



Kaje Harper

Laser VISIONS

Don't Read in the Closet 2014

LASER VISIONS

Biology professor Roman Janz was walking across campus and planning his next plant-collecting trip to Brazil, when something stung him on the neck. And now... now he's wandering in the dark, in the blue, floating, disembodied, and confused. There has to be a good explanation, if he can just find someone, anyone, he can actually talk to about it.

Xavier Faulkner is intelligent, creative, and made millions when he sold his tech-security company. But all his wealth and skills couldn't keep his sister Tam from being poisoned by food contamination. She lived, but her health was damaged, and her job as a cop is gone. In the antebellum house he moved them to, Xavier hopes to find both a distraction and maybe a purpose for their lives. But the old house seems to come with strange noises, and odd blue lights, and maybe—if Xavier isn't just going crazy—a naked guy, walking away into the blue...

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

LASER VISIONS

By Kaje Harper

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Light streams into a narrow, old-fashioned hallway from the open door at the end. Framed in the brightness, back-lit to blurred outlines and shadows, is the silhouette of a man, walking away. He's tall, lean but well-built, with faint tan lines across his lower back and thighs. He's also completely naked. His curved ass and broad shoulders are the most solid things about him. He strides off into the blue, head slightly tilted, not looking back.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I just moved into this old antebellum home I bought with the intentions of restoring. I often find myself awoken in the night by strange noises I cannot identify or hear during the day. At first, I think it's just a dream... this seemingly phantom always walking away. Who is he and how can I get him to finally turn around and see me?

****I don't want this to be a past lover/reunited lovers story. Please no cheating or ménage and must have a HFN or HEA ending. Otherwise, get as creative as you like.****

Sincerely,

Kyle

Story Info

Genre: paranormal, science fiction

Tags: suspense, abduction, law enforcement, friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, slow burn

Content Warnings: very minor plot threads of abuse, PTSD, violence

Word Count: 79,856

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LASER VISIONS

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Chapter 1

Roman struggled, even though he knew it was hopeless. In the back of the swaying van, he did his best against two men he could see only as blurs. Both men outweighed him. They'd tackled him backwards onto the floor; his arms were pinned at his sides. One of them sat on his legs. The drug in the tranq dart was taking effect quickly. He was weaker every minute, reactions slowing, muscles going soft. He gasped for air, against the muffling thickness of the sedative, shaking his head as if that would clear it.

He'd been a soldier. He'd fought truly desperate men in the desert, in the Water Wars of '22, probably before these punks were out of diapers. He wasn't going down easy. He wriggled in their hold as they bent over him, and slammed his head up hard against the closer man's nose. He heard a crunch. *Yes!* He hoped he'd broken it. The guy swore loudly, and his grip on Roman's wrist loosened.

"What the hell?" the driver of the van called from up front. "Aren't you done yet?"

"Someone must've fucked up the dose!" the guy on his legs said, trying to ride his struggling thighs, reaching across him for something. "He's not out yet."

"Well, get the cognoburn into him already!" There was a chime as they turned onto some tollway, and the auto-drive system took over the van. "Here, I'll come help."

Roman froze, his gut turning to water at the words. Cognoburn was illegal, was tantamount to murder. If that was what was coming, it would be better to be dead.

His moment of panic gave the men time to renew their grip. With a third man moving toward him, there was no way to survive this. Maybe he could make them kill him. He tried to make it look like whatever had been in the dart was taking effect. It carried the familiar sweet rush of a narcotic, and he hoped that for once his old mistakes might give him just a little extra tolerance. He imagined his grandfather saying, "*You're the fox, not the wolf; be canny and clever.*" He forced himself to go limp, letting his eyelids droop shut.

"There," one man muttered. "Finally!"

He lay there, unmoving, feeling the onset of the sedative turn his body to blissed-out mush. He would have one last chance. Maybe. A narco dart would take him down fast, tolerance or not.

A tourniquet was placed on his arm, biting in tightly. He felt the poke of a needle in the bend of his elbow. *Not yet. Not yet.* He'd done his share of IVs. They would release the rubber tubing first, and then inject. *Not yet.*

The needle guy was clumsy as he crouched over Roman's arm, poking around to hit the vein. It took him far longer than Roman would ever have needed, even doing it one-handed. He mentally urged the guy to go faster. It took all Roman had to lie still, breathing evenly, trying to hold out as his head spun deeper into muzzy darkness.

Then the man grunted, a satisfied sound, leaned off-balance over Roman's legs, and loosened the tourniquet. Roman slammed one knee upward as hard as he could, right into the guy's 'nads. The man yelped and fell away. A sharp pain ripped Roman's arm. He desperately hoped it was the needle dragged out through flesh, and not the flush of the drug. He rolled sideways, not sure where he was aiming, kicking out violently as his vision faded.

A minute later he was pinned again. This time he had no resistance left. Through buzzing static, he heard the men cursing, as the cheerful voice of the auto-drive said, "Approaching on-ramp to Tollway Twenty-Four. Sharp left turn. Please hold on."

Someone snarled, "Son of a bitch!" He was slammed by a hard blow to his side, even though he wasn't moving any more.

He took some final, fading satisfaction in the high-pitched whine of that voice. He might be an effete college professor now, and fifteen years past his fighting days, but he'd landed that balls-shot hard and on target. A retaliatory kick in the ribs hardly registered over the bliss of the drugs.

"Did he get the cognoB?"

Roman strained to hear, to understand. The men's voices were fading into the crackling background in his head.

"Yeah. I think. Most of it anyway."

"You must've fouled up the tranq dart. No way he should have fought it like that."

"Well it's done. Yeah, look, the syringe is empty. He got it."

“Okay. If there’s a problem I’m blaming you. The boss has a special interest...”

Roman Janz wondered, in his last coherent moment, what interest a guy called “boss” could have in a middle-aged academic. Especially if that interest didn’t involve his mind. Soon he wouldn’t have a mind. Cognoburn would wipe out his higher functions. He’d have been screaming, if the drugs hadn’t combined to sink him into a soft emotionless fog. He tried to cling to the puzzle, this inexplicable value he had, but he couldn’t hold the problem in his thoughts. And then he couldn’t hold thoughts. And then the world went away.

Xavier Faulkner woke with a start, and sat up in bed. The room was dark and quiet, but he had the impression he’d just heard something. Not simply one of the creaks and clicks that this old house was prone to, but something purposeful. A human cry, short and full of emotion. Perhaps Tam, calling for him.

He slid out of bed, grabbing a robe because he slept naked. His sister’s room was toward the back of the house, where it would be cooler when the summer heat arrived. He padded barefoot down the hall. The wooden floor was uneven and rough under his feet, in real need of sanding and refinishing, although not splintery enough to put it at the top of the job-list. Another project to tackle this summer. He’d been hoping that renovating the antebellum glory of Silverlee House would keep him occupied for the next couple of years, and was beginning to think that was an underestimate.

Tam’s door was closed. He stood outside, listening, but there was no sound. Maybe it was all his imagination, as apparently it had been the last four times he’d heard a noise, imagined a cry, and hurried to her side. He would *swear* this time it had been a human voice. But he’d have said the same thing before. He hovered indecisively, reached for the doorknob, then pulled back. Tam would *not* be amused to be woken up again for nothing, and she had a sharp tongue, well-honed to protect her mushy heart.

As he debated, he heard it again. Surely that was a voice? He would have called it a moan, short and low, coming from nearer the front of the house. It was the clearest sound he’d heard yet. He turned away from Tam’s door, listening intently.

The cry didn’t repeat. Xavier was new to Kentucky, and there could be critters here that he didn’t know, perhaps strange birds nesting in the

overhanging eaves of this antebellum house. Or possums or raccoons or something. He walked back toward his room, moving slowly, and as quietly as he could, his senses alert, wishing he'd thought to pick up some kind of weapon.

The door across the hall from his bedroom was open. He'd barely spent any time in there yet. It was a dark, empty space, cobwebby and bare, waiting until some later date for its share of attention. As he glanced in, he saw a faint blue light, as if someone had dropped a glowstick in the corner, but more diffuse and unfocused. The bare boards, the elaborate moldings, the patina of dust, all looked untouched, but eerily limned in faint blue.

For a second, off to his right, he thought he saw something move. But when he whirled to that side, his pulse pounding in his throat, there was nothing to be seen. The blue light faded quickly and was gone. He was left standing in the door to the smaller spare room, with his heart beating in double-time and the silent darkness all around him.

He stood there, frozen and waiting, until his body ached from the tension, but the sound and light never came again. Eventually, reluctantly, he made his way back to bed. Before getting under the sheets, he laid the robe handy and pulled on a pair of printed-flannel PJ pants. His sister had meant them as a kind of joke, when they'd moved in together. But if he was going to have... something... wandering the house at night, he wanted to face it with pants on.

He slept fitfully the rest of the night, waking to every hint of sound. He kept bolting upright, certain he'd heard a voice or a cry. He identified the flap of the canvas over the porch roof, the rumble of a truck on the road beyond the trees, the daybreak caws of crows in the chinkapin oak outside his window. All normal. All expected. Twice he got up and checked the front spare-room, and once he did an inspection of the whole house. By morning, he was in a foul mood.

He gave up on sleep eventually, got up, and showered, enjoying the plentiful water. Before he'd moved in, he'd had the plumbing upgraded. True, his wide showerhead sprayed into a claw-foot tub that had seen far better days, but the water was a benediction. He didn't spend his money on many luxuries. Having this much wealth still felt like a dream, one that he didn't trust. But he was glad to be able to pay the astronomical water-use taxes for long showers and deep tubs. Being rich was at least good for that.

It was still cool when he got out of the shower. He dressed in vintage real-cotton jeans and a wool sweater, over a synth-T-shirt. The T-shirt was slick and

clung to his shoulders. He tugged it straight. Damn, he missed the days when cotton was easy to find. He ran his fingers through his hair, and didn't bother with anything else. No point in primping when the only person around was his sister.

The scent of coffee beckoned him toward the kitchen. Tam looked up from her seat at the small table. "You look like you spent the night losing a wrestling match with The Swarm."

"Why, thank you, kind lady." He reached for the coffee carafe.

"Neither." When he stared at her, she elaborated, "Kind nor lady. So what's on the docket today?"

He'd planned to start ripping the shingles off the canvas-draped porch roof, but he hesitated, then said, "I want to check the house over a bit more, top to bottom."

"Huh? We've been here three weeks already, and I'm betting you checked it with a microscope before you ever bought it. What don't you know about the place?"

I think it's haunted. He couldn't actually say that to Tam the ex-cop, but he did say, "I heard a rumor that this house might have been a stop on the escaping slaves' underground railway. So there might be a secret room or tunnel or something. I want to look for it. It's a bit of a puzzle."

She grinned suddenly, and the brightness of her expression made his chest hurt. He realized how long it had been since he'd seen her really smile. Not since the acute kidney failure that had cut her law enforcement career short, maybe. Not for the weeks they'd lived here together. A hint of a mystery was apparently good medicine, because she bounced to her feet. "Excellent. Where do we start?"

As much as he wanted to keep her grinning, a brother had to have certain sibling-y standards. He grabbed a sweet-roll from the bag and sat down in the chair she'd shoved aside. "I start by having some coffee and rolls, and enjoying my nice breakfast. After that, well..." He wanted to rip the upstairs room apart, but that would be hard to explain. "Start in the basement, maybe, and work our way up." If there'd been a real priest-hole for slaves, it would most likely be on the lower floors. They'd have to work their way up to the spare room eventually.

