughes. I don’t want them too close together.”

Hughes pushed Connors down to sit on the floor as far away from me as he could get him and stay in the same general area. How Hughes was able to touch him and not feel the power emanating from him was beyond me. I could feel it now, a snapping current in the air, and I was nowhere near him.

“If that’s true, Keith, then why the charade?” I asked, not bothering to look at him. “Why marry me at all?” The words were so calm and detached that I could barely believe that I’d voiced them.

“We needed your ability to surface, Taylor. Intense emotional traumas can trigger a psychic response. What could be more traumatic than the sudden death of your husband? Unless, of course, you consider the unexpected, violent death of your parents. Such a tragedy. And at such a tender young age, too.”

I lowered the ice pack to look at him, the unspoken question in my eyes. He smiled back at me, slowly nodding his head, and I felt the first stirrings of anger.

“WHAT YOU’RE IMPLYING is impossible, Keith. My parents were killed over 25 years ago, and you’re trying to tell me you were involved in that?”

“You don’t understand yet, do you, Taylor? I’m only a small part of a much bigger picture. They’ve been watching you for years, waiting for your talent to show itself. When it didn’t, they decided to help it along. Unfortunately, you were too young. Abilities like yours either present at an extremely early age, or they lay dormant until maturity. It was a mixed blessing really. The dormant ones are usually much more powerful, but they needed to provide you the most natural environment possible to ensure your potential.” He laughed as he said it like it was all some big joke. “Imagine their dismay at having killed your parents only to have to find someone willing to give up their life to tend to your upbringing and keep an eye on you. Your father was an only child, Taylor. Your dear Aunt Vivian was one of ours. That’s how I know you so well, you see. I studied the reports on you that she sent in daily. Makes for some fascinating reading.”

He went over to pour himself another cup of coffee, creating a dramatic pause. If an audience was what he wanted, he’d certainly gotten his wish. The room was silent, save for the non-stop wheezing of Hughes, struggling for air. That he wasn’t quite finished was obvious. Every muscle I had, quivered in tension, waiting.

“What’s wrong Taylor? Nothing to say? You want some proof?” He smiled maliciously, and I knew this was what he’d been waiting for. He pulled out a cell and flipped it open, watching me as he thumbed the speed dial. He spoke into it and snapped it shut, leaning back against the table, coffee in hand.

“Keep your eyes peeled in that direction,” he said, pointing toward the crates where Lars had disappeared earlier. “Your proof is about to walk right in.”

I looked in spite of myself, not sure of what to expect, but fearing the worst. His whole story was so preposterous, and yet, he seemed so sure. Took such delight in reciting it. We waited in silence. In the distance, I heard the echo of a door closing and felt my heart rate speed with each second of the clock.

And then there she was. Walking out from behind the crates as if it was yesterday. My breath caught, and my hands began to tremble as she walked into the room. Aunt Vivian. The woman who raised me after my parents were killed. The woman I’d buried nearly ten years ago.

“Looks like the night for miracles. First your husband, then your Aunt. Wonder who’ll show up next.” Keith chuckled, as Vivian walked over to join him and poured herself a cup of coffee.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Taylor,” she said as she lifted the cup to her lips, blowing to cool the hot brew. “I’m afraid your parents won’t be joining us.”

Anger surged, slipping through me like flames, reaching out into the warehouse, shaking the metal doors and shifting the crates in their stacks before I pulled it back inside me.

“So, Marcus was right,” Keith whispered, a smug if satisfied smile across his face. “It’s there, just under the surface. Waiting.”

“Yes, he was. Good to know he was right about something,” Vivian agreed as she came over to look at me like I was a specimen in the jar. “Make sure you keep her under control. Drug her if necessary, but I don’t want any trouble. I’ll tell them to get the plane ready.”

She dismissed me with a look and walked out of the room, leaving me shaken to the core. Keith had been telling the truth about Vivian. If the rest of what he had said was true, I’d been manipulated by these people for most of my life, and I had a bad feeling I’d just let them manipulate me again. They’d wanted to see if Marcus was right, whether my ability had indeed surfaced. Keith had been pushing my buttons all evening. And the battle with Hughes? I’d answered his attack with my fist, instead of with my mind. They’d finally brought in the big guns with Vivian, trying to push me to the edge, so I’d lose control and confirm what Marcus had told them, and I’d handed it to them on a silver platter. How much of what Keith claimed was true, I had no way of knowing, but the fact that Vivian was alive and well, was a shock. That she seemed to be higher in the pecking order than Keith, an even bigger one.

“Here’s how it’s going to be, Taylor,” he talked to me, but I noticed he kept his distance. “You cause any more trouble and Hughes here, is going to take it out on Dr. Connors.”

Maybe the shock was wearing off, or I’d been hit so many times I was becoming immune to it, but at least my brain was starting to function again. If I didn’t pull it together, people were going to get killed. People I cared about.

“Taylor!” Keith shouted angrily, causing me to flinch. “Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

He’d never raised his voice to me, the entire time I’d known him, let alone yell at me. He was yelling at me now and the effect, I could guarantee, was not the one he was going for. This was not the man I’d married, the man I loved. That man was indeed dead if he’d ever really existed at all.

This was my enemy. I had been running from that fact since I first saw him,

but now it took hold in my brain with undeniable resolve. This man thought he had control over me, but he was wrong. He had no idea what power I held. How strong I was. I had forgotten that, in my initial shock, but I sure remembered it now. I looked over at Hughes and Connors and decided I was done being manipulated.

“What makes you think I care?” I answered him, keeping my voice one of defeat and despair. “For all I know, he works for you. How do I know he isn’t just another Dr. Brown?”

The exhaustion I was feeling from being on an emotional roller coaster most of the night, lent credence to my words and I saw a flicker of doubt in his face before he turned to Hughes in question.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hughes croaked out, barely able to talk. “You think Brown worked for us?”

“No. I *know* he worked for you. You used him against me. How do I know you’re not using Connors the same way?” I glared at him, putting all the anger and hatred I felt for him into my words. He flicked his eyes quickly to Keith, and I caught a brief glimpse of fear cross his features. *Keith didn’t know about Brown.* In an instant, everything changed, the pieces falling into place. Hughes had double-crossed them, and Brown had been in on it with him. I still didn’t know who all the players were, but now I knew some of them were playing for a different team. Brown had been with the other team, or at least, he had been until Hughes had killed Abby. That had been a game changer.

I didn’t know what Brown had been planning on doing with me, but whatever it was, it didn’t involve Hughes. I glanced over, catching Connors’ eye as my mind scrambled on how best to use my new found knowledge.

Hughes recovered quickly and simply shrugged his shoulders, shaking his head like I was some sort of nutcase when Keith looked over at him. He was good. I had to give him that. If I hadn’t been looking at him at just the right moment, I wouldn’t have seen that instant of unguarded fear and caught on to him. He was right to shrug me off. There was no way for me to prove Brown had been working for him or that he was double crossing Keith and Vivian. It was his word against mine, and I was so desperate, I’d probably say anything.

I looked over at Hughes, and he smirked at me, his confidence back in full force and there I was, bloodied, defeated and chained to a chair. If I were in Keith’s shoes, I wouldn’t believe me either, and it was, in all probability, going to get him killed. There was no way Hughes could let me leave with Keith and Vivian. Not if he was selling me off to another group. He’d have to make a move tonight before we got on that plane. Why I would even care that my dead husband, whom I now pretty much hated with every fiber of my being, would

probably be dead before the night was out was beyond me. I hung my head and started chuckling at the absurdity of it all.

“Stop it, Taylor,” Keith barked out, obviously worried that I was losing it. *You should be worried*, I thought. *Bad things happen when I lose it*. I looked up to see Dr. Connors watching me, concern in his eyes. He was an innocent in this. Of that I was certain. Like Abby, he didn’t deserve any of this. At the very least, I needed to get him out of this mess, and I had a bad feeling I was running out of time. Keith knew me well. I protected the innocents. He’d use him against me, like they’d used Abby. *Like Abby...* the thought kept nibbling away at the corners of my brain. Unwanted, I remembered the horror in Brown at what had happened, the pain of Dr. Connors when I told him, and realized I had one more card up my sleeve. One I had to play right, to have any chance that Keith would believe it. I looked Dr. Connors in the eye and willed him to understand what I was about to do. Then I took a deep breath and jumped in with both feet.

“Fine, Keith, just go ahead and ...how did you put it? Oh, yes. Take it out on Connors if that’s what you want, but if he has any value to you at all, I’d keep a close eye on Hughes.” I let anger edge out the defeat in my voice as I threw out my ace. “He has a tendency to kill people.”

“Hughes kills lots of people, Taylor. People I tell him to.”

“Somehow I doubt you told him to kill this one.”

I leaned back in the chair, closed my eyes and put the ice pack back in place, but not before seeing the look of shocked anger Hughes directed at me. *That’s right, buddy boy. Brown told me what you did. You killed a Client. Keith may not know, but he’s about to.*

I feigned indifference while trying to settle my nerves, and waited to see what happened next. I wasn’t worried about Hughes rushing me. I’d hear him before he got close, the way he was wheezing. His throat was swelling shut, and it sounded like I had done some severe damage to his vocal cords. With any luck, he’d be in need of medical attention shortly, and there would be one less bad guy we’d have to worry about.

“What’s she talking about Hughes?” Keith asked quietly.

“I have no idea,” he wheezed out. “She’s trying to cause trouble.”

“He’s lying to you, Keith. He knows exactly what I’m talking about.” I didn’t need to open my eyes to know I had his full attention now. I could practically hear his brain working to figure out what I was trying to tell him.

“Hughes? Who exactly did you kill?” I could hear Keith’s footsteps on the concrete and sat up to see him walking slowly toward Hughes, as he waited for his answer.

“She’s playing you.” Hughes was coughing now, his words barely

discernible. "Trying to turn you against me."

Keith came to a stop, pulling a gun out from under his jacket and pressed it against Connors' forehead. "Is that what you're doing, Taylor? Playing me?"

He turned to look at me, and I knew without a doubt he'd kill Connors without a moment's hesitation. I could see it in his eyes, which were watching me like a hawk. This was a test in so many ways. And there were so many ways it could go wrong. Hughes stood next to him, a look of triumph on his face.

"How much did you sell me for, Hughes?" I asked, watching his confidence fade a bit. "Brown was in on it, wasn't he? It might have worked if you hadn't crossed the line." I shrugged and leaned back, placing the ice pack back on my face as I closed my eyes. "Ask him about Abby."

Her name seemed to echo through the warehouse and the stillness that followed. Seconds seemed to stretch into minutes, and I found myself holding my breath for what seemed an eternity. I was betting on the fact that if Keith knew about me, he'd know about others that had special abilities too.

"What about Abby, Hughes?" His voice was deadly, the sound of it sending a chill down my spine. "Is there something I should know?"

The wheezing sound of Hughes breathing suddenly filled the air, and I realized he must have been holding his breath too. I wondered if he even realized that he'd done it. If I'd noticed from where I was sitting, Keith was sure to have noticed too.

The sound of the gunshot was as deafening as it was unexpected. Keith hadn't even waited to hear what Hughes might have said. He'd just shot him. Terror brought me to my feet so fast, I knocked the chair over, the weight of it against the handcuff nearly dragging me to my knees. Hughes was on the ground next to Connors, not moving. I couldn't see his face, and I didn't want to. It was obvious from the amount of blood pooling under him that he was dead. I didn't need a closer look. Connors was sitting where he had been, covered in blood splatter, but he was still in one piece. I turned away to find Lars standing still as a statue, his eyes fastened on Keith and the gun he still held in his hand.

A door smashed open, banging against the wall and within seconds, three men appeared, guns drawn, weaving through the crates and stacks of boxes like ghosts. Keith watched them cautiously as they moved in, assessing the situation.

"All clear," one of the men called out, and I watched as two more men melted out of the shadows. Five men on the ground. Six, I revised, not seeing the man who had been at the gate. Odds were good that at least one or more of them was working with Hughes. There was no way of knowing who it was. No wonder Keith looked nervous. I'd be afraid to turn my back on any of them if I were him.

There was a blur of movement as Vivian came into the room. She barely gave me a glance as she strode purposefully over to Hughes body, only to stop short as she noticed the gun still in Keith's hand.

"Problems?" she asked, her casual tone belying the steely look she was giving him. I'd seen that look before. I'd grown up with it. Aunt Vivian was not happy.

"Not anymore." Keith holstered the gun, giving a discreet nod to indicate the men in position behind her.

"You two." She pointed to the two nearest men. "Get rid of this. The rest of you get ready to pull out. You," she pointed at me, "sit down."