Tam bounced on her toes. "I could go get started."

"Or you could have more patience than a two-year-old and wait for me," he countered.

She stuck her tongue out at him, then went to rummage in the rolling tool chest he'd left in the corner of the kitchen. "Halogen flash, screwdriver, stud-finder, electrotape measure..." She stuffed an assortment of small tools into a canvas bag, as he savored his cinnamon bun.

"Hey, if you're being all helpful, why don't you stick the battery pack out in the sun to recharge?" he asked.

She looked pleased, which was a reward for biting his tongue and letting her move the bulky electrocell herself. The first week he'd barely let her lift a teacup and she'd been ready to wring his neck. She carried the cell out the kitchen door into a sunny spot in the yard, unfolded and angled the panels to catch the rays. He made a note to move the whole-house solar conversion up on the list; the mini panels were a clumsy stopgap, almost not worth the bother.

The air coming in the open door was damp and brisk, and he shivered. April was supposed to be a lovely month here. Today was clearly not Lexington at its finest.

Tam came in dusting off her hands. She gave a stink-eye look to the new sweet-roll he was holding. "How many of those are you having?"

"My share." He took a big bite. "More than a scrawny thing like you gets."

"I'll show you scrawny if you take the last one. I'll have you on the ground with your feet saying hello to the back of your head."

"Fierce woman."

"Both." She grinned. "Woman. And fierce. As you'll find out if you flop around eating much longer when there's work to do."

He laughed, and licked his fingers clean. "Okay. Let's see what we have."

What they had in the basement was a whole lot of dust, spiders big enough to eat a CitiCar for breakfast, crumbling mortar in a corner of the foundation brick that made his repair priority list, and not much else. The floor was dry cement, which was better than damp or cracked, but hid nothing. Bare, empty, and boring.

Tam shoved a rickety wooden shelf over a few inches and ran the stud-finder across a section of brick that she thought had newer mortar. "Nothing, even with the power kicked up. No variation, no hidden spaces. How boring. Up a level?"

“Are you doing okay to keep going?”

He should have just suggested a break and a snack, because of course she straightened and looked down her elegant nose at him. “I can still work you into the ground, little brother.”

“Well, I want another cup of coffee. This dust is killing my throat. And then, yeah, ground floor next.”

He stretched their coffee break with a bathroom run, and then they began working the ground floor. Tam got excited about a space under the first riser of the big staircase. Since he couldn't explain why he wanted to move on, he helped her carefully work off the side panel and shone his flash into the space. The bright LED beam caught something flashing back, and then they both recoiled as a furry shape leaped between them, scurried across the floor and was gone.

“What the actual hell?” he sputtered. “What was that?”

Tam sat on her heels laughing at him. “They call that a rat, bro. *Rattus norvegicus*. Cute buggers. Not.”

“We have rats?”

“Apparently. Maybe we need a cat.”

“That thing would eat a cat for breakfast. We need a dog. A large dog.”

“I'll take out an ad. *Two hundred pound man seeking twenty-pound terrier to protect him from rats. Cost no object.*”

“I only weigh one-seventy,” he said with dignity. “And I think we need a mastiff.”

“Not for rats. We saw them all the time when I worked a city beat. Some of the civilians had dogs, and the little terriers were the best.” She suddenly dropped her gaze, her lips flattening into a tight line. No doubt from the reminder of her suddenly-aborted career.

Silently, he cursed the greedy bastards who'd allowed contaminated wheat to go unreported for months, hoping no one would track down the responsible source, until a celebrity case brought it all into the open. Heaven forbid you should poison a cute blonde singer, but a bunch of nobodies including a hard-working cop... He forced the familiar simmering anger down. There was nothing he could do about it now. “We'll get a terrier then. You can pick one out.”

“Seriously?” She looked brighter. “I wouldn’t mind a dog. I never had the time for one when I was on the job.”

“Seriously.” He should have thought of it before. “But you have to feed him and train him and clean up his messes.” He affected a nagging sing-song. “He’ll be your responsibility, missy, and if he digs in my flowerbeds...”

“If he digs in your weed-beds he’ll be doing the neighborhood a favor.” She stretched out on her front to shine her flash into the now rodent-free space. “You know, if they weren’t claustrophobic, a person could actually hide in there. I wonder.”

“With the rats.” He shuddered.

“Seriously, for a guy who grew up like we did, you’re awfully prissy.”

“We never had rats,” he said firmly. Their father had flipped old houses for a living, and they’d grown up in some shambling dumps, but they hadn’t dealt with more than a few mice and spiders, and maybe bats in the attic.

“Well, this might have been a slave-hole, but it’s hard to say. I could crawl in for a better look.”

“Not without a face-mask.” He tugged on her sleeve. “I want to check the upstairs too.”

She gave him a sharp look, but slid backwards and stood up. “Okay.”

He left the smaller spare room for last. When they stood at the door, he felt oddly reluctant to go in. He wasn’t sure if he was afraid they’d find something, or afraid they wouldn’t.

Tam looked past him. “You know, I like the shape of this one. And it’s close to the master bedroom without sharing a wall. It’d make a nice nursery.”

He stared at her, momentarily distracted. “For whom?”

“Well, you. And whatever guy you meet and manage to bribe to stay with you. I want nieces and nephews.”

“I’m not buying you surrogate children,” he managed, over a mixed rush of feelings. “Or housing them in a haunted room.”

“Haunted?” She turned on him like a pointer on a bird.

“Well.” He covered quickly, waving at the dim space with its dust-lined curtains, its shadowed, cobwebby corners. “Doesn’t it look like Miss Havisham should appear out of thin air, rocking in the corner?”

She narrowed her eyes, and poked his chest with a finger. "Not more than any of the other unused rooms. All right, out with it, Xavier."

He flushed. "Just, um, noises. A couple of times at night."

"Noises."

"Like, groans, maybe. There's probably a bird's nest in the attic overhead or something."

"Is that why you keep waking me up to see if I'm all right?"

"Yeah. I guess. I wasn't sure where it was coming from, but last night it seemed like it was this room."

"Huh." She looked back at the room, and when he would have stepped inside, she flung her arm out to bar the doorway. "Just wait."

He stopped, and she dropped her hand and ran the light of her flash across the floor. Faintly, in the filtered sunlight from the window, they could see tracks crisscrossing the dust of the floor. After a minute she shrugged. "Lots of people, different times. Nothing obviously recent." She grinned at him. "No giant paw prints, no suggestive drag marks."

"Bite me."

"Not my kink."

He stepped past her, heading for the right-hand corner. She took the stud-finder out of the bag on her shoulder and began checking the walls.

The room was disappointingly ordinary. Peeling paper didn't reveal any hidden doors. A stain on the ceiling suggested an ancient roof leak more than ghostly messages. In the daylight, there was no hint of that odd blue color. He even knelt and ran his fingers over all the dusty trim and floorboards. He pulled off his sweater, and shadowed the corner, peering at it in the near-dark. Nothing glowed blue.

"What the crud are you doing?"

He jumped guiltily, and dropped the sweater. "Just, um, checking."

"You're weird."

"You're weirder."

"You're sticking your head in a corner."

"There was this thing that I, um, wanted to check."

"Gee, can you vague that up for me?"

He flushed. "No, I don't think I want to. Let's look at the attic."

The attic was reached by a small circular staircase, so narrow and steep that even his not-over-wide shoulders brushed the walls. He remembered the sales agent calling this the servant stair. There was a separate trapdoor in the upstairs hallway ceiling, no doubt needed to haul up items for attic storage, because you couldn't have carried more than a picnic basket up these steps.

When they reached the top floor, he took a good look at Tam. She was a bit flushed, was maybe breathing too hard. He felt that familiar little clutch of anxiety that he'd been battling for weeks. She'd done well since leaving the hospital, but it had been too damn close. He'd nearly lost her. She was the only family he had.

She caught his eye and frowned. "Quit staring. You look like a dead carp. What now?"

He looked around. Most of the attic floor was open space, cluttered with decades of discards. The house agent had offered to have it cleared out, but some of it looked interesting. He'd figured sorting through potential antiques might be a nice, low-stress job for Tam. Along the back there were three small servants' rooms, each with a high dormer window. They'd be tiny for one person, claustrophobic for two. He had a feeling they'd been used for two.

"I want to figure out what lies over the, um, spare room," he said.

"You do that. I'm going to check and see if there's a way for something to get inside up here." Tam strode to the bigger dormer on the front wall, and ran her light along the cracks.

He paced the layout of the floor below, and located his spot. The attic floor was dirty, but the dust looked undisturbed, and all the boards seemed solid. Tam finished with the dormers, and then did one last sweep across the vaulted roof. "Nothing obvious. Although a mouse can get in a pencil-hole."

"It wasn't a mouse. I'm not that crazy."

"I didn't say you were. Just that there's nothing here." She walked to the front window and looked out. "Nice view though. If it wouldn't be about a thousand degrees in the summer up here, I'd take this for my room."

"It could be insulated, and cooled." Whatever Tam wanted, she should have.

"Nah. Mine's decent, and the en-suite bathroom makes up for the lower view. Still, this is pretty."

He went and stood beside her. Below them, grassy hills rose softly under the arch of blue sky. The fields were dotted with oaks, beech, sugar maple, and hemlock. Clusters of pink and white blossoms flourished amid the masses of green, apparently growing wild. There were a few houses visible at a distance, each large, most white, and every one surrounded by well-tended gardens with a scattering of outbuildings. White fences lined the roads and drives, and behind many of them, sleek, elegant horses grazed. High-class horse-country. Even with its four levels, multiple bedrooms and turret, this house was the ugly stepchild of the neighborhood.

At his shoulder, Tam said, just barely above a whisper, "Sooo. You hear anything yet?"

It was a dash of cold water, a reminder that the reason he'd picked this house over the Connecticut Queen Anne he'd looked at wasn't just because he'd fallen for the tower room. "Not so far," he returned in the same voice.

"I suck at waiting," she muttered.

"It could be a long time. Or never."

"I know that." Her tone held a hint of acid.

Of course she did.

But they both were hoping for more. They were here as bait, at the request of the FBI. A chance to redeem her forced retirement into something useful. All because one night, when he'd hunched over his computer in the hospital waiting room, as they struggled to pull Tam back from the brink of multi-organ failure, he'd received a message. Short, anonymous, sent through so many relays even he couldn't trace it. "*Organ donors can be found, for a price.*"

Nothing more. He'd tried to reply, but there was no way. He'd posted a cryptic "*Tell me more about the price,*" on every online profile he had. And heard nothing.

Tam's kidney failure was complete, irreversible. What's worse, the kidney-cancer threat from the contaminant hung over their heads like a sharp blade, waiting to fall. The doctors had tried to soft-pedal it, but it was all over the news. Everyone exposed to this shit would die, sooner or later, unless they got a transplant before the cancer hit. Tam had been put on the national lists, looking for a donor. At the bottom of the list in her turn, of course. Like the law demanded.

Xavier had been more than willing to donate a kidney, but they were nowhere near biocompatible. So he'd gone online, researching, wondering if

there was somewhere they could move to, or fly to, where she wouldn't be a thousand names down the waiting list. The temptation to buy her way up was sharp, burning in his chest. He had money now, lots of money. Why not use it to buy his sister's life?