I glared at her, fully intent to stand my ground only to have Lars snatch up the chair and shove me back into it.

She went to pour herself a cup of coffee, stalling as the two men dragged Hughes' body from the room, leaving a trail of blood in their wake.

"Well?" she snapped as soon as the door slammed closed behind them. "Explain this mess."

"Hughes sold us out. He and Brown were in on it together." He ground the words out in anger. "He took Abby."

"What?" Vivian shook her head in frustration. "What are you talking about? Who told you this?"

He jerked his head in my direction, and I braced myself as she headed my way.

Vivian had to be over 50, but she looked closer to forty. She'd changed her hair style and gotten rid of the gray. She'd slimmed down, losing the extra padding that had softened her features and I suspected there'd been a bit of plastic surgery here and there along the way. If I hadn't known her when she was younger, I doubted I would have recognized her now.

"Hello Vivian," I said as she came to stop before me. "May I say that death certainly becomes you."

She hit me almost as hard as Hughes had, snapping my head back with the force of it.

"You're lucky I like you, Vivian," I said, wiping the blood away from the cut she'd managed to re-open. "That move didn't work out so well for Hughes."

"Shut up, Taylor. You've already managed to get one person killed here tonight. Let's not add to that number."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Keith shot him. Not me."

She hit me again, sending blood flying through the air and me back down onto the floor.

"Sit her up," she ordered. Lars jerked me up and, for what seemed like the

tenth time that night, slammed me back into the chair. Some help he was turning out to be.

I kept my head down, this time, waiting for the dizziness to pass, watching the blood drip onto the floor at my feet.

“Are you finished now, Taylor?” she asked, echoing the words I had heard too many times in my childhood.

I lifted my head, and stared off to her left, making sure not to make eye contact. Docile and humble. It was what she expected, and her satisfied sigh told me I had gotten it right, even after all these years.

“Now, what’s this nonsense about Brown and Hughes?” she demanded. “And I want facts, Taylor. Not your opinion.”

“Brown was working with Hughes in the beginning,” I mumbled, the words barely audible. “He had abilities. He was able to read thoughts, move things like me.” I heard her quiet gasp and smiled, my head down. She’d had no idea. Brown had been in her grasp the entire time, and she’d never even known it.

“Brown was supposed to pretend to be kidnapped, beg me to rescue him, then let Hughes know where we were hiding. But he never did. He never made the call.”

“Why? What happened?” Keith had come up while I was talking. “Why didn’t they take you when they had the chance?”

“Brown was angry. Hughes had used Abby to find us after the fire. That’s how he knew where we were. Knew when I would be close enough for Brown to reach me.”

“Get on with it Taylor. What happened to the girl?” I was taking too long. Vivian was losing patience. I could hear it in her voice. “Where is she?”

“She’s dead. Hughes killed her. That’s why Brown didn’t call. He was angry about Abby.”

“What kind of fool do you take me for?” I looked up just in time to see the last hit coming. I went with it, landing on the floor and, this time, Lars let me stay there. “You would have *never* gone to the Agency knowing that Hughes was the one after you.”

“I went to the Agency *because* Hughes was after me.” I paused to wipe the blood off my face and let my words sink in while I stalled for time to think about what I was going to say next. “Sean was hurt and needed help. The Agency was the best chance he had, and I thought I’d be able to smoke Hughes out on my own. Find out who else was working for him.”

My last words hung in the air, planting the seed and I waited, as she stood over me, shaking with anger. I wasn’t worried about another hit. Vivian had a pattern I was well familiar with. Three hits had always been the limit, but I

wasn't about to try to get up and test the theory. I'd been willing to take the beating so she'd believe what I told her, but that was as far as I was willing to go. One more smack and this was going to end here and now, which was the last thing I wanted. I needed to know who was behind this, and I was pretty sure there couldn't be too many more rungs on the ladder before I got there, so I was content to wait her out and see what came next. I'd given her a lot to think through and, even more, to worry about.

"Very convenient that Brown and Hughes can't be present to tell their side of this story. Perhaps, Keith, you were a bit premature in killing him before we could ask any questions." She directed her comments to Keith, but I could feel her gaze boring down on me, searching for some indication that I was lying to her. "What makes you think that Brown was telling you the truth? Perhaps he was just another victim."

"Because I saw Hughes with Brown before we rescued him." I decided it was time to stand up and started getting to my feet as I talked to her. "Because Brown was the one that attacked Sean and threw him off the cliff, before he came after me. Brown knew who the buyers were. He betrayed Hughes, just as Hughes betrayed you."

I was on my feet and bent back down to pick up the towel to mop at my face, making sure not to make eye contact with her.

"The people who killed Brown must have been the buyers," Keith said, jumping ahead to the logical conclusion. "not some hillbillies robbing the place like Hughes suggested. So how did you manage to get away?"

"There was no one else there. I lied about that." I said, having decided to take the chance and tell them the truth, in order to drive home my point. "I killed Brown. Then I poured gasoline on him and set him on fire. The evidence was all right there. You would have known if Hughes had bothered to tell you."

She was dying to ask me how I did it. How I'd killed him. If Brown had gotten the jump on Sean, he was more than a match for me, yet here I was, and Brown was dead. She wouldn't ask, though, and admit that Hughes had kept the information from them, and I certainly wasn't going to volunteer anything. Better to let her wonder.

"This complicates things." Vivian turned to Keith, apparently done with me. "We have to assume that they know who she is."

"Oh, it's worse than that, Vivian," I said quietly, dabbing gently at my face until she turned back to stare at me. "I'm pretty sure they know where I am too. Unless you think Hughes was the type to walk away from large sums of cash."

She stared at me, fury in her eyes that I dared to talk to her like that, but she didn't make a move toward me. I was right, and she knew it. Odds were good

that Hughes had made arrangements other than the ones she had planned for tonight. She had much bigger problems to deal with than me right now.

"We need to talk." She motioned to Keith, as she stepped away from me and headed toward the door.

"Get them ready to go," he ordered Lars, as he fell into step behind her.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Lars grabbed the chair, setting it upright and sat me back down on it, this time, a little more gently than before, but not by much.

"That was stupid," he growled out, as he checked the damage done to my face. "Smart, but stupid. Now, they're not sure who to trust."

"I notice they trust you. Didn't even think twice about leaving you in here with me."

He sighed as he squatted down beside me to unlock the cuffs, and I could tell he was frustrated.

"You don't trust me. I get that. Considering the circumstances, I don't blame you, but we don't have time for it."

He sat back on his heels, and I rubbed my wrist, glad to be free of the cuff. I looked at him, searching for the earpiece he was usually wearing, but couldn't see it. For all I knew, Vivian was outside listening to our whole conversation.

"I'm not wired. Too much interference around here for it to work. Look, you either trust me, or you don't. There's nothing I can do about it. I know what you can do. The power you really have, okay? Not that little show you put on for them." He jerked a thumb toward the door where Keith and Vivian had disappeared through. "I screw up, and you can take me out, no hard feelings. Just make sure I've actually screwed up before you do and make sure you take them down too because I've put too much time into this to have you mess it up now."

For a guy who'd not said but one sentence since I'd met him, he'd turned into quite the chatterbox. And he was right. There was nothing he could do to convince me to trust him.

He picked up the towel and pressed it to my cheekbone in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

"This is going to need stitches. You shouldn't have let her hit you like that."

"She wouldn't have believed me if I'd volunteered the information. That's not the way she works." I pushed his hands away, and grabbed the towel from him, succeeding in irritating him further. "Besides, she's more a slapper, than a puncher. It's not so bad if you know it's coming."

"So were you lying to her?"

"No," I lied, remembering the look on Mama D's face after she'd killed Brown to save me. "That was the truth."

Connors walked up while we were talking and stood quietly nearby listening. Hughes hadn't bothered to secure him. He either didn't think of Connors as much of a threat or knew he didn't need to bother doing it. Why was he here? Was he like Brown? Was he working for them, or did he have his own agenda?

He'd been so angry about Abby. There was no way I was wrong about that, but Brown had felt the same way, and he was one of them. I'd been so certain he was innocent just a few minutes earlier. Now I just wasn't sure. I hated this. Hated not knowing who to trust. I didn't have any trouble not trusting Lars but Connors I liked, and I felt like a traitor for suddenly doubting him, when he'd done nothing to deserve it.

"It's all right Taylor. You don't have to trust us. I don't know how you could trust anyone after tonight." Connors voice, so soft and gentle, practically echoing my thoughts, nearly brought me to tears. "In fact, you shouldn't. Not knowing who to trust, always looking over your shoulder is a distraction. *You know that.* That's why you told Keith and Vivian what you did. It's a good strategy, but it can work against you just as easily as for you. Decide right now to trust no one. Not tonight."

"He's right," Lars agreed. "Quit worrying about it and concentrate on stopping this."

They were right. I couldn't afford to trust them. Couldn't waste the time second guessing myself, always afraid of making a mistake. Not now. The decision to stop wondering and just not trust them was an immediate relief.

"Good," Lars snapped out, sensing I'd made my decision. "Connors. Just so you know, if I find out you are working for them I'll kill you myself."

"Ditto," Connors challenged back, causing Lars to raise a skeptical eyebrow.

I looked at them standing there, Lars, big and fierce, towering over the professorial doctor, both of them threatening to kill each other and felt a ghost of a smile slide over my lips. We'd be lucky to survive the night.

"Deal," Lars growled out before turning back to me. "We'll cover your back, but assume that our intent is to stab you in the back instead. The Doc and I will follow your lead. We've done pretty well so far letting you run with it."

"Within limits," Connors corrected him. "Too many more blows to the head and I'll have to doubt your reasoning abilities. He's right about that cut, Taylor. You need stitches."

"Right now, we need to concentrate on getting out of here." I looked over at Connors, wondering how long it had been since he'd eaten. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm managing for now. It was hard to stay ... calm, given the circumstances. I thought she was going to kill you. I understood what you were doing, but it was

still hard to sit there and let it happen.”

Lars looked at Connors in disbelief. It was easy to see he didn't think of him as a threat any more than Hughes had, which was fine because I knew differently. I knew how much control it had taken to sit there and do nothing with Hughes within inches of him. I knew he understood how important it was that we follow the trail to the end.

“You know, I would have never let Keith kill you,” I told him, hoping he could hear the sincerity in my words.

“Oh, my dear. The thought that you would have, never even crossed my mind.”

THE OUTSIDE DOOR opened, and Lars instantly had his gun out, prodding me forward with the barrel and shoving Connors into step beside me, as Keith stepped through the door.

“Here. Get cleaned up and put this on.” He threw a shirt at me, which I didn’t bother to try and catch, letting it fall to the ground instead.

“Where’s Vivian?” I asked, checking the door behind him, expecting her to step through at any minute.

“She’s busy.” He walked over and scooped the shirt up in one fluid movement, trying to shove it into my hands.

“Look, Taylor, I’m sorry about what happened.” If he was trying to sound contrite, he was failing miserably. It had come out irritated and annoyed.

“What exactly are you sorry about? Lying to me? Betraying me? Letting me think you were dead?”

“I’m sorry about Vivian,” he snapped. “She shouldn’t have hit you.”

Really? He hadn’t been sorry when Hughes had knocked me around, but then he was trying to push me into using my power. Maybe there were limits. Even for him. He stepped closer, trying to look at my face and I jerked away, refusing to let him see. He reached around and grabbed my chin, forcing me to face him.

“It isn’t the first time, Keith. I’m used to it,” I said, knocking his hand away. “Besides, I didn’t exactly see you trying to stop her.”

“It won’t happen again, now that we know.” He jerked me around to face him. “It wasn’t in the reports. We had no way of knowing what she was doing to you.”

I stopped struggling as his words sank in. *We* had no way of knowing? Just who were we? Whoever they were, apparently, they hadn’t been watching. Just relying on the reports that Vivian had filed. Way, way too trusting.

“I imagine there’s quite a lot that you won’t find in the reports,” I said softly, driving the wedge of distrust further into the hole. I jerked my arm from his grasp and bent to pick up the shirt that had ended back up on the floor, before turning to go.

“It won’t happen again, Taylor. You have my word on that.”

I nodded that I had heard him, glad my back was to him, and he couldn’t see me roll my eyes at the thought that he would think his word actually meant something at this point. Lars poked me with the gun to get me moving again, and

we headed down the corridor between the crates. I heard the door slam shut behind me and glanced back to see that Keith had left the building.

“Well played, my dear,” Connors whispered. “Well played indeed. He’s out there right now, wondering what else she’s done that he doesn’t know about.”

Lars pushed open a door that led into the bathroom and flipped on the light, leaving me standing face to face with the mirror. They were both right. I needed stitches.