He'd stumbled on whispers, rumors that anything, any body part, any tissue-match, could be had for a price. A rich person, with a need, could be hooked up with a source. Whether the source was willing... well, there were ways around that. Some of those rumors led overseas, and he saw the horror stories there. Stolen lives, murdered donors. Botched surgeries. Incorrect matches. Multi-drug-resistant infections. But some rumors whispered at a source closer to home. Confidential. Highly funded and technologically perfect. Illegal. Yours, for a price.

And then he'd hit a wall. Apparently, whoever was running this was very careful. Xavier might be rich, but he didn't have a reputation for cutting illegal corners. The little feelers he put out weren't taken up. No one came to take his bait, offering to hook his sister up with a match.

Computer security had been his profession, before he sold his company and became a man of leisure, but even he couldn't track this rumor down. And before he could decide if he was trying to do that in the name of justice, or otherwise, the Feds had come to him.

He wasn't the first to get that teasing message. Not even the first to report it. The FBI's research had suggested that somewhere, possibly in these pretty Kentucky hills, was an illegal business bringing in a fortune from organ-legging. *Need a kidney, or a liver, or a heart? Low on the list for donors? We can find you a match. Just don't ask where it came from...*

So here they were, set up in this house, wealthy, clearly and obviously in need of that service. They were handy in the epicenter of where the Feds thought the ring operated. Tam's dialysis system had been set up in her room as openly as they could manage. The service truck came to the front door every week. Tam used a local doctor, a local supply company. No fakery. Anyone with a minimum of hacking skills could check her record and see this was for real.

Xavier had set up his web links, his sim site, presenting himself as a gentleman of money indulging himself with a home restoration. No expense spared. He'd paid cash for the house and land, and when he bought anything around here it was top drawer, money to burn, well beyond what law enforcement could finance. And then they waited.

And waited.

They stood silently at the high window. The sun brightened, faded, brightened again, as clouds glided by. Sleek horses grazed innocently on the green grass, as they had in this area for hundreds of years. Tam said, "I think I could live here forever. If it wasn't for the damned organ-legger out there. As it is, I'd always wonder..."

"It's not like we'd ever go through with it." That was partly a reminder to himself. The temptation was there. You could legally sell blood, sperm, human eggs, bone marrow, why not one kidney? You could live without one.

It wasn't like Tam needed a new heart. They could take up the offer of a kidney transplant, and do it, and turn the supplier in afterward and take care of the donor for life. Or they might offer the pre-matched donor a fortune... He bit his tongue hard, as a reminder. Because you could live without one hand too, or a cornea, or one lung. And when you started down the slope of buying irreplaceable parts of people, it was only a small step to buying whole people, for whatever purpose you chose. And that way lay slavery, and murder.

There were parts of the world where you could buy a person. For sex, for adoption, for work, for sadistic fun. He was never going to be part of that.

They sighed in unison, and glanced at each other. Tam forced a grin. "So, since we've obviously failed to track down our house ghost, what else do we have planned for today?"

"Lunch, I think. It'll be here soon." He had lunch catered most days. It fit his image, and meant neither of them had to cook. "And then I need to look into repairing that cellar brickwork."

"Does that mean I can get up on the porch roof and start ripping off shingles?"

He wanted to say no. Her challenging glare dared him to try. "Yeah. I guess. Just don't climb the ladder when I'm not there. And don't work too hard. And call my com to help you come down if you feel hot or dizzy or... All right?"

"Yes, Mommy. God, you're worse than a nursemaid."

"You don't listen."

"You're not the boss of me."

They went downstairs in cheerful insult mode, stopping on the second floor to clean up. Xavier pulled off his good sweater and sighed at the dirt ground

into it. He didn't know what had possessed him to dress up like he was going to meet the ghost for drinks. He stripped off the lightweight jeans too, and pulled on some tougher clothes, before going down to let the caterer in.

Chapter 2

Roman struggled to surface, through a thick, clinging fog.

A man's voice above him grumbled, "I hate dealing with the zombies."

He knew that voice, disliked it, didn't trust it. He couldn't remember why.

A deeper voice said, "Shut up. It's easy duty. Easier than working the snatches."

That voice he hated.

He kept his eyes closed, as his wits fought to come back online.

Hands touched him, turning him over. He lay on something resilient. Now that he'd been turned, he could tell he was face-up. Something touched his mouth, wet and sweet as it trickled between his lips. He swallowed reflexively, and another drop touched his tongue. He fought to open his eyes.

Nothing worked. His body lay inert, heart beating, breathing, but unresponsive. His eyes wouldn't open. Another squirt of food was pressed past his lips. He swallowed again, automatically.

The hated voice said, "That one's been around a while."

"Yeah." His feeder pressed another dose of mush on him. "On ice, I guess. Longer than most. Must be worth something."

A grunt. "Must be. I wonder..."

Roman lost the thread of the conversation in the fuzz of his brain. Sounds faded, the taste of the food and the sensation of it in his mouth dimmed, although he had the impression his body was still taking nourishment, one reflexive swallow at a time. But he was leaving the world behind again.

He floated. All around him was a haze, formless, grey, soft, yielding, darkness, untouchable, unchanging. From somewhere, he heard his grandfather's voice. "*Focus. I taught you better than that.*"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"*Find the light.*"

"I'm trying. I keep trying!" He wanted to cry. He was trying, he really, really was. Trying over and over, lost in the dark. *Help me? Please help me?*

No one wanted to help him. No one came for him. The moments when he emerged, whether into the imprisoning bulk of his body, or into the strange flashes of blue, of odd spaces and shadowed rooms, never lasted.

Never. At most he got a breath. A moment of feeling lucid, and then it slipped through his fingers. Slipped through his mind. He was crazy. He must be crazy.

Even crazy, he wasn't a quitter though. He tried to look around in the dark, the formless, the void. God, he hated this place and yet it sapped him of strong emotion, until that hate was a pallid, feeble thing. He looked around for an unknown time. A long time. He thought it was long...

There, off to his left, was a thread of blue. He'd seen those before, leading him to brief flashes of dreams, where he wandered for a moment out of the dark. The blue beckoned to him. Maybe this time would be different. Maybe this bright beam would finally lead to a way out.

He headed toward it, not sure if he was walking, gliding, flying, wishing he could run. His body seemed irrelevant somehow. The blue opened up, wider, like the entrance to a cave. When he stepped through the gap, he was in another unfamiliar room. But this time he saw it clearly. His motion sense steadied until he felt like he was standing still, and he took a breath without being immediately yanked away into the dark.

The room seemed deserted. There was no furniture, and the drapes on the windows hung in faded folds, filmed with dust. As he turned in a slow circle, he spotted the doorway. Through it, a hall led off in either direction. He hurried to the doorway, and froze there. The blue light held him cradled, and the darkness beyond was thick and impenetrable. When he thought about taking one more step out of range, it felt like trying to step off a cliff. Perhaps it could be done, but every fiber of his body said it would be a bad, bad idea. He couldn't force himself forward.

He groaned with frustration. He knew there was something important he needed to do. He couldn't remember. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

The light in the room changed. Whether that was his fault, or something external, he couldn't say. The bright cave-mouth crack was swiftly getting thinner. He wasn't sure what would happen if he lost it. The idea made his heart race and his breath come fast. Reluctantly, he turned away from the doorway of

the room, hurrying toward the light, desperate to pass into it before it closed. As he slipped through, losing that wooden floor, the tattered curtains, and the smell of dust, he heard someone behind him gasp, and call, "Wait!" But he was too far gone to turn back. The darkness swallowed him.

Xavier skidded into the room next to Tam's, and stopped short. The blue light had faded. The man he'd seen was gone. He slammed his hand on the wall in frustration.

Was he going crazy? He'd swear he'd seen a naked man walking away from him into the wall and disappearing. A nicely-built naked man too—tall, fit and lean. With a really nice ass.

Maybe he had a case of blue-balls-induced psychosis. If this was something real, would he have bothered to notice the guy's ass? Real, vanishing, naked guy. Hah!

He searched the wall, running his hands along the wallpaper. It felt cool and solid, unchanged to his touch. Different spare bedroom, same ordinary, boring, doubt-his-sanity shit as last time. He pressed harder until the heels of his hands ached, but there was no way for solid flesh to just... pass through. He was going crazy.

Behind him, Tam said, "What's wrong?"

He whirled around. "Huh?"

"I heard you shout."

"Oh. Um." He didn't have a quick answer ready.

"The ghost?"

"I don't know. Maybe." He rubbed his face. "Would you say I'm over-imaginative? Prone to hallucinations?"

"Well, there was that invisible bear living in your closet when you were seven," she teased.

"Tam!"

"No. As a rule, I'd say you're pretty level-headed."

"I don't do drugs. I'm not addicted to virtual reality games. I don't get caught up in Net-walking."

"You're as physical-world grounded as any computer geek I know."

He gritted his teeth. "Then why the hell am I seeing spirits? Or illusions? Or ghosts?" He slammed his hand on that solid wall again.

"Calm down," Tam said. "Tell me what happened."

"I heard a groan. I came to look. There was a blue light again, and I saw..." He trailed off. "I'm going crazy."

"Just say it."

"I saw a man. A tall, naked man with a great ass, walking away. He walked into the wall, right here." He thumped it again for emphasis. "And when the light was gone, so was he. Just like that."

"Okay."

"That's all? Okay? I'm totally losing my mind here, and you say it's okay?"

"Xav, if you think you saw something, I'm betting you did."

"Now say, '*Sure, Xav, you saw a naked guy walk into a wall.*' And keep a straight face. I dare you."

Tam sighed. "You're right, it doesn't sound likely. At the same time, I was a cop for almost fifteen years. I've seen more weird shit than you can believe. I'm keeping an open mind."

Xavier nodded. He paced to the door and turned to look at the room. Nothing blue. No hallucinations. Just Tam, looking at him steadily with her problem-solving expression on. "So. Possibilities?"

She gave him a brisk nod. "Well, the paranormal has to be on the list. Ghost, spirit, whatever."

"Okay. Anything that *isn't* from a *Twilight Zone* re-run?"

"A secret door? A holo-projection? Hallucinogenic mushrooms?"

He paused, taking stock of his physical state. His heart was beating a little fast, and his head ached, but he didn't feel dizzy or off balance, or disoriented. He felt as normal as a crazy person could expect. "I doubt it's mushrooms. Or drugs. Although if it keeps happening, I might get you to take a blood sample."

"I'm a cop, not a doctor. You can get your own blood sample. Or pee in a cup."

"Thanks for the support."

"That *was* support. Go on."

He paced again. "So a secret door isn't likely. We went over all the rooms pretty well yesterday. And last time, it happened in the room next door, not this one. It's not impossible that we missed something, in two different rooms, but it's not likely."

Tam nodded. "I can ask the local cops if we can borrow an ultrasonic search unit. But we also measured dimensions. There's no space unaccounted for."

"A holo-projection. That could actually be the answer." He felt better for a moment at having a real non-paranormal possibility. "Except it opens the question of who and why. Unless *you're* trying to drive me crazy so you can lock me in the attic and take over my financial empire."

"Basement, not my nice attic. Plus, if I want you locked away, I just have to show the local cops your stash of bestiality porn."

"My what? I don't have bestiality porn!"