“Actually Doc, he said ‘we didn’t know’,” Lars muttered quietly. “He talked to someone higher up, went over her head. That’s the person who’s unhappy with what Vivian did.”

I’d been looking around for some way to wash the blood out of my hair without sticking my head into what had to be the dirtiest sink I’d ever seen, but his words stopped me short. I looked from the mirror and the abused and bloody figure I saw reflected there, down to the clean shirt that I held in my hand. It belonged to a woman, and as I rolled the fabric between my fingers feeling the soft, smooth glide of silk, I realized it had to be Vivian’s.

I had never been allowed to touch her things growing up, most especially her clothes. The penalty for doing so had been severe. A lesson learned once and not ever forgotten. How it must have pained her to give this to me now. Something she would never have done given any other choice. She was in trouble, and she knew it. I wasn’t about to help her cover her tracks.

I let the fabric slide from my grasp and tumble in a heap onto the floor, deciding I looked fine, just the way I was. Let them see a sample of Vivian’s handiwork up close and personal. See what they were dealing with. If we ever got there.

“Lars!” Keith’s voice boomed through the warehouse, making me jump. “We’re moving!”

“You ready? He’s not going to be happy,” Lars asked, casting a glance at the discarded shirt.

I nodded and turned to look at him, just in time to see the gun emerge from behind a stack of crates and take aim at Lars.

There was no time to think, no time to yell a warning. Barely enough time to react. I shoved Lars aside while giving the crates a mental heave, just as the bullet hit the wall between us. Lars hit the ground and rolled away as I whirled toward Connors, and knocked him to the floor, scrambling for cover.

“Taylor, stop. He’s down.” Lars was moving rapidly, clearing the distance to the crates where I’d seen the gun. “Stay over there.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. Connors and I had ended up crouched down by another stack of crates. I pressed my back against the hard wood behind me,

closing my eyes. I had no desire to see what I had just done. The adrenaline was pumping through me like fire, and my lungs ached with each breath I took.

“Who’s shooting at us?” Connors whispered.

“Whoever Hughes sold her to, Doc, or whoever was working with Hughes. Doesn’t much matter. They’re here to collect her,” Lars replied, moving quietly in next to me. “What do you want to do?”

The sound of gunfire outside confirmed that whoever had been about to kill Lars hadn’t come alone.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but we need to help them. Make sure that Keith and Vivian win this.”

Connors grunted in agreement, wanting to know who was behind all this as badly as I did. Getting on that plane was the only way we were going to find out. The trick was going to be making sure things ended up the way we wanted, without them knowing we’d helped. That, and staying alive.

“Okay then,” Lars whispered, handing me his own gun, keeping the one he’d picked up from the dead man for himself. “Use the gun from now on. It’s a lot easier to explain.” He cocked an eyebrow, bobbing his head back toward the fallen crates, making his point. “Stay close, Doc, and keep your head down.”

We silently wove our way back through the crates toward the main room. We were nearly clear from the crates when I grabbed Lars’ arm, stopping him from walking into the open room and pulled him back.

Shaking my head, I put my finger to my lips, cautioning them to silence as we backed away and melted into the crates behind us. They were waiting for us there. I could feel it. The man they’d sent in was meant to flush us out. The empty room was a trap.

We needed to draw them out, and I was the best bait we had. They needed me alive so they would hesitate before opening up on whoever came into the room, giving me some time to turn and run. Or, at least, I hoped so. I handed my gun to Connors and motioned for them to stay put and to be ready. It was obvious that neither of them were happy about it, but they kept quiet, following my lead, like they had promised me earlier.

I turned and ran the rest of the way through the crates and into the room as if Satan himself were at my heels. The response was immediate and what I had been expecting. The taser points almost seemed to be flying toward me in slow motion, the wires coiling out behind them in graceful spirals. I fell backward, letting my feet drive forward and watched as the spikes passed inches above me, before reaching the end of their lines and being jerked back to the floor. I rolled over and was moving, scrambling on all fours, clawing my way back toward the shelter of the crates, my pursuers hot on my heels. I gained my feet and off

balance, careened into the first stack of crates, losing precious time. Hard fingers closed around my right arm, jerking me back, and using the momentum, I whirled around, driving my left palm heel forward, meeting bone with a resounding crack. He didn't go down, but his grip loosened and I twisted free, nearly falling, fighting to stay on my feet as I turned once more to run.

I sped past Lars and Connors, dodging around corners, moving fast, knowing there were too many of them to take down at once. There'd been at least three men waiting in the main room, and at least one was still hot on my heels. I rounded the corner into the hallway that led back to the bathroom and ran full out in the straightaway.

Suddenly Keith stepped out of the shadows at the end of the hall, blocking my way. I saw him standing there as he raised his gun and leveled it at me.

I dove, stretching forward and hit the floor hard, sliding down the hall as the shot rang out over my head. I barely had come to a stop, when his hand grabbed my hair, jerking me up to my feet and throwing me against the wall. He pinned me there, one hand around my throat, the other centering his gun on the footsteps coming at us through the crates.

"Keith, let me go," I gasped, digging at his hand, trying desperately to warn Lars.

Suddenly, he was there, stepping into the hallway, his gun aimed at Keith, murder in his eyes.

For a second, I thought they were going to kill each other, then just as fast, Keith dropped his gun and his grasp on my neck. Lars dropped his gun as well and reaching behind him, dragged Connors into view before shoving him down the hallway toward us. I slid down the wall onto the floor and within seconds, Connors dropped down beside me.

"Is the perimeter secure?" Lars asked Keith while checking his ammo. A quick glance told me he had managed to get his gun back and lose the other gun somewhere along the way. I realized, looking at Connors, that Lars hadn't been so much pushing him as dragging him along. He looked exhausted, his facial muscles slack and his eyes vacant. I didn't know what had happened back there, but it had pushed him over the edge. As I watched, he roused himself enough to try and give me an encouraging smile, but it was obvious he needed help and fast.

"Yes. For now. " He went to the man he'd shot and rolled him over with a kick. "Recognize him?"

Lars shook his head no. He didn't recognize him, but I did. I'd last seen him at the warehouse in Denver where they'd been keeping Brown, which meant he worked for Hughes, not whoever Hughes had promised me to. I clung to the

chance that Hughes had a keen sense of self-preservation and hadn't given me up. They might not know exactly who they were looking for, but it was a sure bet that they were expecting delivery tonight. Whoever the buyer was, if they had a brain in their head, they'd have been watching Hughes, waiting for him to bring out the package.

"We've got to get out of here," I said, scrambling to my feet and dragging Connors up with me. "We don't have much time."

"Shut up, Taylor. You'll leave when I say and not before. Now sit down." Keith glared at me and motioned with his gun to sit back down.

I had my hands full with Connors, but my legs were free, and Keith was standing much too close to me for his own good. I took him in the man parts with a shot that made his eyes roll up in his head and the gun drop from his limp hand. The feeling of satisfaction that went through me as he hit the floor almost made me feel ashamed of myself. But not quite.

"The man you shot worked for Hughes, Keith. They're here to get me. Tonight someone is expecting a delivery. They may or may not know who they're buying, but you can bet they know where we are and when Hughes doesn't come out with me, they'll be coming in. I don't intend to be here when they do."

I turned to leave, only to be stopped by the feel of a gun barrel, pressed tight against the back of my skull.

"You'll leave when he says you leave. Now sit down." Lars shoved me back down, causing me to lose my grip on Connors, ending us in a tangled pile on the floor, while Lars helped Keith to his feet. "She's right. They'll come for her when Hughes doesn't show up."

Keith was up, but barely. He was standing with his hands braced on his knees, dragging in deep breaths of air.

"You do that again, Taylor, and I'll kill you myself," he hissed out when he finally managed to straighten up. "I don't care how valuable they think you are."

He gave me a look, and I knew he meant every word of his threat. If I took him down again, it would have to be for good. The fact that I even thought such a thing, made my head spin. The realization that I would do it, if push came to shove, made it that much worse.

"I'm glad you understand me," Keith snapped, misinterpreting the look on my face. He pulled the radio from his pocket and thumbed it on. "Get the cars ready. We're leaving."

He clipped the radio back on his belt and turned to leave. "Bring them along, Lars. If she causes any trouble, shoot her." He turned back to give me a parting sneer before he disappeared behind the crates.

We stepped out of the warehouse, and Lars pointed us to the car we had arrived in. Keith was already inside, with the engine running. A second car pulled up next to us as Lars opened the rear door and motioned us inside with the gun. Connors went in first, sliding over to the far door, giving me time for a quick look around before I got in.

Vivian was nowhere to be seen, and I had to assume she had gone ahead. There was one guard manning the gate, and one at the wheel of the other car, so she either took the other guards with her, or they had been killed in the fight. Either way, Vivian had left us short handed. I settled into my seat, wondering if Keith realized what Vivian had done and why.

I leaned over and helped Connors with his seatbelt, before snapping my own into place. I glanced out the window to see the gate opening, the last guard running for the waiting car and wondered how far we would get before the attack came.

We sped quietly through the industrial area, flying past darkened warehouses and empty parking lots. Lars ran through the intersections, ignoring the stop signs without hesitation. Connors hadn't moved in quite a while. He was either asleep or unconscious, and I was betting on the latter. He'd expended too much energy, and we needed to get him some help. At the moment, that didn't seem to be much of an option.

I looked behind us to see the other car tailing us, several car lengths back. Close enough to keep an eye on us, far enough back to be able to react. They were running without lights, making themselves a decoy. Anyone attacking, would assume the package was in the rear car, that the lead car was the security team. A plan that would either work for us or against us.

We cleared the industrial area and came into the business district and the first stop lights. Lars would have to slow down now and obey the traffic laws. We were a car load of bloody, battered people. We couldn't afford to be stopped by the police for running a light.

I expected to see the reflections of headlights behind me as we rolled up to a stoplight and glanced back when they failed to appear. The chase car was gone. I'd given them too much credit. They weren't a decoy. They were hiding and had taken off the first chance they got. I looked at Lars and saw him glance in the rearview, saw his jaw clench and his hands tighten on the wheel. We were on our own.

It was late, and the streets pretty much deserted, with the exception of a couple of blocks where the bars were located. We were almost out of town, heading for the highway into Denver when it happened. I heard them long before I saw them. The noise pounded through my head, shaking the car windows. The

light ahead turned yellow, and I felt the brakes grab as we slowed to a stop and then watched out my window as the car slid up next to us.

It bore little resemblance to the family car it was intended to be. Honda was the gangster car of choice, and this one had been customized to the max. The music blasting out the open windows was loud enough to make my bones vibrate, sending waves of pain through my battered face and head. There was one huge black guy in front, beating out a rhythm on the dash and rocking the whole car in time to the music. I sat watching him, willing the light to change, when suddenly he turned and looked right at me, eyes narrowing in anger.

“What you looking at!” he yelled at me. He was out of his car in seconds, coming around the front of our car, banging his fists on the hood. He was all anger and indignation, pointing and yelling, pounding on the car. I sat paralyzed in my seat, not knowing what to do. Lars was out of the car and moving toward him, drawing his gun. My mind couldn’t seem to get a grasp on what was happening, couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

Lars shot him, taking him down right there in front of the car. He holstered his gun and dragged the body out from in front of the car. Within seconds, he was back behind the wheel, and we were speeding away from the scene, the music fading in the distance. I looked back, the Honda’s headlights barely visible, and prayed that what I had just seen, hadn’t really happened. Because if it had, I had just watched Lars kill Jonas and I hadn’t done a thing to stop it.

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WE GOT TO the airport without any further incidents. Lars had taken the exit to the airport, pulling off the main entrance road to enter through a carded gate and head in the opposite direction from the main terminal. Now we were sitting in a hangar, waiting. Keith was on his cell phone, pacing back and forth next to the car. He was doing more listening than talking and I'd have given a lot to know who was on the other end of the line. Lars had gotten out as soon as we arrived and was nowhere in sight.

The plane in the hangar was some sort of jet. I don't know much about planes, but I know the difference between a propeller and a jet engine and this was definitely a jet. I'd expected a private plane but was surprised at the size of this one. Whoever was behind this was well funded.

I shook my head trying to clear it. I'd actually dropped off after we'd made the highway, exhaustion and shock winning out over adrenaline. I may have needed the down time, but felt worse because of it. My eyes stung, and I was beyond groggy, struggling to get my bearings. My face hurt and was numb at the same time. I reached up and felt around, my hand coming away damp with blood. I wiped it off on my shirt, which was totally ruined anyway and checked on Connors. He was alive, but his pulse was weak and erratic. He needed help and soon. I knew there was no food in the car, but odds were there was something on the plane. We needed to get moving.

Deciding I'd waited long enough, I reached over and grabbed the door handle, surprised when I felt it swing open. Keith hadn't bothered to lock us in. Apparently I wasn't the only one feeling the effects of the evening.

Keith glared at me and pointed at the car, silently ordering me to get back in. I ignored him and went around to open Connors' door and reached in to unbuckle his seatbelt. He was conscious but just barely. I pulled him out of the car and got him to his feet, propping him against the car for extra support until I got a good grip on him. I wrapped his arm around my neck and held it there, my other hand around his waist, snuggling him in close to my side.

"Walk," I ordered and started forward. He tried, but I ended up pretty much dragging him to the steps of the plane. Fortunately, he was a little guy, or I'd never have made it. Not that it had done me much good. The private plane was lower to the ground than a commercial liner, but the stairs looked impossible from my vantage point.

Suddenly, my load lightened, nearly causing me to fall over. Keith was there and had taken the bulk of Connors weight off me.

“Let go. This will be easier without your help.”

He swung Connors up over his shoulder, and I followed him up the stairs and into the plane.

“You could have waited,” he said as he dumped Connors into one of the leather seats.

“No, I couldn’t. He’s in trouble. I need to get him some food.”

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked, looking down at Connors like he was some sort of pest.

I shoved past him, heading toward the front of the plane where I assumed the galley would be, only to be jerked back into Keith’s broad chest.

“I asked you a question, Taylor. I expect an answer.”

“Sugar.” I threw the word out, trying to push away from him. “His levels are crashing.”

That wasn’t the problem, but it was close enough. The symptoms looked similar, and if he didn’t get help soon, the results were going to be same. Unconsciousness, coma, and death. I tried jerking away again and this time, he let me go.

The rear seating area easily held a dozen seats, each one the equivalent of first class on a commercial airline. The forward cabin was even nicer, set up more like a living room with leather sofas and work tables. I found the galley, tucked in behind a fully stocked wet bar, and began rifling the cabinets. My frustration was growing with each drawer. I’d cleared one side of the galley, and all I’d found was a bunch of pillows and blankets along with coffee cups, silverware, and glasses. Where was the food?

The wall behind me held the coffee maker and heating ovens, along with a full-size door. I jerked it open and stepped inside, thinking it might be a pantry. It was an elevator. I leaned out and glanced around the corner. Keith was standing in the exit door of the plane, on the phone again. I ducked back inside the elevator, slammed the door and pressed the button.

I’d finally found the food. The door of the elevator opened into a room filled with glass fronted refrigerator units, a huge ice maker, and six heavily armed men, the sight of which, froze me in my tracks, my hand still on the door.

“Stand down.” The quiet order came from the back, and I waited until the barrels dropped before I stepped out into the room.

Lars pushed his way through the men, obviously the man in charge.

“Yours?” I asked, getting a nod of affirmation in response. He made a quick motion and the men silently disappeared into the bowels of the plane. With them

gone, I finally had a clear look at the rest of the hold and the other person who was standing there. Relief surged through me. God love them, whoever they were. They'd brought Jenny with them.

"We don't have much time," Lars warned in a whisper, holding the elevator door open so it couldn't go up. "Get what you need fast and keep it quiet."

"Connors is dying," I told her, praying she'd know what to do.

"I know. Give him this. It's an injection that should bring him around. It will go through his clothes. Just jam it up tight and hit the button."

She handed me the narrow cylinder, and I slid it into my pocket out of sight.

"Once he's awake, get him to eat as many of these as possible." She crammed two baskets of muffins into my hands. I recognized them as the ones from the Lodge that Connors had been munching on earlier and nodded that I understood.

"Taylor, I can give you something for the pain, but it'll make you groggy. What you need most is rest. And stitches."

"So I've heard." The look on her face nearly made me smile as I shook my head no. I needed my wits about me. I turned back to Lars, needing to know what was going on. "Bryan?"

"He's fine," he snorted. "They needed to make contact and Sean figured you'd recognize Bryan and not kill him."

"Sean?" I looked over at Jenny, who was smiling and nodding at me.

"He's good. He's with Candice and Bryan. He said to tell you they have your back."

I felt my throat close up and swallowed hard against the emotion that threatened. They were safe and alive. And watching my back. I nodded at her and headed for the elevator. I had a million questions, but they could all wait until later. Right now, I knew all I needed to know.

"Lars, I'll take these. Grab that case of water and follow me up." I bobbed my head at the cooler, and he had the door open, pulling the water out in seconds.

"Jenny." I stopped, not knowing what to say to her. Thanks hardly seemed adequate for what she'd done, but she understood.

"Taylor," she quipped back at me, a ghost of a smile on her face. "We have an appointment the second this is over."

I nodded, knowing I didn't really have a choice and got in the elevator.

"No more blows to the head, Taylor. Understood?" I turned around to find Jenny holding the door to the elevator. Lars was standing behind her with the case of water, looking at anything but me. He'd told her what had happened. That I'd let Vivian hit me.

“Understood,” I agreed, keeping my eyes pinned on Lars.

Satisfied, Jenny stepped back and closed the door. I hit the button with my elbow and rode up to the galley.

“Where were you?” I had barely managed to get the elevator door open when Keith came storming around the corner of the galley.

“The coolers are down in the hold,” I said, kicking the door closed. “Lars is behind me, with some water. Muffin?” I held out the basket, offering him one, knowing he was too angry to take it.

“Get in your seat. We’re leaving.”

I secured the muffins in one of the galley cabinets and grabbing a blanket out of the galley, made my way to the back of the cabin. Keith was still forward, giving me time to slip Connors the shot while checking his seat belt and tucking the blanket in around him.

I was seated and buckled in, the plane already rolling out of the hangar, by the time Keith came back in. He gave me a look and sat down at the other end of the cabin, swinging his seat around to face me before buckling in, trying to intimidate me. If he thought I was going to sit there quietly and take it, he was sadly mistaken.

“Where’s Vivian, Keith? I don’t see her.”

“Not your concern.”

“Okay,” I paused, looking out the window at the line of planes waiting for clearance to take-off, “so where are we going?”

Keith ignored the question, opting to stare out the window instead. Lars came in from up front and took a seat opposite Keith, facing forward.

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me where we’re going, at least tell me how long the flight will be.”

“That’s enough, Taylor.” He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. I looked back out the window as we rumbled along, passing the long line-up of planes.

“You don’t really expect to get away with this, do you, Keith?” I asked softly. “You’re guilty of what? Kidnapping? Murder? I don’t know. The Agency is a government facility, after all. I’m sure treason fits in there somewhere.” His eyes narrowed in anger as the word ‘treason’ left my lips. If looks could kill, I’d have been reduced to a smoldering pile of ashes. I’d hit a nerve and decided to grind my heel on it. “What *do* they do to traitors these days, Keith?”

“Shut up. Taylor. I won’t tell you again.”

“Why? What are you going to do to me if I don’t? Hit me? I don’t think your boss would like that very much, do you?” I taunted, reminding him of the trouble Vivian was in if she was even still around.

I watched his hand roll up into a fist, saw the rage in his eyes, as he struggled for control and thought for an instant, that I'd pushed him too far.

"You ought to thank your lucky stars for that Taylor. It's the only reason you're still alive." He looked me in the eyes as he said it and I knew it was the truth. He'd kill me without a second thought if he could. Whoever he worked for, owned him, body and soul. I knew in that second he was lost. There was no saving him because there was nothing left to save.

"It's not going to work, Keith," I told him, my voice ringing with conviction. "You're going to spend the rest of your life in prison."

"I'm not going to prison, Taylor," He said, a smug smile on his lips, hatred in his eyes. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

He reached down and released his seat, swinging it around to face the front of the plane, effectively cutting me off. He was confident he was safe. That whoever he was working for had the power to protect him. I could only hope he was wrong.

The plane took a sharp left and paused, the engines powering up for take-off, leaving the line-up of corporate jets and rich globe trotters cooling their heels behind us. I could imagine their frustration, sitting there in line, as we passed them by. As we took off and settled into our flight path, the sun broke on the horizon, confirming my suspicions. I breathed out a sigh of relief, knowing my own frustration was nearing an end, the wait nearly over. We were heading east. Now it was just a matter of time.

* * *

I OPENED MY eyes to find Connors watching me, munching away on a muffin. His eyes bright and sparkling again

"Good morning," he managed between mouthfuls. "There's coffee."

It took me a second to realize I was looking up at him. Someone had reclined my seat, making it into a bed and covered me up with a blanket. The fact that they managed it without me waking up was too scary to even contemplate.

"Lars," Connors volunteered quietly when I lifted the edge of the blanket in question. He looked around before continuing. "Direct orders."

"She's not in charge," I mumbled, knowing he was referring to Jenny. I struggled to sit up and failed miserably. My muscles had stiffened up during the

few hours I had been asleep, and I was feeling every ache and pain. I reached over to find the buttons and move the seat up into a sitting position, ignoring Connors' sympathetic gaze.

"No, but she is usually right," Connors whispered between bites. He might have had a point, but I was no mood to admit it.

"Bathroom?" I asked, finally managing to get to my feet. He pointed to the rear of the plane, and I staggered down the aisle. The bathroom was every bit as opulent as the one at the Agency, if not more so. I eyed the water jets in the shower, craving the feel of hot water pounding out the aches in my muscles. It took every ounce of my willpower to turn my back on it, confident that if I got in, it would take a pry-bar to get me back out. Later, I promised myself, when this is over. As long as you want. Just not now. Later.

I took care of business, avoiding looking in the mirror. I knew how much my face hurt. I didn't need a visual to make me feel worse. Hunting around, I found a toothbrush and some toothpaste along with a travel size deodorant and made use of them. I might look like I'd crawled out of the sewer, but there was no reason I had to smell like it. I took a few minutes to stretch and try to work out some of the kinks. There was plenty of room, and at least, I had some modicum of privacy. When I came out, I felt a lot more human. I was still stiff, but moving was easier. I looked up to find Lars was waiting at my seat with a cup of hot coffee and a muffin.

"Get in your seat and buckle up. We're about to land."

I sat down, and he handed me the coffee, turning his hand over to reveal two tablets hidden in his palm. I left them laying there, reaching instead for the muffin.

"Fine." He stuffed them into his pocket, clearly angry. "If you want any more muffins, you'll have to wrestle the Doc for them. He's a bottomless pit."

I looked over to find Connors strapped into his seat, the half empty basket of muffins sitting in his lap and had to smile. He was looking better with each bite he took. As far as I was concerned, he could have all the muffins he wanted.

By the time we started our descent, I had finished my coffee and downed two muffins. Connors graciously had tossed me one of his stash as soon as I had polished off the first one and I was feeling far better than I had any right to expect. We came out of cloud cover to find the city stretched out beneath us, the dome of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument easily recognizable from the air. We were landing in D.C.

"Reagan National," I heard Connors mumble from across the aisle. "He's down there, Taylor. I can feel it."

I heard the landing gear lock into place, and my heart sped up in anticipation.

Connors was right. He was down there and to borrow Keith's words, he had no idea what he was dealing with. I smiled as the wheels touched down, ready to end it.

"Stay in your seat," Keith ordered, moving quickly through the cabin as the plane came to a stop. I hadn't seen him since I'd woken up. He'd taken the time to get cleaned up, sporting a fresh shave and clean clothes as he strode past. "I mean it, Taylor. Get out of that seat and I promise you, you'll be sorry."

He motioned to Lars to stay at the front of the cabin and set to work opening the door. We'd taxied past the terminal buildings and the corporate jets lined up along the edge of the field before finally pulling into a large hangar. I glanced out my window and just caught sight of a limo heading inside, trailed closely by two black Suburbans. A shiver of unease ran through me as they moved out of sight, the giant hangar doors rolling to a close behind them. Keith stood in the open doorway just inside the plane, the smile on his lips at odds with the knots in my stomach. I hesitated, my brain telling me to get a grip while my guts screamed at me to run. *'Follow your instincts'* I heard Mac order as clearly as if he was standing beside me, and suddenly I couldn't move fast enough.

"Something's wrong!" I called out the warning, fumbling to release my seatbelt. "Move!"

I was out of my seat and headed toward the rear door when the first burst of gunfire erupted, catching Keith full in the chest and slamming him up against the wall. The sound of feet pounding up the metal stairs had me sprinting down the aisle in a race for the open door.

"No!" Lars shouted as I jumped over Keith's body and rounded the turn to the door, just as the lead man cleared the top step.

I shoved out in panic, mentally hurling him backward down the stairs into the men behind him. They were back on their feet in an instant, scrambling for the opening.