"That you know of." She grinned, then sobered. "A projection also raises technical questions. There would have to be a projector in a straight line from this room. The nearest hillside is half a mile away. There's no convenient tree outside the window. I guess you could beam a holo over half a mile, but it would get pretty damned blurry."

"He wasn't blurry," Xavier said, and bit his lip.

She raised an eyebrow, but went on, "Or you could project from inside the house, from an adjacent space. Top, bottom, sides."

"There'd have to be a hole. Although a pinhole with a fiberoptic would do." He shifted uncomfortably, imagining someone on the other side of the ceiling, looking down. "Crud."

"They'd still need the projector. And a remote, if they weren't on-site to control it. There should be something to find." Tam looked all energetic again, glancing around, evaluating angles.

"We can check in the morning, when it's light."

"Or we could check it right now. I'll get the flashes."

"And your gun?" He didn't want to seem like a weenie, but if there might be someone in the house, it made sense to take precautions. Right?

"I turned in my department Taser with the badge," she said.

"Tell me you don't have a back-up."

"Maybe." She grinned, looking awfully happy for someone woken by a strange noise in the middle of the night. "Wait here. I'll be right back. Oh, and by the way, nice pants."

He glanced down at the yellow smiley-faces on his PJ pants. "You bought them," he called after her.

They did a thorough search of every inch of the adjoining walls, the attic floor, and then with the help of a stepladder, the downstairs parlor ceiling. There was nothing, unless you counted insects, cobwebs and dust. For good measure, they got the surveillance-device detector that the FBI had given them for the sting operation, and ran it over the whole space. It didn't so much as blink.

By two a.m. they were done. Xavier followed Tam back to her room, where she put the bug-detector in its case, and stowed the little snub-nosed gun in her bedside drawer. Next to a personal Taser.

"You didn't see those," she said.

"No, ma'am."

He sat on the edge of her bed. She eased back into it, and lay down with a tired sigh. It hurt to hear that. A year ago, she could have run him into the ground without breaking a sweat. She was only thirty-six. *And a month out of hospital after a life-threatening illness*, he reminded himself. Give it time. She was getting better.

"So," he said. "We're back to me being crazy, or seeing ghosts."

"I vote for crazy." But she winked at him to take the edge off that.

"You really think there could be something spooky going on?"

She shrugged, and closed her eyes. Her red hair, a shade darker than his, clung to her damp, pale skin. He wanted to brush it back, but she'd bite his hand off at the wrist if he tried. Without looking at him, she said, "There was this one time... One of the patrol officers in my department found a house where, um, bad things had happened. Mutilated dead bodies. And even after they were taken away and the scene was cleared, people kept thinking they saw more blood. Or they would see another body out of the corner of their eye that would vanish when they turned back."

"You too?"

“Not me personally, but the detectives were trading weeks of vacation time not to be the one to go do the interviews in that building. Finally, Ramirez had his grandmother come in on the quiet and do some kind of purification ceremony. After that, things got quiet.”

“You believe that?”

She shrugged again. “It was a bad enough scene. Maybe everyone was just traumatized. But there were some tough, tough cops involved, and everyone was nervous walking through there for weeks. So yeah, I think there was something uncanny going on.”

“D’you think Ramirez’s grandmother would like a nice Kentucky vacation?”

“I might be able to persuade her, maybe with a gift from you to sweeten the pot. But do you want to just get rid of this ghost? Or do you want to figure out what’s going on?”

He said slowly, “Yeah. I guess I want to know.”

“Thought so.” She sounded smug.

“Why do you say that?”

“You told me you were ogling his ass.”

“I never. Well, maybe. Crud.” He had been, hadn’t he? For the all of three seconds he’d had to look.

“So for now, let’s get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll do some investigating. A house this old has to have some history. Maybe we can figure out who this guy is.”

“Right.” He stood up slowly. “See you in the morning.” When he would try to find out just how long the guy he’d been ogling had been dead. Double crud.

Helpless was bad. Out of control was a short step to insanity. He was probably crazy anyway, but it made Roman even more crazy to be jerked around in his own damned head. He hated the grey formless floating, but he also was teeth-grindingly sick of the uncontrollable flashes of clarity. One moment he would sink into awareness, facing the realization that he was trapped in a body reduced to nothing but swallowing water and food. The next go-round, he’d be slipping through blue-lit gaps into empty rooms, only to be yanked away again a minute later.

Roman decided he was damned well going to get the hang of this meditation stuff. His grandfather's voice seemed to approve. Of course, his grandfather was dead, a spirit or ghost or hallucination, which made this whole thing messed up. More messed up. But he was willing to pretend he had someone on his side.

At first it felt pointless, controlling breathing he didn't even know he really had. Repeating his centering phrase, chanting it, building up a mental image of how he wanted to swim through the soupy fog toward a real goal—it seemed futile. He began to wonder if he would ever again know what was real and what wasn't. Maybe this was hell. Or limbo. He'd never believed in either one, but thinking that all this was just random nerves firing in his brain was almost worse. He could hope to escape hell, but not his own mind.

He had to try. He focused on the image of swimming, using his body and his will, moving through the grey toward a blue light. Sliding down the light to a door, and out into that house. He'd involuntarily come out in half a dozen different rooms by now, although he never got to stay long. Each of the rooms matched the rest in feel, in size. It had to be one house. And however weird it was to be there, he at least walked and spoke in those rooms, or thought he did. Better than lying blind and paralyzed sucking down mush, which seemed to be his other option.

The light, for all its weirdness, was less frightening than living in his inert shell of a body.

He yearned toward the light, as hard as he could. Disciplined his thoughts, his breath, his whole self into one goal—seeking the blue. He got a sense of vibration, of tension, and turned his attention that way. When he saw something, a flash of color, a hint of light, he dove for it, imagining himself an arrow, riding that beam out of the dark.

He emerged in a bedroom. Another new room, but clearly the same house, with its high ceilings and tall, narrow windows. This room was oddly-shaped, with a hexagonal bay, and set in that curved space was a big sleigh-bed. On the bed lay a man, fast asleep.

Roman froze, staring, working hard to breathe. It was the first time in all his wandering that he'd seen another person. He didn't think he'd ever met this man before, but his memory didn't seem to be working right. Maybe this was someone he knew. Maybe this was a friend, waiting for a clue to come find him. Or maybe this was the person who had him trapped, who didn't know he'd found a way out. Enemy? Friend? Stranger? He didn't know how he could tell.

The sleeping man was younger than him, perhaps thirty. He had red hair, cut short enough to just barely curl. Roman couldn't see his eyes, although he was betting they were light, maybe blue or green, since the guy's skin was fair with a scattering of freckles. His features were fine, with a high forehead, pointed chin, and elegant cheekbones. One bare arm above the covers looked more wiry than muscular.

Roman wanted to shout, to reach out, to see if the man would wake, but he was torn between hoping and being afraid. He moved closer. He'd sometimes wondered, as he'd gotten little glimpses of empty rooms, whether he was somehow going back in time. Some parts of the house had the feel of centuries gone by. But now he saw modern touches. A pro-screened tablet was laid aside on a table. There was a tiny cell-com on the stand beside the bed, the earbud looking like a brand new model.

Newer than the one he'd had, that he'd bought... sometime. A while ago. It was fuzzy and he couldn't remember when. It bothered him, that not remembering. The last day he remembered was... today was... He tried to recall, and the darkness tugged at him, pulling him away from the bed. The blue doorway began to close. "No!" he said. "I'm not done."

Still the doorway narrowed, and he had to hurry, turning his shoulders to slip back through. Behind him the man sat up in bed, calling, "Wait. Don't go. Who are you?"

But he couldn't stay. The question followed him into the darkness. *Who are you?*

Things were muted in the grey. His dismay, his fear, his uncertainty. In the grey, he floated. He was Roman, he was a man, he'd fought, he'd lost. In the grey, his sobs were muted too, and ended soon. He needed to get out of the dark, before he faded to match it.

It took an untold time. It took all his will. But he made it happen again.

The next blue beam he found let him escape from the dark into the doorway of a kitchen. Ahead of him, a fridge hummed softly in one corner, and a small table stood in the middle of the floor, flanked by two classic wooden chairs. A quick glance behind showed him a dim, tiled hallway. It bothered him more to be naked here than it had in the bedroom. Standing looking at the kitchen, feet bare on the tiles, his junk hanging out, made him feel really exposed, in more than one sense. He thought he felt eyes staring at his back.

He'd planned to fight harder against being pulled through the doorway when it shut this time. He'd decided to jump off that fucking metaphorical cliff, and let the door close without him and see what happened. But when he saw the light fade he hurried through it, unable to hold out, escaping the odd vulnerable sensation of being watched.

For a longer time than usual, he wandered in the fog. Once he nearly woke in his paralyzed body. The voice he hated, that he'd dubbed Nasty, was saying, "...not like they use those parts of her. Seems like a waste not to take advantage. She'll be gone in a few days."

Another man replied, "Well, you can if you want to. I'm not risking this job for a piece of ass. Especially a zombie ass, no matter how pretty she is. If the boss looks at the monitor recordings at the wrong moment..."

The voices faded out again, no matter how Roman tried to stay in the moment. His stomach twisted. Something bad had been happening, something he should have stopped, but he was gone again and the two men's voices were lost. Frantically, he looked for a blue thread, for the doorway, for a way to get free and do something. He had no idea how long it took before he found it.

He landed in a parlor. Another empty space. He moaned in disappointment. At least this room was furnished, and there was enough new tech to confirm that he could stop worrying about time travel. He turned slowly, looking about the room, and caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. He whirled around.

The man from the bed wasn't sleeping this time. He stood in the doorway, a tiny weapon in his hand. His eyes were open. They weren't blue or green, Roman realized, but a clear, light grey.

"Who are you?" the man said, not raising the gun, although his fingers tightened on it.

Roman didn't answer. He wasn't sure if he *couldn't*, or if it was the shock of being spoken to after so long. *How long had he been lost?*

While he was still wondering, the man asked, "Are you a ghost?"

Was he? He couldn't remember dying, but then he couldn't remember really living either. A few voices. A taste of sweet liquid, or perhaps he'd imagined that. That wasn't life, was it? But surely it wasn't death. He suddenly remembered three men, fighting them, struggling, heart pounding, a burning pain. Had that been death?

“What’s your name?”

“I don’t know,” he said, still stuck on the ghost question. He realized he’d spoken aloud, and dragged in a ragged, grateful breath.

“I’m Xavier,” the man said. “I won’t hurt you. Can you tell me why you’re here?”

He shook his head. He had no clue.

“Where do you come from?”

Roman felt the light behind him going, robbing him of strength. He glanced over his shoulder. The doorway was fading. “No!” He glanced quickly back at Xavier. He wanted to stay, desperately. A person, conversation, how long had it been since he felt this real?

He’d planned to stay. He fought to brace himself, but as the light faded so did he, thinning, like he was being sucked out of even this ghost form. He couldn’t stand it. Not again. There was so little of him left. The pull of the darkness was imperative, sucking him into the void.

He wanted to say something, leave something real of himself behind. Something he might come back to. As he turned and hurried for the doorway he called back over his shoulder, “I’m Ro...” The dark took him, swallowing his last word.

Alone, in the grey-black nothingness, he cried. His chest heaved, his eyes burned, and he choked as the tears ran down his throat. But he made no sound.