"Help me!" I called out, and Lars was there beside me, struggling to close the door.

"What part of *no* don't you understand?" he spat out, as he sealed the latch, locking us inside the plane. "You could have been killed."

"They need me alive," I answered back, even though I knew he was right. I'd gotten lucky. The second of hesitation from the man on the stairs was the only reason I wasn't on the floor next to Keith. He'd had an easy shot, his semi-automatic centered on the door, determined to take the plane. He'd dropped the barrel when I'd stepped into view and charged the doorway. Fast, but not fast enough.

"Is he dead?" Connors asked, scrambling across the floor, moving past us to

check on Keith. I let him check, but I already knew the answer. I'd seen him take the blast, saw the life fade from his eyes. He'd been dead before he'd even hit the floor. He wasn't coming back this time.

Noise from the galley drew our attention as one of Lars' men appeared from around the corner, moving fast and low down the aisle to meet us.

"We've got a visual from the hold you might want to see," he informed Lars, glancing quickly to Keith and then Connors, before settling on me. "I'll cover you from the rear."

Lars stayed low, moving swiftly down the aisle. He was almost to the galley when a spray of bullets cut through the cabin. He dove to the floor and hugged it as another spray tore through the seats above his head.

"They have eyes," the man next to me called out, pointing to the windows. He backed us up, pushing us into the doorway leading to the exit. The metallic smell of blood was heavy in the air, Keith's body practically under our feet. I dragged deep breaths in through my mouth and kept my eyes on Lars as fear and adrenaline pounded through my veins.

With only the bathroom behind us, there was no other option but to move down the aisle. I watched as Lars inched forward only to draw back as bullets tore through the floor in front of him. They were above us, probably on scaffolds, improving their vantage point with each passing second. It was only a matter of time before they had him.

Lars' man pushed past me, dropped onto his belly and crawled the first few feet into the cabin as scrapes and noises came from outside the door behind us. He motioned us to follow him and moved forward another few feet. The bullets danced across the seats toward him, and his body jerked as they found their mark.

I scrambled forward, grabbed his feet and pulled, dragging him back into what little protection our area offered.

"He's alive," Connors said, checking his pulse, "but he won't be for long. We need to get out of here."

I took a breath, knowing he was right, knowing the only way was down the aisle. I stood up, intent on closing the shades and giving us some protection.

"No!" shouted Lars, the same time as Connors grabbed my leg.

"It's all right," I assured him, trying to shake off Connors and the electrical impulses he was shooting up my leg. I looked over at the windows, and picturing them in my mind, grabbed hold of the shades, and pulled. The noise reverberated through the plane, and I watched Lars' eyes grow wide in wonder, as the windows slammed shut one after another.

"Okay," he whispered quietly, nodding his head. "That works."

He was on his feet and running down the aisle, tossing me his gun.

“Go!” he hissed out. He grabbed the injured man and pulled him up over his shoulder falling into step behind us, as we ran for the galley.

The elevator was there waiting, and I shoved Connors inside as Lars struggled around the corner. A shrill alarm suddenly pierced the air around us, freezing me in my tracks until I recognized it. A cell phone. It had to be Keith’s.

I turned around and ducking past Lars, ran for the phone. I slid to a stop beside Keith’s body, frantically patting him down, feeling time ticking away. I knew they’d move fast once the windows shades went down, blinding them to the inside. Finally, I found it and fumbled it out of his pocket, stumbling to my feet.

Lars was already halfway down the aisle, and I tossed him the phone as I tore back up the aisle. The door to the plane blew as we rounded the corner into the galley. The debris cloud rolling through as Lars slammed the elevator and hit the button.

“Yes?” Lars snapped out as soon as he opened the phone and listened as the elevator dropped to the floor below. “He’s dead. This is Lars. We’re at the hangar under attack.”

The door opened, and hands reached in to pull us out. Lars motioned for silence as they disabled the elevator behind us.

“I have the package. I need delivery.”

He listened and then snapped the phone shut, slipping it into his pocket, as he gave me a quick nod. He had information, but for now, it would have to wait.

“Status,” Lars demanded and moved off as his men filled him in. Feet pounded through the floor over our heads, as they searched the plane for us and I knew it was only a matter of seconds before they figured out where we were. Within seconds, he was striding back toward me, issuing orders as he went.

“It’s Vivian,” Lars reported striding toward us, Connors having magically appeared at my side. “And she brought friends. Three in the plane, five in the hangar. Both exits are covered.” He pointed to the elevator and toward the back of the plane, where I assumed there was a loading door. “We have the element of surprise.”

“What about the man they just shot?” I asked, worried that his presence had given them away.

“She’s expecting the two guards from the warehouse to be here. She’ll assume it was one of them. We’re good.”

A dull thud issued from the open elevator. They were coming for us. Lars watched me, waiting for me to decide, his men restless behind him, drawing my attention. Jenny and the injured man were nowhere in sight, and I had to assume

they were out of harm's way.

Four men stood behind Lars, eager for the fight. I had no doubt they could handle what was about to come down the elevator shaft, but then what? We couldn't fight the others, trapped in the hold of the plane and we'd have used up our ace in the hole.

"We can't fight in here," I whispered. He nodded agreement, his eyes on the elevator. I looked over at Connors. "They need to think nothing's changed. That we're still prisoners. You up for that?"

He nodded, and Lars smiled. "We let them take us by the loading door. Get them to open it." With a wave of his hand, the men disappeared into the darkness of the hold, leaving the three of us standing alone by the elevator.

"Lars," I paused, waiting until he looked at me, needing to make sure he understood. "This needs to look real. They have to believe it." His eyes moved to the cut on my face, the muscle in his jaw clenching tight before he finally nodded in agreement as the top of the elevator disintegrated in a shower of dust.

"Run!" I yelled to Connors and pointed to the rear of the plane. We were already moving when the stun grenade dropped through the ceiling and rolled into the storage area.

"Shut your eyes," Lars called as it blew, the noise deafening inside the contained space. I stumbled, disoriented and blind, the flash bright even behind my closed lids. I went down hard and came up weaving like a drunk, Lars dragging me by the arm.

"Let me go!" I yelled, jerking my arm free, hearing the sound of pursuit close behind us.

"Move!" Lars shoved me and I stumbled forward, trying to focus.

We needed to make noise, wanted them to know where we were. The last thing I wanted them to do was search the hold looking for us and find Lars' men hiding there.

"Stop!" The voice behind us rang out, a spurt of gunfire emphasizing the command. Lars grabbed me by the back of the neck and whirled around, dragging me like a rag doll to stand between them. I fought, grabbing at his hand and he crammed the end of his gun into my temple.

"Stay back or I kill her," Lars threatened, his voice low and vicious, like some cornered animal.

The man jerked to a stop and held up a fist, stopping the other two men who were coming up fast behind him.

"All we want is the girl." His voice anything but reassuring as he took a step forward.

If possible, Lars squeezed my neck tighter, dragging me back against him.

My head was cocked at what seemed an impossible angle, and I dug at his hand, ignoring the gun.

“Everyone wants the girl,” he said giving me a shake. “I’m the one that has her.”

“So?” the man asked, taking another step forward.

“So, maybe I know something you don’t know. I want to negotiate.”

The man paused for a second, letting out an amused, dismissive snort. I held my breath, waiting, as he watched us, deciding our fate.

Suddenly he swung his gun to the left of me, and I heard Connors quick intake of breath.

“Open the hatch,” the man ordered and within seconds, the hold lit up, as the loading door swung open.

“Go then.” The man jerked his head towards the opening. “Negotiate.”

LARS DROPPED ME out of the plane, and I hit the ground hard, sprawling onto the concrete as he dropped down next to me and pulled me to my feet.

“Move,” he spat out, dragging me forward as Connors swung out of the plane and hurried to catch up. I looked up to see the others converging on us, Vivian in the lead, looking like the cat that had swallowed the canary.

I barely got a glimpse of the men as Lars dragged me past them, but a glimpse was all I needed to send a chill down my spine. Dressed in dark suits and ties, they looked like they had just stepped out of the Federal Building, except for the automatic weapons they carried. What kind of guys drove around in Washington D.C., carrying illegal weapons, stun grenades and explosives? They blended in so well, you’d never notice them until it was too late. The thought went through my mind like lightning, and I looked at Vivian in horror. What, in the name of heaven had she done?

We reached the cars, and Lars jerked me around to face them, and forced me down on my knees, gun held to my head. The men shifted, uneasy, their eyes on the drama that was being played out in front of them.

“Let me go!” I twisted away from Lars, only to be slammed back into place. I stayed on my knees and looked around desperately for Connors. He was close by, covered by two men, guns at the ready. I saw the look of warning flash in his eyes, and smelling her perfume, turned to see Vivian standing before me.

“Why should I let you live?” she asked viciously, her voice almost unrecognizable. I looked up, surprised to see she was talking to Lars instead of me.

“You need me.” He pulled me up to my feet and shoved me stumbling, toward Connors. “I’m the only one that can handle her.”

“Really?” She walked over to me and threw me a dismissive look “I handled her for years. Without your help. I can handle her now.”

“You can tell yourself that all you want Vivian, but it won’t make it true.” My voice was way calmer than I felt. “You’re deluding yourself.”

“You think so?” She pulled out her gun, a semi-automatic, and aimed it at Lars. “If she moves, shoot the doctor.”

She was standing right in front of me, so close I could have reached out and touched her, but I didn’t, knowing that the minute I did, they’d kill Connors. All I could see was the gun, my eyes focused on the release.

“Don’t do it, Vivian,” I warned her, praying that Lars’ men were out of the plane and in position, praying that Connors would survive this. She smiled at me, and looked me in the eyes, as she drew in a deep breath, preparing to fire. I saw her finger tighten on the trigger and let my mind slide down the gun grip, pressing the release as I went.

The bullet magazine dropped from the gun and clattered onto the floor. For a split second time seemed to freeze, and then everything happened at once.

Vivian turned the gun toward me, and I spun, dodging a bullet that never came as Lars launched himself at her, sending them both rolling across the floor. I felt a blast of heat from behind me and whirled in time to see Connors reach out, knocking the two guards off their feet with just a touch of his hand. I barely had time to register that their clothes were actually smoking before the hangar erupted in a hail of gunfire and Connors grabbed me, pulling me to safety behind the limo.

The noise was deafening as the exchange of gunfire escalated, the acrid smell of gunpowder burning my nose and making my eyes water.

“Stay here,” I ordered Connors, making my way to the front of the limo when the gunfire abruptly stopped. It looked like a war zone, bodies scattered across the hangar floor, laying in pools of blood. Lars was on his feet and moving, searching the bodies and kicking weapons away as he went, his men moving in rapidly from the perimeter. Vivian was still on the floor, where she’d gone down when Lars had hit her and was lying a few feet away, watching me.

“Cute trick with the gun, Taylor,” she groaned as she said it, obviously in pain.

I got up, scanning the area as I moved over to her, the feeling of danger still with me. “I like it. Comes in handy, sometimes.” I squatted down next to her. “What are you, Vivian? I’d hate to be accused of profiling, but you and your boys here don’t exactly look like Islamic terrorists.”

“There are others besides the al Qaeda or ISIS that you should fear.” She smirked as she said it. “Some you should fear more.”

“Maybe,” I said, as Connors came around the car to join me, “but you’re not one of them. Not anymore.”

“You think you won?” she hissed at me.

“It kinda looks that way,” I said, looking up as Lars headed toward us, giving me a nod.

“You’re wrong.” I looked back down in time to see her gaze on the limo and the detonator in her hand.

“No!” I screamed and pushed out with all my might as the world exploded into a wall of flame and flying shards of metal.

I WAS DROWNING, my lungs bursting as I fought for air, my arms flailing in an attempt to find the surface.

“Taylor! Stop fighting!” Strong hands grabbed my arms, pinning them down. Panic surged through me, and I threw them off, letting my mind do what my body couldn’t.

“Taylor.” The quiet voice cut through my panic, his touch dragging me back into sanity.

“Mac?” I asked, unable to focus, my vision blurry and dark.

“I’m here.” He caught my hands in his, trapping them, keeping me still. “You’re safe. You’re not drowning. Just breathe, Taylor. Just breathe.”

I raked the air into my lungs in deep gulps as a blanket dropped over my shoulders and Mac wrapped it tightly around me. My heart was pounding hard, and I was sure Mac could feel the tremors wracking my body.

“What’s going on?” I gasped, pulling my arm free and dragging my hand across my eyes, trying to clear them. “What’s happened?”

A chill went through me, sending shivers over my skin as someone pulled my hand away and began blotting my face with a towel, wiping gently at my eyes, clearing them of the gooey substance that seemed to coat everything.

“What’s happened is you’ve destroyed the recovery tank and most of the room. If Sean hadn’t been close by, you’d have probably taken out the whole wing. I suppose we should be thankful for that at least.” I opened my eyes to see Jenny kneeling in front of me, clearly perturbed. “Come on, let’s get you out of this mess.”

I looked down to find myself on the floor in the middle of a huge puddle of thick goo. I lifted a hand, rubbing the substance between my fingers in confusion. Jenny was right. The room was a disaster. Tables were overturned, the slime I was sitting in covering most of the floor. The recovery tank Jenny referred to, a twisted chunk of metal, the hatch hanging open at an angle. The men who’d been trying to hold me down were still lying on the floor, moaning as medical personnel saw to their injuries. I took it all in, my brain finally beginning to function again as memories came flooding back.

“Where’s Connors?” I demanded, struggling to stand up. “Lars?”

The tails of the wet blanket slapped against my legs as I rose and I looked down in disgust, kicking them away and nearly falling in the attempt.

“Easy Taylor. It’s going to take a while to get your land legs,” Jenny cautioned, taking my arm through the blanket. “Let’s get a wheelchair.”

I would have argued if it hadn’t been for the fact that it was taking everything I had just to stand there.

“Ah, I see you’ve been throwing people around again. You’ve gotten very adept at that.” I looked up, relieved to see Connors in the doorway, teetering on a pair of crutches. “Good to see you awake, Taylor. You had us worried.”

“Stay out!” He had started into the room, but Jenny’s command stopped him in his tracks. “You want to break the other leg? We can barely stand up in here.” Jenny and Mac were propelling me toward the door, carefully setting their feet as they went. She was right. The floor was covered with the goo from the tank and walking was treacherous.

By the time we made the door, I was exhausted and more than happy to collapse into the waiting wheelchair.

“Where’s Lars?” I asked again, as we started down the hallway.

“He’s coming. He’ll be here this afternoon. I called him as soon as the alarms went off,” Connors answered. “I figured you must be awake.”

I turned around to throw him a dirty look as he wobbled slowly along, trying to follow us. We turned the corner, and he was lost to sight, but I could hear his laughter behind us as it echoed down the hall, making me smile. A vision of flames and flying debris suddenly flashed through my mind, gripping my heart. The explosion. The limo. Connors standing behind it. He could have so easily been killed, his laughter lost forever. So close. It had been so very close.

* * *

IT WAS LIKE *deja vu*. I had been here before, looking in the mirror, taking in the damage. Only, this time, it was worse.

Jenny had shooed Mac and Connors away as soon as we reached the room. She’d wheeled me into the bathroom and told me the worst of it, before letting me out of the chair. I avoided the mirror while I showered, letting my hands find the scars and the damage first, preparing myself mentally for the visual.

She’d refused to tell me about anything except my injuries, saying Lars would fill me in on the rest when he arrived. Then she proceeded to explain what she’d done and why I was in the recovery tank. The list of damage was long, the

injuries severe. I listened as she talked, amazed I was still alive. I wouldn't have been, she'd informed me if Lars hadn't gotten me out so quickly. I owed him my life.

I finished cleaning up and stepped out of the shower. Jenny helped me towel off and slipped me into the dreaded hospital gown before putting me back into the wheelchair. She tucked a blanket around me and turned the chair toward the mirror. Then she stepped back and waited.

I didn't know the person I was looking at. My hair was a dark stubble, my eyebrows almost non-existent. I'd expected that from the heat, expected the flash burn from the explosion, but not the rest. I was bone-thin, looking more like a skeleton than a live being. My skin was pink, and I could see the scars scattered across my torso, healing, but clearly evident. They would always be there, a daily reminder of what had happened.

My nose was different, as was the shape of my eyes. My cheekbones higher and my jaw more prominent. I'd been hit by shrapnel, Jenny had said, the bones in my face shattered. She said there'd been five operations. I remembered none of it.

"There're no scars," I said. I ran my hands over my features, watching in the mirror to confirm it was, in fact, my face I was feeling.

"Connors brought in the best plastic surgeon he could find. I assisted. The recovery tank took care of the rest."

The recovery tank. The thing I had just destroyed. Jenny's creation, one of her most successful experiments and I had just torn it apart.

"I'm sorry about the tank Jenny," I said, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"It's alright, Taylor. It wasn't your fault. We'd been keeping you sedated, trying to keep you quiet while you healed, but you'd been fighting it. With your mental capabilities, it was only a matter of time before you won. That you happened to be in the tank when it happened, well," she walked up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders, giving them a squeeze in reassurance. "It's hard enough to deal with the tank when you know you're going inside. You had no idea where you were. You just reacted. Panicked. I'm pretty sure I would have done the same thing."

"You wouldn't have had the same results." I smiled at her watching my lips turn up in a way I'd never seen before. They'd done a good job, but it was going to take some getting used to. If that was even possible. I heard distant voices in the hall, recognized Mac's voice.

"How's Sean?" I asked, remembering Mac's injuries. I'd called him Mac when I had first come out of the tank, disoriented and surprised by the fact he was there. I had hoped that Jenny hadn't noticed. From the raised eyebrow she

sent me, she obviously had.

“*Sean* is fine. He’s still doing some physical therapy, but the paralysis he experienced was only temporary. His biggest problem now is feeling he let you down by not being there. That somehow he could have stopped what happened.”

I shook my head, watching the reflection in the mirror as I did it, needing confirmation it was me I was looking at.

“What about Connor’s leg?” I watched as a stranger’s lips formed the words.

“It’s good. Multiple fractures, but its healing well. He’ll be using a cane by next week.”

Next week? He had multiple fractures and would be on a cane next week? I looked at my healed scars in the mirror and finally asked the question that I’d been avoiding.

“How long have I been here, Jenny?”

I saw her reflection behind me shift in the mirror. She was watching me, looking to see if I was ready.

“Two months.”

I gripped the arms of the wheelchair. Two months. Two months had gone by. My mind refused to accept it. It had just happened. I could still smell the smoke, feel the heat from the flames. I shook my head in denial, unable to take it in.

“You need some rest, Taylor. You may be awake, but you’re still pumped full of sedatives. A normal person would still be out for hours.” She grabbed the handles of the chair and backed me out of the bathroom. “You’ll be able to handle this better once they’re out of your system.”

She helped me into bed, hooking up monitors, despite my resistance.

“You’re an unknown, Taylor. I don’t know how you’ll react as we’ve already seen evidenced.” She swatted my hands away, snapping the wires onto my body. “Just humor me and try to get some rest.”

She left, and the lights lowered, automatically dimming the room. My mind was whirling with information and questions. There was no way I was going to be able to rest. What I needed were answers. I needed to talk to Lars.

* * *

I WOKE UP disoriented and groggy, desperately in need of coffee. You’d have thought after two months I would have that addiction out of my system, but that

certainly wasn't the case. I sat up to find Lars sitting in a chair next to me, a cup of coffee, still steaming, in one hand, a folded newspaper in the other. I took a deep breath, savoring the aroma that filled the air. No wonder I'd woken up in need of a fix.

"That better be for me," I said, reaching out to take it as the lights came up. He smiled, handing me the cup. I searched his face for damage as I took a sip, relieved to find he looked the same as always.

"I'm fine, Taylor. You're the one who took the brunt of it," he said, reading my thoughts.

"Your voice is better," I noted, surprised. The raspy growl had changed to a hoarse, deep baritone that was much more human than before, but it still sounded painful.

"You thought I always sounded like that?" I nodded, and he chuckled as he explained. "Job-related injury. Not unlike what you did to Hughes. I've had two months of healing since we last talked. Unfortunately, this is about as good as it's going to get. Not great, but I'll take it."

I leaned back and took another sip of coffee. I could have done without his reference to Hughes and what I had done to him. I had badly damaged his vocal chords, and if he had survived, he probably would have sounded much like Lars, if he could even talk that was.

"You up to talking?"

I nodded, realizing Jenny had been right about the sedatives. Between the rest and the hit of caffeine, I felt much better, my thoughts clearer. I was as ready as I was going to be.

"What do you remember?"

"Nothing after the explosion," I told him. "I remember looking up and seeing you coming toward me. Vivian said something. It sounded off, and I looked down, saw the detonator in her hand. She was looking at the limo, and I knew, but it was too late. I saw the car explode. Saw the flames rushing toward me. Nothing after that."

"You saw the detonator in her hand?"

I nodded again, knowing that image would be burned in my mind for the rest of my life. I could see it even now, her thumb pressing down on the button, me, helpless to stop it.

"Taylor, you never looked down." My coffee stopped halfway to my lips. "You were watching me. You couldn't have seen the detonator."

"No, I saw it, Lars."

"You didn't look down," he repeated. "I saw the fear in your eyes when you knew. Heard your scream as you whirled around to face the danger. Watched as

you threw Connors behind you, trying to protect him. I watched you throw the limo away from us as it exploded. Watched the flames wash over you. I saw the metal hit you, watched you fall as it shattered your face. It happened in seconds, Taylor. Seconds. But I've replayed it in my mind a thousand times. I'm not wrong. You never looked down."

"That's just not possible," I whispered to him, disbelief at what he said warring with the pain and conviction I heard in his voice. I was so sure I had seen it, and here he was, just as sure, telling me I hadn't.

"Of course, you saw it, Taylor." Mac's voice surprised me, and I nearly dropped my coffee. He must have come into the room while Lars was talking and I'd never heard him, I'd been so focused on what Lars was saying.

"You just didn't see it with your eyes. You saw it with your mind." He smiled as he walked over and hopped up, taking a seat at the foot of the bed. "It's your gut instinct taken up a notch. Instead of sensing the danger, you actually saw it this time. Could come in quite handy."

"A lot of what you do could come in quite handy, to use Sean's words. That's why this all happened in the first place." He stood up, tossing the newspaper in my lap. It flopped open to the front page, the headlines staring up at me. It was dated the day after the explosion.

I threw Mac a look, my nerves in a jumble. He gave me a reassuring nod, and I gave him a heavy sigh in response. I settled back against the pillow, took a big sip of caffeine and started reading.

According to the paper, the explosion had been the result of a fuel leak in the hangar. There had been several casualties, among which were Vice Presidential Aides James Johnson and Adele Minter, respectively. The Vice President's plane was destroyed before firefighters could get the fire under control. I let the paper drop as I finished the story, the impact of it hitting me hard.

"How much of this is true?" I asked Lars.

"Most of it." He'd been moving around the room, poking at things as I'd read the paper. As I asked my question, he ambled back to the chair and took a seat, ready to talk. Mac was still sitting on the bed where he'd watched me the whole time, feeling what was going through me, helping take the edge off. "Keith and Vivian both worked for the Vice President. From what we have been able to confirm, James Johnson and Adele Minter were their real names. Keith and Vivian were aliases for your benefit."

Stunned, I felt my breath catch. Their names weren't even real. Everything. Everything had been a lie. "Vice President Armstrong is part of this? It was his plane?" I asked, disbelieving.

"Yes. He's head of the committee that Connors reported to, but it started long

before that. In the late 60's, early 70's, the US Government was looking into the paranormal. The CIA, in particular, had an interest in weapon development. Your parents were involved." He paused as my eyes narrowed at his words. I felt Mac shift on the end of the bed, feeling my anger build. "They tested out college students and offered those that showed promise, the chance to explore their potential. They paid well, and it was exciting work. Your father was a science major. Your mother was studying psychology. It was a perfect match for them. Armstrong was a mover and shaker on the Hill even then. He was part of the committee that oversaw the project."

"You're saying my parents worked with the Government?" I shook my head, going back years in time. "I don't remember any of this."

"Because the program had dissolved by the time you came around, due to lack of evidence. There was no support for their theories. The Government has a tendency to cut funds to programs that don't get results. It was deemed a failure and scrapped, but Armstrong didn't believe it. He was sure there was something there and kept tabs on the participants, especially your parents. He was thrilled when you came along. The product of two people who showed paranormal promise was his dream come true."

"Did he have them killed?" I demanded, the machines shifting on their wheels with the vibrations of my anger. "Did Armstrong order them killed to get to me?" I repeated when he didn't answer.

"We don't know, Taylor. I'd give anything if I could tell you no, but I won't lie to you. We simply don't know."

They waited quietly for me to pull myself back together, to get my anger under control. I felt like I was suffocating, unable to breathe. I could hear the beat of my own heart on the monitor as it galloped out of control. The door swung open, and Jenny's head popped in, anger in her voice as she ripped into Lars and Mac.