“...and then he ran into the wall and was gone,” Xavier finished, glancing at Tam. She sat at the kitchen table, her hair still sleep-mussed but her eyes bright. He’d woken her, dragged her down to the parlor, and after another fruitless search they’d retired to the kitchen for fortification and brainstorming. He wasn’t sure what to do next.

Tan looked at him with fascination, her coffee going cold in her untouched cup. “He said Ro?”

“Yeah. I think maybe he was cut off short, though. Roland?”

“Roger?”

“No, definitely a long O. Roberto? Or... I’d asked where he was from. Rome?”

"I wish you'd recorded it."

"Me too. I wasn't expecting him back so fast."

"Tell me again what he looked like." She pulled out her mini-tablet and set it to record.

Xavier closed his eyes to remember better. "Tall. Maybe a little taller than me. Lean, but still with some muscle on him and nice wide shoulders. Mid-thirties, maybe? Dark hair, cut short. Eyes... I don't remember." Dark, he thought, but he hadn't seen their color. "That blue light seemed to be behind him, so he was more like a silhouette. Colors were odd."

"He's Caucasian, though?"

"Yeah, with just a hint of a tan."

"So there's no way he's, say, the ghost of one of the slaves from *pre-Civil War* days."

"No, not a chance."

"What else do you remember about him?"

"He was naked again. Well-hung." Yeah, he'd looked. It was kind of right there. Although he hadn't really meant to say it. Maybe he was more shaken than he realized.

"You're sure this isn't one of your fantasies? When was the last time you got laid?"

He opened his eyes to glare at her. "None of your business. And yes, now I'm sure."

"Does he fit any of the deaths you were researching?"

"Not really." He'd spent a fair bit of time yesterday, searching archives for men who might have died in this house. "Most of the men who lived here and died young did it elsewhere, in wars, or off in the city. Not that a ghost couldn't come back to haunt the old homestead, I guess. I don't know if ghosts have travel restrictions."

Tam snickered, and he frowned at her. "You were the one who told me to keep the ghost concept on the table."

She rubbed her mouth and tried to look sober. "Yeah. Go on."

"There are no rumors of the place being haunted. The only recorded death of a young white man actually in this house was in the flu epidemic of 1918. But he was barely seventeen. Way younger than this guy."

"Huh." Tam picked up her cup, sipped it and made a face.

Xavier got up and went to the counter. Outside the kitchen window, it was pitch dark, with the velvety softness of a country night that cities could never match. He was coming to like it. But out there somewhere lurked a man named Ro. Or from Ro. Although *lurked* didn't seem the right word.

"He wasn't threatening me," he said, taking his sister's cup to dump and refill it. "He seemed anxious. Confused. Maybe even afraid."

"Maybe he's the ghost of a murder victim. Someone killed him on the grounds, and now he haunts the house, waiting for his murderer to come back..."

"You're taking this pretty damned lightly." He set the full cup back in front of her.

"Well, ghosts?"

"Or your brother and only flesh-and-blood relative quietly losing his little mind."

"Aw. You have a big mind, bro. That's how you made all the lovely money." She sobered. "I'm sorry. It's just hard to believe. I mean, faint specters of the violent dead making people uncomfortable is one thing. A naked man introducing himself in your parlor is another."

"It wasn't much of an introduction."

"Still. Weird."

"Very." That was a major understatement.

"It's more of a puzzle than anything. Which isn't bad, since I'm about to go out of my own tiny mind with boredom."

"The stuff stored in the attic isn't interesting?"

"Well, in a dry and dusty way, yeah. And I think a few bits of it might fetch us some good money on Vend-it. But you have enough money already, which kind of dilutes the thrill."

He turned to look back out at the darkness. "Look for diaries. Notes, maybe a Bible with births and deaths. I really want to know who this guy is."

"Sure." She drank her coffee, then came to stand behind him. Their faces, reflected in the glass, looked similar, their kinship obvious.

"Look for pictures," he added. "Even if they show women or older kids. Maybe I can find someone who looks like him."

"I can get a professional Identi-Kit program set up, to help you draw a picture of him," she offered. "You could fool around with it. See if you can make a decent likeness. We could maybe post it online."

"No!" He wasn't sure why refusal came so fast. But maybe it had something to do with the look on Ro's face, as he turned to go. "I don't know who he was or what he's scared of. But there's something wrong. If he was a murder victim..." He swallowed. *If someone had murdered Ro, and they turned out to be still within Xavier's reach, they were going to pay.* "I don't want to alert anyone that he's talking to me."

"Hm. That almost makes sense." She set her cup in the sink. "So, should we stake out the house for the rest of the night? He's appeared multiple places by now, so we'd want some kind of patrol."

"Yeah. He was up in my room two nights ago, then down here yesterday. He hasn't shown up twice in one night, though."

"That we know of. You wouldn't have known he'd been here that time in the kitchen if you hadn't had the munchies at just the right moment."

He sighed. "Well, I'm not going to get back to sleep, regardless. I'll do some more searching."

"Why don't you keep watch upstairs? I'll stay down here, maybe go online. I still have my LEO access to departmental records. I can probably search the Lexington missing persons database."

"They didn't rescind your police department access?" He said it before thinking, and bit his lip.

She looked sour. "I guess my lieutenant figured he'd have pity on me. I'll see if I can find anything about local murders or missing young men. Add the name Ro into it. Maybe you can do a civilian-type search yourself."

He hesitated. Ro hadn't seemed dangerous, and he'd been seen upstairs more than down. But still, he hesitated to leave her down here alone. "You sure we shouldn't stick together?"

"You go upstairs. Stay sharp. Yell if a blue guy tries to get in your bed."

"Fuck you," he muttered.

"Incest is also not one of my kinks," she replied cheerfully.

“I’m going to give you back your gun.” He took the little weapon out of his pocket and set it on the counter. It made him uncomfortable, but she’d insisted he keep it by his bed. “I don’t think he wants to hurt me, and if he did, I don’t think the gun would make a difference. I’m certain now that he’s not someone physical sneaking into the house.”

She took the gun and made it disappear somewhere on her person. “We should get a Taser maybe. Electromagnetic. Might disrupt a ghost where a bullet would just pass through. Or a laser. Do you have a pointer?”

“Sure, a couple,” he said, because she would feel better if she thought they were armed with something. “You can use the one in my desk drawer. I’ll get the one from my briefcase upstairs and keep it handy.”

He climbed the staircase reluctantly. In his bedroom, he pulled out his tablet, and went hunting the Net for a guy named Ro, or a visitor from Rome, or anyone associated with the house who might fit his visitor. Search as he might, with all his extensive skills, he found nothing relevant. When the sun had risen enough to banish the last shadows from the room, he crawled back under the covers and went to sleep.

Chapter 3

Xavier joined Tam for lunch on five hours of sleep, unable to spend another minute in bed. The catering service had done them well, with nicely-seasoned tofu-salad sandwiches. The bread was freshly baked, and studded with sunflower seeds. The cookies were orange-peel and anise. He made a mental note to put up a *Like* on their company links.

Tam ate less than usual, pushing half her sandwich toward him.

"One whole sandwich meets your diet guidelines," he told her. The caterer had Tam's needs clearly laid out, with instructions to feed them both the same. He could stand to eat healthy for a while.

"I have a med appointment later. I don't want to eat too much."

"Oh." He took it, picking at the crust. He wanted to ask if she was meeting with her FBI handler, or just the doctor, but they'd been warned that if the organ-legger took the bait, he might bug the house, to check for traps. They hadn't bug-swept the kitchen for several days. So instead, he said, "Any side trips?"

"I might get my hair done." She nodded at him, significantly enough that he took it as a *Yes, I'm meeting the FBI* sign.

"Your hair looks fine to me," he muttered, playing his brotherly role. "But okay. Will you take a car or call for a rick?"

"A rickshaw would be too slow," she said. "I need to go into the city. I'm not trusting this hair to any small-town scissor-jockey. I'll take a car."

"Use the sedan. It should be fully charged." He picked up one of the cookies and broke off a bite, carefully casual. "When do you think you'll be back?"

"Late afternoon? I might drive around, if the battery is full up. Enjoy the local scenery."

"Call me if you're going to miss dinner." He suspected she was looking forward to doing something cop-like, from the gleam in her eye.

"Will do." She stood, scraped her leftovers into the compost, and bent to kiss his hair.

"Wow." He changed, '*you're in a good mood*', to, "You must be looking forward to the haircut."

“A woman likes to look her best.”

They avoided meeting each other's eyes. Primping had never been high on Tam's priorities list.

Once he'd heard the crunch of tires on the gravel drive that signaled her departure, he headed upstairs. Rather than another session of futile research, he changed into work clothes. Tam had stripped the damaged tiles off the porch roof. He'd spent that morning hiding his heart palpitations while Tam walked around casually up there, oblivious to the height. By the time she made it safely down, he'd decided to put the new tiles on sometime when she was gone. To hell with the risk of doing roof-work alone. He figured his chance of a fall was lower than having a Tam-associated heart attack.

It was pleasant work. The air was still springtime-cool, and the porch was shaded by the house. The historical-society-approved shingles were a bit finicky to get placed, but there was a satisfaction to doing things the old fashioned way. He let himself enjoy the pop of the nail gun, the brightness of the sunshine, and the faint scent of the Carolina allspice blossoms near the steps.

He managed to finish before Tam got home. He was cleaned up and settled in the kitchen when she came in the door.

“How did the haircut go?” he asked, because she'd made it clear that her doctor visits were off limits.

“Went fine.” She made a silent, long-suffering face.

“I like that hair-color.” Her curls were cut shorter, and there were shimmery gold highlights hidden among the dark red.

“Me too. I found a great place.”

Suddenly, he noticed the kitchen wall opposite the window beginning to change color. It wasn't exactly glowing, but the soft gold of sunlight on the wallpaper took on a faintly green tint. Then, against the bright backdrop of the green-lit wall, Ro came into view.

“Crud!” Tam took a big step back, reaching for her hip. She must have been unarmed, because her hand came up empty. She froze, staring. “Holy phantasms, Batman!”

Xavier said quickly, “Ro. Welcome back.”

Ro looked at him blankly. He was still tall, well-built, short-haired, unchanged from last night. Except now it was daytime in a sunny kitchen, which made this feel more unreal than ever.

Ro stood stock still, in front of the botanical herb print that hung on the wall. Xavier noticed that he looked solid, for a ghost. His skin had texture and density, and the picture wasn't visible through him. He had faint tan lines, as if he'd been in the sun in shorts some time back, and failed to use good sunblock. And yeah, he was still naked. Xavier jerked his attention back up to the guy's face.

Tam said softly, "Hi, Ro. I'm Tamara. People call me Tam." She took a couple of steps sideways around the table, putting more space between herself and Xavier.

Ro turned to look at her. "You can see me?" His voice was rough and unsteady, his eyes wide and a surprising blue.

"Yes. We both can."

Ro glanced back and forth between them. "Where am I?"

"Silverlee," Xavier said. When Ro frowned uncertainly, he added, "It's the name of the house. We're in Kentucky, about an hour out of Lexington."

"Lexington?"

"It's a city..."

"I know that!" Ro hesitated. "Sorry." He put a hand out toward the back of the nearest chair. Flesh and wood failed to connect, and his fingers passed right through the chair with an odd optical effect. He stopped the return motion with his hand appearing merged into the wooden rail, flesh and wood blended. Ro's, "Whoa. Fucking weird," merged with Xavier's grunt of surprise.