"I said not to upset her!" she spat out. "You have to leave. Now!" She threw open the door and pointed to the hall, demanding obedience. They both ignored her, which made her even madder.

"It's alright, Jenny. I'm okay," I said trying to assure her and convince myself at the same time. "They need to be here."

She gave me a long appraising look and then glared at Lars and slammed out of the room, leaving us sitting in silence. Surprisingly, I did feel better, more in control. Her interruption had broken the tension in the room, given me time to process a little. I wasn't calm by any stretch of the imagination, but I was better.

"Where does Vivian come in?" I'd taken a few deep breaths and was ready to go on. "Or should I say, Adele?"

“It was Armstrong’s belief, that the abilities would surface after a trauma. The death of your parents provided him the perfect means to insert someone into your life to monitor you closely. That was Adele. She had joined the program as a researcher while she was a student in University and stayed on as Armstrong’s assistant. By this time, he was moving up the rungs in the political arena and was able to pull some major strings. Adele was, in his mind, the perfect solution. What he didn’t know was that Adele was a sleeper agent for the Russians, who were working on their own research into the paranormal. Armstrong had just put you in the care of a covert Russian spy.”

“Russian?” The rest of my anger dissolved in a whirl of shock and confusion. “Vivian was a Russian agent?”

“Armstrong didn’t have any idea. Adele had her own agenda, sending reports back to mother Russia, following their orders, while playing along for Armstrong. When you grew up and left home, they lost their hold on you. Armstrong arranged for Vivian to ‘die’ hoping it would push you over the edge. He had no idea of what Vivian had done to you as a child, or he might have realized it wouldn’t work.” He got up, pacing around the room again, too restless to stay still. “He needed a way to keep tabs on you, and he finally had the power to make it happen. Using the Agency was his idea. What better way to watch you than to actually put a ‘Watcher’ on you. He solicited support from the same agencies that had been involved years ago, selling them on new technology and advancements in the field. He didn’t have to sell too hard. They saw the advantages of someone like you all too well. With a Watcher in place and regular reports coming in, he decided to try again. With Keith.

He sat back down, stretched out his legs and waited, giving me time to process the information. I wasn’t sure I could. None of it seemed real, but then again, that wasn’t surprising. Most of the life I’d lived up to now hadn’t been real.

“Let me just make sure I have this straight, okay? Vivian was a mole for Russia, using Armstrong to gather information. Hughes worked for her, and recruited Brown to help him?”

“Keith worked strictly for Armstrong.” Lars nodded at me, confirming my analysis. “He wasn’t involved with Vivian except in her role working with Armstrong.”

“So, why make a move to take me now? They read the reports. They had to know I had no idea how to control this thing. Why didn’t they just leave me alone? Bring me into the Agency for training?”

“Armstrong might have done that, but Vivian forced his hand. As Armstrong’s Aide, she was privy to the reports. She knew your abilities had

surfaced. It would be easier to take you early than give you time to learn to use them. Then there's the fact that the Agency made him vulnerable." Lars sat up in his chair, leaning forward. "Look, Armstrong had been filtering the reports that Connors sent in. As far as the committee members were concerned, there wasn't much going on at the Agency except some advances in medical research. Nothing they could use on the paranormal front. The program was for all intents and purposes, dissolved three years ago. Armstrong was high enough up on the ladder to funnel funds to keep things going. Washington is such a bureaucratic mess, it wasn't hard. As far as the Agency was concerned, nothing had changed. And it hadn't, except there's no committee anymore. The Agency is Armstrong's own personal research lab. Once you became active, he didn't need to take the risk of getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He could have you and pull the plug on the Agency with no one the wiser."

Except you, I thought, wondering who he really was and how he'd gotten his information. Russians spies, covert government operations, secret intelligence on the Vice President of the United States. Scary stuff, this.

"So what exactly did he plan to do with me after he had me? For that matter, what did the Russians want with me?" I ventured the question, figuring I had nothing to lose. Lars knew a lot. Maybe he knew the answer to that too.

"Power, Taylor," Mac cut in answering my question. "Look at all the things you've done already and you've just barely tapped into your abilities. Not to mention the fact, as Lars pointed out earlier, that your abilities are changing, strengthening. There's no telling what you'll be able to do months from now. Much less in five or ten years."

"Sean's right, Taylor. You're an asset people are willing to kill to possess. They're also willing to kill to keep others from having you. That's why Vivian had the explosives in the car. They'd rather kill you than let someone else get their hands on you."

I leaned back onto my pillow and closed my eyes, knowing they were right. I wasn't angry anymore. I was heartsick, the sadness inside me almost unbearable. So much death, so many lives ruined and for what?

"If it's not you, Taylor, it will be someone else," Mac said quietly. "Others like Abby. There are people out there that know it's possible. They won't stop now."

"No, I don't suppose they will," I murmured, resigned to a fate I would have given anything to avoid. I wasn't the only one. At his mention of Abby, my mind had flown to Connors and what they would do to him if they knew what he could do. The very thought turned my stomach. "Where's Armstrong? I want to talk to him."

“That’s not possible,” Lars answered. “We have let it slip out that you were, in fact, killed in the explosion. It’s not in the paper, as technically you’re already dead, but Armstrong knew better. So did the Russians. As of now, as far as they’re concerned, you are no longer an option. We’d like to keep it that way.”

“Armstrong can’t get away with this. Sean is right. If it’s not me, it will be someone else, and I’m not willing to sit back and hide while he does it. He has to be stopped.” I sat up, fully intending to get out of bed and find Armstrong on my own. The sudden wave of dizziness had me clutching at the mattress to keep from falling over. Lars was on his feet beside me, ready to catch me just in case.

“Just what was the plan here? You’ve been out of it for two months. Awake for just a few hours and you’re ready to take on Armstrong? Not gonna happen. You try it again, and I’ll handcuff you to the bed,” he said, shoving me back into the pillows. He was clearly angry, and he wasn’t the only one. I’d had about enough and was ready to let him know it.

“Don’t even think about it, Taylor,” he growled out. “You won’t win. Your mental stuff doesn’t work on me.”

It was a challenge, pure and simple and I rose to it, giving him a shove back. He just stood there, glowering at me. I gave him a harder shove and got the same results.

“Yeah,” he said, raising a cocky eyebrow. “How bout that?”

“What’s going on?” Mac asked, concern in his voice.

“She just tried it out to see if I was right or not. Twice. It doesn’t work.”

“How long have you known?” Mac asked, his eyes widening. “And for that matter, how do you know she even tried it now?”

“I can feel her. Feel her try it. I felt it the first time in the hangar when she threw Connors past me like he was a fly. She meant to throw me too, but it didn’t work,” he said dryly. “If she had succeeded, I wouldn’t have been able to get to her in time.”

He threw me a warning look and turned to sit down. I moved the chair. Not much. Just enough to let him know it. I might not be able to touch him, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t throw something at him. He pulled the chair back and sat down, sighing heavily.

“I get the point, Taylor. You get mine. Stay in that bed.” He rubbed his hand over his face in frustration. “Look, you don’t have to worry about Armstrong. I agree, he has to be stopped, and he will be. We’re ready now. We’ve just been waiting for you to recover. When we take him down, the Agency goes with him. The labs, the equipment, everything has to disappear. We needed to get everyone cleared out of here and give Jenny time to get you back on your feet before we made our move.

“Just who are you, Lars?” I asked, deciding it seemed a good time to clear things up. Especially since he seemed to be the one in control now. “And who exactly is ‘we’? For that matter, is Lars even your real name?”

He said nothing. Just looked at me and I could tell he was debating on what and how much to tell me. It bothered me immensely that he knew more than I did about what was going on and had the ability to share or not share.

“Sean, you need to leave,” Lars ordered, never taking his eyes off mine.

Mac hesitated for a minute, unsure. I sent him a message that I was fine, never taking my eyes off Lars. Then I felt him get up and leave the room and braced myself for what was to come.

“ARE YOU GOING to have to kill me after you tell me?” I asked, deadpan, hearing the door close as Mac left the room.

“If it comes to that.” He gave me a tight smile and leaned forward. “I work for a consortium made up of some of the top men and women of this nation. They are not government. Not political. They are watchdogs, guarding the citizens, the constitution and the security of this nation. They go where the government can’t or won’t. I head up a covert team of highly trained specialized men. We do what needs to be done.”

“You’re a mercenary.”

“No, I am not. I’m not for sale.” I could tell by his tone he was insulted. “We don’t start wars, and we don’t fight in them.”

“Then what do you do? And don’t tell me whatever needs to be done. That isn’t going to cut it.”

“Protect you, for one thing. Stop people like Armstrong. Take care of Russian spies when the Government can’t or won’t because of political reasons. Taylor, we don’t start things. We stop them. I work for the good guys.”

“How do you know that, Lars? How can you possibly know what their motivation is? For all you know, they have their own agenda, just like Armstrong.”

“Because if they weren’t the good guys, they’d just have me kill him and be done with it. They’re not going to do that, even though that would be the best thing to protect you. It would certainly be the easiest and, just so you know, that’s my own personal preference, but that’s not the plan.” He said it with enough disgust to convince me he was telling the truth. That he wanted to kill Armstrong was obvious. “Armstrong’s big mistake was bleeding funds into the Agency after the program was scrapped. It doesn’t matter what you do, you can’t hide that kind of money forever. There’s always a way to find it, especially when you know to look for it. Once we knew about the Agency, all we had to do was track the money back to Armstrong. It took a while, but we have him.”

“Sounds like a big operation. Hard to keep quiet.”

He shook his head. “Not as large as you’d think. You get the best, you don’t need as many. Only a handful of people know about it.”

“And you’re the best. That’s why they sent you in here alone?”

“They didn’t send me.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Mac called me,” he answered, surprising me.

“Who’s Mac?”

“Cut the bull, Taylor. I know who he is. He and I go way back. When he got suspicious, he tracked me down. Asked me to look into it.”

“So you just left your job and came to check it out?”

“I was already working with Keith and Vivian. They knew me. That’s why Hughes trusted me. When Mac called and needed help, and Hughes needed an extra man, I simply suggested that I might be a good fit. Worked out well for everyone.”

“You made him leave the room.”

“He doesn’t know about this. Like I said, we go way back, and he knows I can take care of myself. He doesn’t know about the people I work for. About what I do now. I told you, only a handful of people know about it.”

“Then why tell me?”

“So you can make an informed decision. You may not have noticed yet, but you have a bit of a problem. We’ve got no way of knowing who else knows about you. You’re safe for now, but not for long.

“Why?”

“Because you have friends. Or have you forgotten about Candice and Bryan? Or should I say Trinity and Jonas?”

“What have you done with them?” I demanded, my anger rising along with my fear. They were supposed to be waiting for me at the little cabin in Estes Park, but I had a sinking feeling, I wouldn’t find them there.

“They’re fine,” he said quickly, holding his hands up in an attempt to calm me down. “They’re here, in fact. At the Lodge. Along with Mama D.” I sank back in the bed, only half believing him. “They don’t know you’re awake. That’s why no one has come storming in here. I told Jenny not to let them know.”

“Why?”

“Because you have a decision to make. I thought it might be easier without them cluttering up the issue.”

“They aren’t clutter,” I shot back at him, fear lending an edge to my voice.

“They are clutter, and that’s the problem. As long as you’re with them, you’ll be running. Trying to protect them. One day, that’s not going to work. Someone is going to get killed, and if it’s one of them, you’ll never forgive yourself. You know it, and I know it. You make stupid decisions to protect the people you care about.”

“I do not.”

“Yes, you do. The only reason you came to the Agency like you did was to

save Mac. If I hadn't been there, what would have happened?"

I wanted to shoot back an answer, but I didn't have one. I didn't know, and it scared me.

"You have options, Taylor, about where to go from here," he said it softly, realizing he'd made his point. I couldn't look at him, didn't want to see the victory in his eyes. "Option one is to run. Go get Mac, Jonas, Trinity and Mama D. Hit the road and go on the run again. If that's what you want, I'll get you some new I.D.s, passports, whatever papers you need. You'll need to keep a low profile and watch your back. Forever. I don't recommend it, for the very reasons we just talked about, but if that's your choice, I'll help you get started."

I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around them, feeling trapped. The picture he painted was the very thing I didn't want. If we'd wanted to do that, we would have done it in the first place. The whole reason we came to the Agency was to try and get some semblance of our lives back. To live without having to look over our shoulders forever.

"Option two is to let them go. They already know you're badly injured. It's a simple thing to let them believe you're dead. I'll get them settled, new papers, new lives. Everything they'll need to start over."

"What if they found me? What if someone discovered I was still alive and used them to hunt me down? There'd be no one there to protect them."