Xavier moved closer, staring at where Ro's hand and the chair combined strangely in the same space. Ro suddenly turned, flashed a terrified look toward the kitchen window, and gasped, "No! Nooo!" He lurched toward Xavier.

Xavier tumbled back trying to avoid the ghostly touch. Quick as a cat, Tam whirled, grabbed something off the counter, and swung it to point at Ro. "Keep back."

A red light flashed out, striking Ro in the thigh. He screamed, a high, sharp sound. Tam swept the red beam sideways, and Ro tumbled after it, almost as if pinned by it. The beam hit the open doorway; Ro fell back into the hall with the red spot still on his thigh, staggering three steps into the dim space. Then he began babbling loudly, "Keep it on! Keep it on me! Don't turn it off! Don't turn it off!"

Tam snapped, "What? Why?" but held the beam locked on Ro's leg.

He panted through his teeth, as if in pain, then unclenched enough to say, "Whatever that is, the blue is going and I'm still here. Don't turn it off!" He gasped another harsh breath.

"Huh." Tam's hands were admirably steady. "Explain that."

Xavier took a step toward the hallway, staying out of her range of fire, and peered at where the laser's red dot hovered on the meat of Ro's leg. Ro wasn't bleeding or fading or whatever ghosts did when shot. The red spot on his thigh remained steady.

Ro trembled, and lowered a hand to rub at his leg a few inches above it, keeping his fingers well clear. "What *is* that thing?"

"Laser range-finder," Tam said. "I had it out yesterday, measuring some of our trees. I thought a laser might have an effect on a ghost."

"Effect. Yeah." Ro stared down at himself. "It feels hot, really hot. But I'm here."

"Huh? You were here before I turned it on."

Ro nodded. He looked up at Tam, and moved his hands to cover his groin. Xavier thought he saw a hint of a blush. "Yeah. I came in on the blue light. I've been here before, downstairs and up, I think."

"At night," Xavier said. "In my room."

"And hers." Ro tilted his chin toward Tam. "Although she was asleep. I've been all through this house, a minute here, a minute there. Half a dozen rooms. I don't know why."

Xavier remembered the noises in the night, the times he woke thinking he'd heard a cry, or a voice calling. "I heard you, a couple times, maybe."

"I don't know why it happens," Ro said. "I'm floating in the dark, all alone, in the thick, grey, dark, lost. It's... not good in there. But if I can find the blue light, I can follow it. And it always leads here. The, um, doorway doesn't stay open long, and until now it's always been night-time. When the blue light fades, I have to go. Back into the dark."

"I've seen you run away and vanish."

"I had to. I don't understand it, but when the door is closing, I have to get back."

"And now?" Tam asked.

Ro said, "I don't know. This is new." He rubbed his thigh, frowning. "I can't see the blue door from here. I don't know if it's still there. But I don't feel it pulling me."

Tam said, "How can we tell?"

Xavier looked over his shoulder to check around the kitchen. "At night, there was a blue glow behind him. There isn't now. But a few minutes ago that wall was, well, green, I guess, when he appeared. Blue plus yellow? I don't see that color now."

Ro shivered, a convulsive shudder that rocked him from head to foot. "I don't feel it. Maybe I'm out of the dark for good." He reached out a hand, and pressed his fingertips into the hallway wall. They sank into the plaster to the first joint, and he pulled them back sharply and shook them. "I don't know if this is better..."

"Than the empty dark? Do you want to go back there?"

"No!" Roman said loudly, then hesitated. "I want to stay here, but..." He looked at the floor, and shifted his weight to one foot. His sole began to merge with the floor, and he quickly went back to a balanced stance. When he looked up, he seemed scared. "Is this what I am now, in this house? Am I a ghost? Or are you ghosts? Is this whole thing some kind of hallucination?"

"I'm pretty sure we're real," Tam said gently.

Xavier asked, "If you're a ghost, do you remember, um, dying?"

"I'm not sure. I think I remember a fight, thinking something bad was coming. But not actually getting killed. I don't think."

"Tell us how to help you. What can we do?"

Ro met his eyes, his pupils blown so wide they almost hid the blue of his irises. "Do you know how long it's been since someone simply talked to me like a human being?"

"How long?" Tam asked.

"I don't even know..." Ro was cut off by a series of beeps from the range-finder in Tam's hand.

She glanced down. "Crud! Low battery warning."

Xavier glanced around quickly. "Where's the charger?"

"I'm not sure!"

He remembered having it outside; he'd put the panel in the sun, and then kept it handy for the nail gun. "Frack! It's by the front porch."

Before he could run for it, the tool beeped again. A tinny voice said, "One minute to auto-shut off. Please recharge."

Tam said quickly, "Maybe a laser pointer? Ro? Will that work?"

"No clue. Try anything." He sounded breathless.

The room Xavier was using as a home office was a lot closer than the front porch. He ducked past Ro, careful not to touch him, and ran down the hall. Tam had put the laser pointer back in his desk drawer. He scrabbled it out, hurried into the hall. Ro was trembling, his eyes wild, his hands held out aimlessly. Xavier passed the pointer to Tam, in case the direction or aim mattered.

She clicked it on, aiming right above the range-finder spot on Ro's leg. For a moment, there were two red dots, one above the other, on the tanned skin of Ro's thigh.

Ro said, "That one doesn't hurt." And then the lower red dot went out. His eyes widened, and his mouth opened. And then he was gone. The little dot of the laser pointer made a tiny bright spot on the faded paint of the hallway wall.

"No!" Xavier dove forward, reaching, as if there was something to grab. "Get him back."

"We'll try." Tam shoved the range-finder into his hands. "Get that charging. I'll get the electric tape measure, any other laser device we have, and turn them on. We'll try."

But although they lined up three different pointers, the tape measure, and even the range-finder piggy-backed into the charger, even when they aimed them precisely into that dim hallway, there was no sign of Ro.

Xavier collapsed against the wall, and then slowly slid down to sit on the cool tile floor. "He's gone."

"It looks that way." Tam pulled out a kitchen chair and sat where she could see him. "I wonder if he got back into his dark."

"How can you be so calm!" Xavier slammed his hand on the tiles. "We failed."

"Hey, little bro. We tried, right? We still have no clue why any of that worked, or didn't. Or why he's here in the first place. Maybe he's an evil spirit."

He gave her a withering glance. "Most confused evil spirit ever?"

"Maybe he's an evil spirit with amnesia." She snorted. "Maybe that confused act is all a ploy to lure you into its arms."

"What the actual fuck?"

"Well, he spent a hell of a lot more time looking at you than at me. So he's probably not here to lure me."

"If he was luring anyone he wouldn't have held his hands over his dick like a kid. Not sexy." Although it had been kind of sweet. Many people were totally casual about nudity these days. And he was getting way off track. "He seemed more lost than evil or seductive to me. Maybe you're projecting. How long since *you* got laid?"

"You are *never* going to know the answer to that. Anyway, I tend to agree. If he meant any harm, it sure didn't show."

Xavier slumped, pulling up his legs to wrap his arms around them. "How long do you figure he's been dead? Naked and short hair doesn't give us many clues."

"I'd say pretty recently. When I asked about the laser pointer, he didn't ask what it was or seem confused by the term."

"True. Yeah." When had those come into use? Back at the end of the twentieth century, he thought. Within about fifty years anyway. "So I probably don't have to worry about a Civil War era soldier who might be buried under the floor." He hesitated. "Unless an old ghost can learn new stuff."

"KISS." When he stared at Tam, she said, "*Keep It Simple, Stupid*. I'd start with assuming he's modern."

"So, why is he a ghost? Why come here? What is the blue light? Why did the range-finder work and the pointer not? Just general what-the-fuckery."

"You said there were no reports of ghosts in this house before?"

"Nothing believable. Hah, I just said the word *believable* about ghost stories. But no. The plantation house down the road supposedly has a wailing slave girl by the pond, hunting for the baby that was taken from her. Nothing for this house."

"So it's not like you've bought ectoplasm central."

He glared at her.

“What?”

“You’re taking this so, aargh, so *lightly!*”

She shrugged. “That’s my style. Dismembered dead bodies in a restaurant back room. Guy decapitated by malfunctioning Auto-bus. Naked ghost. I’m smooth.”

“Well, you may be smooth, Officer I’ve-Seen-Worse-Shit. I’m losing it all over the damned place.”

“You look okay to me.”

“I want Ro back. Now. Yesterday.”

She tilted her head. “Why does it matter that much?”

“I don’t know. This is my house. I hate unexplained stuff.”

“And you like naked guys.”

“That has *nothing* to do with it.” It wasn’t the naked, it was the lost, scared and lonely, that made him wish he could have kept Ro with them.

Roman cursed and struggled, trying to get back to Xavier. And Tam. Fighting against nothing real, arms and legs moving aimlessly against unsubstantial drag, like he was wrestling a wet blanket. He couldn’t see anything but familiar dim fog. No blue light, no red, no kitchen, no man with clear grey eyes looking at him kindly. No voices, good or bad. He floated, unmoored, and nothing he did changed anything.

When his first panicked struggle ebbed to twitches and shudders, he drew a long breath. He *thought* he took a breath. Was he even breathing? *No, that way lay panic again.*

So, he was a ghost. But people could see him. Even talk to him. And not just cryptically about the specters of fathers past or something. But he apparently had no control over his coming and going, and he *hated* not being in control. He wasn’t sure how he knew that, but he was sure it was true.

Perhaps next time he was at the house, he could have them turn on the range-finder, hooked up to steady power. And leave it on. The pain that burned like a heated brand on his thigh had been so completely worth it, to just talk to another human being. He could stand that pain for a long, long time.

For unknown hours, or minutes, or days, he flailed around in the dark, caught between bitterness and fear, and a sliver of hope. When he was too exhausted to do anything else, he fell into what seemed like sleep. And thought he heard a voice in his ear. "*Roman. Concentrate.*"

"Grandfather?" Grandfather would be ashamed of his pointless thrashing and panic, that was certain. The old man had been the most centered, grounded person Roman had ever known. He remembered Grandfather's expectant tone well. Remembered the sound of his voice, the sharpness of his dark eyes. That certainty, that *knowledge*, was a blessing. That was part of who Roman was, a man whose grandfather had spoken to him, taught him, guided him. *Grandfather...*

When he didn't fight too hard, but let himself sink into the quiet, he had a vivid memory of standing on a high place. The ground under his feet was dry and sandy. Below him, a cliff dropped away, opening almost at his toes into miles of clear air. The landscape was bleak and beautiful, shades of grey and red rock, and dusty green, and the air smelled clean. An elderly voice behind him said, "*Look out there. See that. Feel it. This is your place. When you need clarity, when you need stillness, when you need vision, come here and look out over that valley.*"

"What do I do now, Grandfather?" There was no cliff in this darkness, no clarity. But maybe there could be stillness.

He'd been taught meditation by that same dry, steady voice. He could hear the words now, patient, simple. He slowed his breathing, despite his doubt that he was actually breathing to begin with... *No, no, not good.* He slowed his breathing. Relaxed his muscles, ignoring the question of what they were doing for him otherwise. He closed his eyes, although the grey darkness was about the same behind his eyelids as in front of them.