"You'd have to go deep. Disappear completely. You don't look the same, so it won't be as hard, but it won't be easy either. You'd have to constantly be on guard. Still, there's no guarantee. It's a chance you'd have to take. Either way, you need to make a decision. We can't move on Armstrong until we vacate this place. Every minute counts."

He sat quietly, letting me stew over the decision. I already had a pretty good idea of what we were going to do next. There was the little matter of the gold and the promise I had made Trinity, but what we would do after that was still up in the air.

We certainly weren't going on the run, and as for abandoning them? That was never going to happen. His two options didn't fit the bill, and he knew it. He was just setting that stage for the end game. I knew he wasn't done, and I was content to wait him out, let him finish when he was ready.

"There is a third option," he said finally, in a hushed voice.

There it was. The whole reason he was here. Lars worked for someone, and they had a plan all their own. One that, I was sure, involved me. I settled back into the pillows and looked at him expectantly. The third option.

I hoped, for all our sakes, it would be a good one.

The adventure continues in ...

The Third Option

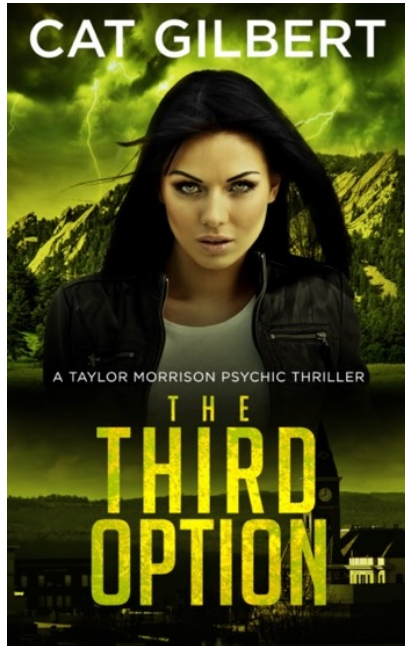
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The Third Option

Prologue

THEY CAME FOR me in the wee small hours of the morning, thinking, I was sure, that I'd be asleep and easy prey. They were wrong. I knew they were there. I knew the minute they eased the front door open and slid inside the cabin. I could smell them when they opened the bedroom door, feel their nervous excitement in the air, but I chose not to do anything about it. If I fought, someone was going to get hurt or even worse, killed. It just wasn't worth it.

So I let them come, deciding I would let them take me this time, if for no other reason than I wanted to see what they would do if they actually got me out of the building. Once they had me, were they fully prepared for everything that meant? I stifled a sigh of exasperation and pretended to be asleep, as they hovered in the doorway. The sharp sting of the needle came as a surprise, and I had a moment of doubt as the drug quickly took hold. They'd shot me with a tranquilizer dart from across the room. This was a first. They were getting smarter.

* * *

I WOKE UP to an amazing sunrise. I wasn't sure if the brilliant colors were a result of whatever drug they had given me or just God's magnificent palette, but it was awesome. It would have been better, though, if I hadn't been so cold. The rats had staked me out, flat on my back, in the snow, in my pajamas. It was deep enough that it was like laying in a white box, unable to see anything but what was directly above me. It was oddly peaceful. Like I was the only person in the world, and I savored it for a moment. I hadn't been alone for months now, and it was starting to get to me. Three months, actually, if you wanted to get technical. Three months since I'd come out of the coma. Three months since I'd made my agreement with Lars. Three months since I'd left them. My family. My friends. The people I was responsible for. And for what?

I'd agreed to work with Lars and to try and be cooperative. I had the final say in what we did or did not do, but I didn't think it would be good to start out by digging in my heels and refusing what he proposed. The result of my trying to be agreeable was three months of isolation from the people I cared most about.

I'd barely even had time to fill everyone in on what was happening before they whisked me out the door to this place.

Where we were, I had no idea. Why we were here, I had a pretty good handle on. Lars and his team had put me through the paces, training me in how to use all the latest equipment, weapons, and technology. Forget judo, karate, and kung fu. Lars had brought in a specialist to train me in hand to hand combat. This was not self-defense. There were no special holds, no stances or forms to memorize. This was all about how to attack. It was about where and how to hit. How to ensure your opponent went down and didn't get back up to come after you. The training was exhausting, especially in the beginning, but it was important stuff to know. I wasn't always going to be able to use my mental powers. Guns were great as long as you had time to get one out, but with this, I was prepared for the hand to hand stuff. I could fight a guy bigger than me and have a good chance of coming out alive. I liked that. Especially considering there were bad guys after me.

But I didn't like this. This was Lars' doing. His attempt to get things kickstarted. My mental powers had disappeared as soon as I left the Agency. If I hadn't used them in the hospital room, I would have thought I'd lost them from the damage I'd taken in the explosion. But they had been there at the hospital. I had moved that chair. Lars saw it. So did Mac. That was the last time my powers had surfaced. One minute they were there, the next they were gone. Mac and Connors had warned about this. This was exactly why they couldn't prove telekinesis existed. Something happened when people were forced to try to duplicate their powers in a lab. They just couldn't do it. The power seemed to disappear. Sometimes for good. Which wouldn't be all that bad, except the people after me would never believe it. They'd keep coming until they got me and then where would I be? Up the creek without a paddle, that's where. And Lars knew it. He'd thought up more scenarios than anyone could have possibly imagined, in an attempt to 'provoke' my powers, but all he'd succeeded in doing was annoying both his team and me. I had hoped he'd given up, but apparently, he hadn't and if this was any indication, he was getting more creative.

Where did that leave me? Laying outside in a little snow box, that's where. Unfortunately, there was no bottom to this box and my flannel pajamas were no protection against the melting snow beneath me. I was wet and cold and just as frustrated and tired as Lars was. I missed my friends and family. I was done. I'd been cooperative enough. It was time to end it. The thought of finally going home, wherever that might be, made me smile, but it was my freezing backside that got me moving.

My feet and legs were free, but my arms were fully extended over my head,

and a light yank confirmed that my wrists were chained to something firmly set behind me. Great. Just great. No way to just stand up and leave. Now I was going have to get wetter. I rolled over, propped myself up on my elbows and popped my head up above the snow to get a look. They would be able to see me, but I didn't care. It's not like they didn't know I was here and they fully expected me to wake up at some point. I couldn't see them, but I knew they were somewhere close by. I could feel them watching me. Waiting. I ignored my surroundings and focused on the situation at hand and my objectives. First, to get loose and second to get some dry clothes and a big cup of hot coffee.

They'd zip-tied my hands together with heavy duty cable ties, like the ones the police use. There is no breaking those. You struggle, and they just get tighter. Regular zip ties or even duct tape would have been so much easier, but then easier hadn't been what they were going for.

They had run a chain around the ties, and I followed the links as they disappeared into the snow, the shadowy track leading to a metal post with a big u-bolt screwed into it. The post was three to four feet away, giving me enough slack to move around some if I got closer. Maybe I'd given them too much credit. Here I thought they were getting smarter, what with the dart gun and heavy duty cable ties. Leaving me in the snow and cold had been a good move. I hate both those things. But giving me room to maneuver? Big mistake.

I scooted closer to the pipe to get more slack in the chain and gained just enough to be able to stand without stooping too much. My bare feet certainly didn't appreciate it nor did my sopping backside as there was just enough breeze to ramp up the cold factor a couple of notches. I glanced around to try and get some bearings. As far as I could tell, I was in a little glade with dense pine trees about 50 feet out on three sides and open to the hills on the fourth. There were no obvious landmarks, but I thought I could just make out the top of the building where they'd taken me from just over the crest of one of the hills. They hadn't taken me far, and I hadn't been out here for long. I could still feel my hands and my feet, so they'd delayed staking me out for a while. That was nice of them.

The thought had barely crossed my mind when the first missile hit me square in the face, stunning me with enough force to knock me back a step. My arms jerked on the chain, pulling against the zip-ties, the force biting into my wrists and driving me to my knees. I shook off the impact, throwing the ice and snow off my face, certain I was going to see blood on the snow. Snowballs? Really? More like ice balls, I thought, as the next one hit me square on the shoulder, soaking my arm and sending ice pellets down my neck. Someone had some pretty good aim. I hunched down, attempting to make myself a smaller target as I scanned the trees for my attackers, but empty silence was all that greeted me.

They'd launched two bombs and then scrambled for cover. Cowards.

Not that I blamed them. I was a real dangerous person now, and I didn't have an issue with using my new found skills when I was attacked. Within limits that is. So far, having to stick to the physical side of things had worked pretty well for me. I was able to escape most of the test situations they threw at me. Not that it meant anything. They were as worried about hurting me as I was about hurting them, but it was good practice if nothing else. Now it had evolved into this. Snow and ice and drugs and chains. Lars wasn't letting them get within physical reach of me, trying to force me to use my mental powers.

I squatted there, dripping wet and freezing and thought of home. I was going home. As soon as this was over, I was packing my bags and hitting the road. I searched in the tree line, wondering where Mac was, knowing he had to be out there somewhere watching. He'd promised me, after the mess with Marcus, that he wouldn't leave me again, and I knew that somehow he would find a way to follow me. I had counted on it. I couldn't sense him, not like I could with Brown, but I had a pretty good idea of when he'd find me. The tension and anxiety that had plagued me since making the decision to join up with Lars had eased the moment he got close. He was out there, I was sure of it, and he'd be just as ready to head home as I was after three months of roughing it.

Home was the goal, but we had to get there first. I may have decided to end it, but that didn't mean I couldn't have a little fun on my way out. Fun was safe. I stood up, making myself a target and waited. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught movement in the pine branches as an attacker cleared the way for his launch. With my hands tied together, there was no way I could retaliate with a snowball of my own, but that didn't mean I was defenseless. I had no intention of getting hit again. Twice was more than enough. Without a thought, I reached out mentally, grabbed hold of the snow laden branch above his head and gave it a good shake. He made the mistake of looking up just as the snow fell on him, knocking him to the ground and I froze. What had just happened? Did I do that, or had it just been a coincidence? I watched as other loads of snow fell to the ground as the sun warmed the branches and couldn't help but wonder.

Another attacker took advantage of my distraction to wing one at me. I turned, just in time to see it coming and took a mental swing against it, shattering it a good five feet away. He stood there in the trees, unmoving, not believing what he'd seen. I couldn't believe it either. No coincidence here. Somehow my power was back. The feeling of instant euphoria came as a surprise, but this wasn't the time to think about it. I was under attack. He wasn't going to stand there for long, and where there was one, there would be others. I took hold of a small pine tree behind him and bent it back halfway to the ground

before releasing it. It smacked him a good one on the backside, catching him completely off guard and knocked him face-first into the snow.

Suddenly, there was motion all through the trees, and Lars' team of men came into view, each with a snowball in hand. Okay. Bring it on boys! I reached out and shook as many tree branches as possible. Snow cascaded down in a white curtain, buying me some time. Pleased, I squatted down next to the pipe as they brushed themselves off and eyed the u-bolt holding my chain to the pipe. My hands were way too numb from the cold to even think about turning the screws, but I might be able to do it mentally. I focused on one screw and turned it in my mind. Nothing happened, and I glanced up to see the line of armed attackers once again on the advance. I was about to be pelted! Not good. Focus! Maybe I was turning it the wrong way? What was that saying? Lefty-righty, something, something. I couldn't remember, and it didn't matter. I decided to try turning it the other way. Amazingly, it moved. Once I got the hang of it, I had it out, and the other screw followed quickly behind it, the u-bolt dropping from the pole. I was loose. It made absolutely no difference and at the same time, all the difference in the world. I had the power. I was He-Man, and She-Ra rolled into one.

I stood tall and lifted my arms in the air, showing them I was free. They stopped in their tracks. I thought for a minute it was because of me, but then Lars stepped out of the trees, and I realized he'd called them off. Bummer. The fun was officially over. Just as well. My feet were freezing. I turned and started walking towards the hill where I thought I'd seen the rooftop. Before long I heard the noise of a snowmobile behind me and within seconds Lars pulled up alongside, giving me a rare grin. I held out my hands, and he pulled out a knife, slicing through the zip ties. Then he tossed a blanket at me and motioned for me to get on behind him. He didn't have to ask twice. The legs of my pajamas were coated with snow, and my feet were turning blue. They were going to hurt when the feeling came back into them. I wrapped up best I could and hopped on.

As I suspected, we weren't far from the main building. We topped the hill, and the compound spread out before us, surrounded by dense forest and glistening snow. It was a beautiful sight. Peaceful, serene. Everything a mountain hideaway should be, but I would be happy to see the end of it. I had decided. I had held up my side of the bargain. It was time to get Mac and go home.

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