Slow, relax, quiet. Tried to turn off his brain. Matched his breaths to every third heartbeat. *Beat, two, three, in. Beat, two, three, out.* Focused on that one thing, inside him, closing out the craziness of the outside, for the quiet inside.

Gradually, he heard voices. One was unfamiliar, cool and educated, with a little drawl. The other was, was... *Nasty*, his brain supplied. He had the impulse to run away, but even evil was better than nothingness. He held onto his control, breathed, listened, in a dark that had more features now, rustling, beeps, a faint stale smell.

The cool voice said, "Do you know how long he wants to keep this one? It's already been longer than the usual. I'm seeing a little muscle wasting."

Nasty answered, "I'm not about to ask. *But...* I heard this zombie may be a long-term acquisition. Kept on ice, so to speak. They grabbed him before he could run off somewhere inaccessible. I heard he's a perfect match for someone important."

"Who?"

"Oh, hell, no. I don't even want to know."

"Ah. Well, I'll put in an order for an electrostim bed then, to maintain muscle tone. And you should tell the attendants to be more careful with hygiene. He's on an air-float mattress. There's no good reason for that pressure sore. If they happen to need skin, that's a prime graft site, and I won't be responsible if it's infected."

"I'll tell them." Nasty's voice came closer, which made Roman want to run. He couldn't, though, so he froze into even greater stillness.

Cool voice said, "What about her?"

"Two kidneys, I heard. And maybe liver. They're in negotiations, so it shouldn't be long."

"Right. Standard protocol then." There was a pause. Roman thought he could maybe feel a touch on his upper arm. He struggled to open his eyes, and failed. Cool voice said from much closer, "And try to feed this one a bit more. Maintain body mass. Less metabolic stress, and besides, who knows, maybe they'll end up needing him for a leg or something. Poor bastard."

Nasty said, "Since when do you care?"

"It's one thing to bring them in for a few days, do the harvest and dispose of the remains. After all, there are much worse deaths for the underclass. It's another thing to keep a body here, week after week, maybe month after month. Just in case he's needed."

"He don't care. He's never gonna care again."

"True."

"Don't go getting a conscience on us, Doc. That could be dangerous."

The cool voice went positively glacial. "Don't worry about me. You try taking care of the donors better, or it won't be me who's in trouble. In fact, I'm

going to order turning every two hours for this one, instead of every four. See to it.”

There was a pause, and some garbled sounds, and then Nasty hissed, close enough to Roman's ear to make him jump, if he could have moved, “Slimy pissant. Thinks he's better'n me.” This time Roman was pretty sure he felt hands on his arm and back. “I'll turn you, all right. And then I'll give *her* the standard protocol. My favorite version.” He tugged on Roman.

Dizziness swooped over Roman. He was torn between hating the looming darkness, and wanting to escape that gleeful, cruel voice. In the end, as his body moved around uncontrollably in space, he lost his hold on it, and fell into the waiting void.

This time he managed not to panic. He wasn't lost or scattered to the wind. He had threads to find the truth of himself. *Nasty. Doctor. Mattress. Pressure sore.*

He wasn't dead. The certainty swept over him with a relief more dizzying than anything before it. *He. Wasn't. Dead.* Not dead. In hospital, comatose, sedated, something, but not dead.

In some kind of coma though, apparently, and he didn't know why. Already bits of what he'd heard escaped him, his memory failing to hold onto the words. *Hospital.* He was in hospital. Had he hit his head, in that fight he vaguely remembered? Could that put a man in a coma like this? He was a botany professor, not a physiologist... *He was a botany professor.* He was...

He was Roman Janz. Age thirty-eight. Ex-troublemaker, ex-soldier, now peaceful tracker of rare plants. The sudden rush of memory, of *self*, of thirty-eight years of life pouring back into him, unnerved him. He felt his thoughts shaking apart in dozens of directions. He had a past. He had an identity. But he was terrified, down to the marrow of his bones, that he didn't have a future.

In his mental flailing, a hopeful thought came to him. *Xavier.* He focused on the memory of a strong, clear voice and grey eyes that looked at him and *saw* him, even now, even in this disembodied state. Xavier wanted to help, if he could just get back to him.

Or if that didn't work, maybe he could go the other way. He vaguely remembered the doctor hadn't sounded evil. Or perhaps there was another nurse, or a sympathetic attendant. Maybe he could get back into his flesh and blood self enough to do something. To move. To ask for help. Something. He

wasn't even going to breathe loudly around Nasty unless he had the strength to run. But maybe there was someone who would help him.

Hope hurt. But not half as much as the bleak, hopeless confusion had. He turned his attention inward again, slowed his breathing, listened to his heart. *Grandfather, help me.* He went looking for the light.

Chapter 4

Xavier was expecting a restoration specialist to show up the next morning with some samples of kitchen tiles, so when the driveway vehicle-approach alarm sounded, he didn't look out. A few minutes later the doorbell rang. He pulled the door open, then stared at the man on his doorstep. Unless selling tile paid a lot better than he'd thought, this guy was not into home restoration. That was a ten thousand dollar suit, and a half-million-dollar car at the end of the walk.

"Xavier Faulkner?" The man's voice was cool and unaccented.

"Yes," he said cautiously, sliding his hand up toward the alarm pad on the doorframe.

"Your sister is Tamara Faulkner? Her health has been... precarious."

"Yes." His heart sped up. Tam was still asleep upstairs, after a night spent patrolling the house with him, watching for a blue light that never appeared. He suddenly wished she was awake and behind him. Perhaps with her gun. Of course, this might be an insurance salesman, or local businessman, or even some kind of garden-variety con man. It didn't have to be their target.

"I have an item of business I wish to discuss with you, Mr. Faulkner. An acquisition, shall we say?"

"I'm in the market for a lot of things," he said carefully. His cell-com could be set to record or transmit, but he'd had no warning this was coming. He had a feeling that any command, even subvocalized, or any gesture toward his ear, would be taken very wrong. The man might look calm and unruffled, but his eyes were cold as steel.

"I believe you will be interested in these." The man handed him two sheets of lightweight old-fashioned paper.

Xavier looked at them. He wasn't an expert at reading gene-scans, but he knew the basics. The banding and codes on the charts marked the genetic material that made one individual different from another. Or similar. This was the histocompatibility marker scan for Tam, if the name on it could be trusted. And the second page with the name carefully cut away, was another chart. Someone whose chart superficially looked a whole lot more like Tam's than Xavier's own did.

"Hold them up to the light," the man said. He took the charts out of Xavier's hand, stacked the pages, and handed them back.

Xavier took them slowly. They hadn't planned for this kind of face-to-face contact. The FBI had thought the chance of the organ-leggers reaching out to him was minimal, even with the perfect profile and all the backing evidence in place. And if he was contacted, they'd expected a slow and anonymous approach. Not some guy pulling up in a dark limo—Xavier glanced toward the driveway where the car waited—and just making him an offer.

"Hold them up superimposed," the man repeated.

Holy, holy crud. This was really it. Xavier had always thought of himself as a Frodo. He was mostly a homebody not a hero, although willing to step up when duty called. Or maybe a Samwise, even, backing up his sister when she did the hard parts. He'd had a few nicely vague and heroic dreams of helping to catch the bad guys. They'd never included having the bad guy standing on his front porch. It was embarrassing how his heart rate threatened to top two hundred, just from realizing this sting might actually happen. And involve him, personally.

He did as he was told. As the sunlight shone through the paper, he could see that this anonymous woman, whoever she was, was an almost perfect antigen match for Tam. There were a couple of bands Tam had that this person didn't, but none in the reverse. After long talks with the doctors about why he and the other more distant relatives he'd tracked down were not good matches, Xavier could see how well this donor worked. He didn't have to fake the tremble of his hand, as he passed the papers back.

"Who is she?" he asked, because it would be unnatural not to. And then, as if had just occurred to him, he asked, "And how did you get Tam's chart? Or the, um, donor's?"

The man gave him a steady stare, and pulled an old-style flame lighter out of his pocket. He clicked it, and set fire to one corner of the stacked pages. The flame raced up one edge, and Xavier fought the impulse to snatch the pages back. The man held the burning paper between two fingers until half of the pages were gone; then he walked down the four front steps and set the smoldering fragments on the flagstone walk. They stood silently, Xavier in the doorway, the stranger on the path, watching the flames burn themselves out. When they were done, the stranger put one shiny shoe on the blackened ashes, and gave them a twisting crush, obliterating any remnant.

Then he looked up at Xavier. "One-time offer. Twenty million. No haggling, five mil up front. If you're interested, you can follow me to my car, where we can discuss it. If not, I'll leave now. No hard feelings."

"You'd just leave, after I've seen you? No precautions?" He'd read all the crime-story rules about not leaving witnesses behind. He hoped there was a satellite cam on them right now, but you never knew.

"This isn't my real face." The man smiled thinly. The little wrinkles at the corners of his lips formed neat creases, typical of an expensive syntha-mask and not bare skin. "That car will be gone in an hour. And if you become too troublesome, well, money is a good defense against trouble." The sharp edge to his tone suggested he could buy more than just lawyers.

"So you want me to just get into a car with you? Like that? Just because you know something about my sister?" Xavier tried to look calm despite the pounding of his heart. "I'm not that stupid."

"You've been bumbling around, looking for options for her. This is an offer that only comes once. Your choice." The man turned away.

"Wait!" He hesitated. *What would seem plausible?* "I want to raise the driveway defense rack before I get in any vehicle."

The man said, "This is not a kidnapping. But you'll have to take my word for that. At this point, I've done nothing but burn a piece of paper. Quietly. If you're too scared to go further, say so."

Everyone Xavier's age had vivid memories of the home-jackings that had made a spiked defense grid a standard part of home security. He'd installed a good system for the property perimeter before moving in. But... but if he was too careful, he had no doubt this man would walk away. And Tam would be bitterly disappointed in him.

"All right," he said. "I want to hear more."

The man led the way down the walk and opened the back door of the waiting car. Xavier hesitated another second, staring at the shape of the driver, just visible through heavily smoked glass. Then he slid into the back seat. The other man got in too, sitting opposite him, and pulled the door shut.

The deep hush told him this was a sound-proofed limo. The comfort of the seats was luxurious. He tried not to relax too much into the memory-foam cushions, perching on the front edge and bracing his hands on his knees. "So tell me what you're offering."

"First." The man reached over slowly, and brought out a metal box with a hinged lid. "Please place your cell-com in here."

Reluctantly, Xavier unhooked it from his ear and laid it in the box. It wasn't like his tracker implant wouldn't still let Tam find him, anywhere. But the cell-com was such an ingrained part of his life that he felt naked without it.

The man closed the lid. "Just a precaution. Thank you. And one more precaution. I'm going to scan you for recording devices. I'm sure you understand."

Xavier nodded, but said, "What about you? What if you're recording this, and are planning to blackmail me later?"

"You'll be fully able to claim entrapment." The man pulled a slim wand out of a pocket in the armrest and ran it around and over Xavier. "If you're clean, I'll make the offer. You just say yes. Or no."

"Am I still able to say no?"

"Of course. No evidence, no risk. Yet." The man set the wand aside. "If we do business, there will come a point, though, where having second thoughts could be *quite* dangerous to your health. And your sister's."

Xavier tried to look smooth and calm, and not gulp as he swallowed the spit pooling in his mouth. He was such a ween. He tried to channel Frodo. "Go on."

The man settled back in his seat, and opened a mini-bar beside him. "Drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Pity. You can't find scotch like this anymore." He shut the door without taking any thought. "So we both know the score. Your sister ate some of the snack-cakes contaminated with mutant pipevine. Like all the other unfortunates who got that bad batch, her kidneys shut down. Permanent, irreversible damage."

"I'm well aware." He heard his own tone, dry as dust now, no weakness. Good. He pushed back memories of those days.

"She gets dialysis, and you're able to afford the best. She could live a full lifetime that way. Hooked up to the machine for an hour every evening, getting treated. Many of the poorest victims would envy her."

"Get to the point." He knew this. In those early days, he'd watched the pictures on the link-news of the families, thousands of them, waiting like him to

see if their loved ones would survive, wondering how life would go on. He'd anonymously donated ten traveling dialysis units for the local community health services in their hometown. It had wiped out one investment account, but he'd needed to do something.

"We all know that this isn't the end, though. Mutant pipevine isn't just toxic, it causes cancer. Sooner, rather than later. What's the average time from exposure to renal epithelio-sarcoma? I'm sure you looked into it."

He licked his dry lips. "Nine years." The words echoed through him. *Nine years.*

"Uh huh. Not long."

Xavier wanted to punch the complacent look off the guy's blandly-masked face, but he clenched his fingers on his knees and waited.

"Now, your sister will rise to the top of the transplant list one day. Maybe even before the nine years are up. Your resources will have kept her in good health. She'll get a new kidney. One new kidney, because that list is long and that's all you really need. Except when the other is a ticking time bomb."

"She can have the second one removed, once the transplant is done and healed." He'd looked into it. He really had.

"She can. But if she rejects the new one, what then? Autoimmune diseases crop up faster than the drugs to suppress them these days. If her new one isn't a perfect match, if it's only as good as the eighty percent minimum? Will you take that risk?"

Xavier only realized how hard he was shaking his head when the world got blurry. He stopped with an effort. Crud, he would make a horrible secret agent. Although to be fair, he assumed their cases usually weren't this personal. "We'll do what has to be done." Then, because Tam would probably hit him otherwise, he also added, "It will be totally her choice."

"Or there's an alternative."

"Go on."

"What if she could have two kidneys, perfectly matched, right now? What if we could remove both the rejection and the cancer risk, before it arises? Some of the victims are gone as fast as two years. It's an ugly cancer when it happens. What if we can reduce her risk to near-zero?"

"I'm told organ cloning may be a reality within the next ten years."

The man said flatly, "Which is more than nine years, and purely speculative. This is a one-time limited offer."

"Removing two kidneys from a donor is..." He didn't want to say murder. Didn't even want to express the concept around this man. "Certain death. I can't condone that."

"This donor is already brain-dead, I assure you. She meets all the LifePoints criteria for a full donation with euthanasia. I would never, never suggest otherwise." He managed to look shocked and sanctimonious, despite the face-smoothing effect of the mask. Or maybe aided by it. "All I am offering is a *redistribution*. Without my intervention, this young woman's organs will be distributed down the list, to the highest ranked recipients who meet the minimum eighty percent match. Your sister is nowhere near the top of that list."

"But you can fix that."

"Let's say, I have early access, for that very reasonable fee I mentioned. Really, it's a public service. With a match that perfect, your sister won't need all the expensive anti-rejection drugs and testing. I'm saving public money by spending private money. The Health Services should thank me."

Xavier could tell the man thought this was funny. Maybe after he got out of the trap of the back of this limo, it would be. "My sister was a cop." He figured it was best to say that himself. They hadn't tried to hide it—that would have been futile. "Why would you offer her this chance?"

"Well, first because the perfect donor just *happened* to be available. And because I checked, and your sister isn't some holier-than-thou, lilywhite public servant. For the last seven years, in Juvenile Crimes, she bent a hell of a lot of rules. There's even a misdemeanor or two in there, if you know how to look. She was all about the individual over the system. Maybe it's time for her to be that individual who benefits, if she wants to."

"I didn't know..." He remembered that her background had received a little minor adjustment from the FBI. Rule bending for the kids was all Tam, breaking the law wasn't. It probably wouldn't hurt for him to have looked surprised. There was no doubt a reason he hadn't been told the details. His lack of a poker face, maybe.

"One hour."

"What?"

The man held out a slip of paper. "Within one hour, you can wire five million to that offshore account. Your money will immediately be forwarded to another account, of course. When that has cleared, I will be notified that down-payment has been made, and the next phase will begin. If you miss that window, I will assume my offer has been declined."

"You want me to just hand you five million dollars? Like that?"

"It's a seller's market. There may be billions of people on this planet, but there are very, very few who will be perfect matches. Even if you had access to the gene scan registries for the whole world, what are the chances of finding another match this good? And then finding that donor in a, shall we say, plausible condition?" He shook his head sadly.

"But..."

The man opened the box, handed him his cell-com, reached and touched the button for the door, which swung open silently. "We're done. One hour."

"There are a hundred details!"

"All of which wait on your answer." The man gestured out the door.

Reluctantly, Xavier slid out of the car and stood. Without another word, the door shut in his face. The car pulled away, its electric engine almost flawlessly silent. Gravel crunched under the tires, as it gathered speed down the drive, not hesitating as it crossed the retracted rack at the perimeter.

He stood staring, until it rounded the bend toward the road, and disappeared behind the lilac hedge that screened the fence.

Eventually he turned back to the house, climbed the steps, and almost ran into Tam as he went inside. She stood against the doorframe, her hand on the alarm panel, an angled mirror letting her see out the peephole viewer.

"What the crud?" He tripped on the doorsill, stepping back.

She took her hand off the alarm to grab his elbow. "Your com went blank. Your tracker said you were still here. I looked out and saw that limo, sitting there."

"Yeah. We got an *interesting offer*."

Her eyes widened for a second, then she said, "That can wait until I'm done harassing you for getting into a strange car without telling me."

"No, it really can't." He pushed her toward the kitchen, closing the door behind him. "You need to listen."

As they went down the hall he recapped the conversation in the limo. He told the story straight. For all he knew, the man had planted a bug on him, and was now sitting half a mile away listening in.

They'd discussed how to play this, and the conversation went as planned. He paced the kitchen, as they debated. Tam let herself be persuaded slowly, while she sent a message out with silent touches on the wired FBI com he'd thought they might never use. Xavier used the little tidbit about her supposed lawbreaking as a wedge to help convince her. He hoped there were no hidden cameras pointed through those historically-authentic, clear-glass windows to catch the smug grin she gave, when he accused her of already being on the wrong side of the law.

"So we're agreed?" he said at last. "Five million is a lot, but it won't bankrupt me by any means. It's worth that much to hear the rest of the story?" He tapped his cell-com for the time. "We only have ten more minutes."

Tam huffed theatrically, then said, "Yeah. Let's play along for now."

As Xavier pulled his tablet toward him, and set the slip of paper beside it, he heard Tam take a sharp breath. When he looked up, Ro was standing against the kitchen wall. "Crud!" He hovered between tablet and Ro.

"You get that," Tam snapped, surreptitiously passing him the little data link. "I'll get Ro." She hurried for the range-finder, set ready and fully charged on the counter.

Xavier wanted to go to Ro and ask if he was okay. He wanted to make sure the damned laser worked again. But he had nine minutes to send the FBI the bank account number and then transfer five million dollars. His own bank security measures would take most of that. He cursed under his breath, took time for a glance up and saw Ro wince as Tam put the finder on his leg.

Ro said, "Yes. Good. Is it charged?"

"Full battery and the charger is handy. You caught us busy though."

"Can we... let me try backing into the hall, like last time."

Xavier wrenched his attention down to his tablet. He entered codes, worked his way through the system. He forced himself to ignore the murmurs as Tam and Ro apparently managed to maneuver into the hallway and away from the kitchen. He entered his retina-scan and fingerprints and passcodes. *There. And that one.* He hesitated for a moment with his finger over the screen. But really, it was just money. One last click sent five million winging on its way,

somewhere. He checked and confirmed that the transaction time was still three minutes in the clear. *Done.*

Turning off the tablet, he hurried into the hall. Tam was herding Ro, a step at a time, further from the kitchen, keeping him pinned by the beam.

“Yes,” Ro said to Tam. “It’s working. Holy crud, it’s really working.”

“Another step.” They did a slow slide to the left.

Xavier asked. “What are we doing? Does that hurt, Ro?”

He looked over, eyes wide and bright. “Who the fuck cares? It’s working. I’m out of the blue, and I’m still here.”

Xavier suddenly remembered he might be bugged, and if so, he was probably not giving limo-guy the most sane appearance. He laid a finger behind his ear and said loudly to Tam, “I’m kind of sweaty. I think I’ll go have a shower, and then we’ll talk more about this situation.”

Ro stared at him, but Tam pressed a finger to her lips and nodded, “Sure. Go do that. We’ll talk after.”

He climbed the stairs two at a time, cursing in his head. He wanted to be down there. The FBI had given them a couple of scanners, to check for surveillance. He ducked into Tam’s room, and found one, running it from his feet up his body. It stayed green until he got to his chin, at which point the light flickered to red. *Double crud.* A little checking told him that his toad-fucking *cell-com* was bugged. He hesitated, heading for the bathroom while he thought about it. He turned on the shower, then grinned, undressed loudly and stepped in without taking the cell-com from behind his ear.

It was supposed to be water-proof, but he’d cracked the casing a couple of weeks ago, and not replaced it. For a bonus he stuck a finger in his ear and held it under the flow, until the com crackled and went dead. *Hah.* Just in case the bug was made of sterner stuff, he loudly cursed his stupidity in ruining it as he took off the dead cell-com, and dropped it in the trash. And muffled it with a giant wad of tissues.

He left all his clothes on the floor too, and hurried to his room. A pair of sweatpants was the fastest option, and then he hurried back downstairs. To his shock, the hallway was empty.

Before he could panic, he heard faint voices from behind the cellar door. He opened it, and looked down. At the foot of the stairs, Tam and Ro faced each

other, wearing similar looks of satisfaction. Xavier closed the door behind him, and headed down to join them.

“Hey guys, why are we in the basement?”

Ro said, “I don’t know why this range-finder even works, but we thought if I got away from any of the places I’ve been in the blue, somewhere without outside light or windows, then maybe I can stay here. So far it’s working.”

“Oh. Wasn’t that taking a chance of losing you?”

“We did it inch by inch,” Tam said. “And now we have enough space to actually sit and talk. How about you? Anything?”

He nodded, but said, “Tell you later.” Not that it wasn’t relevant, but the bug had been pretty much what he expected. Ro was definitely *unexpected*.

Ro said, “I don’t think I’m dead.”

Xavier stared at him. “You’re not?”

“I think I’m spirit-walking.”

Tam said, “Like, astral projection or something?”

“Something like that. Is that any crazier than being a ghost?”

Xavier blinked. “I guess not.” Something warmed inside him at the thought. It really wasn’t any less likely, was it? Or any more likely, but he pushed that thought away. Either he and Tam were sharing neighboring straight-jackets, or something paranormal was going on, and he’d rather have Ro as a live spirit than dead ghost. “If you’re not dead, where are you? Your physical self, I mean?”

“I’m not sure.” Ro looked uncomfortable. “A hospital, I think. Maybe a mental hospital. A few times, I thought I was in bed somewhere. Listening to, um, orderlies. Maybe a doctor once. It’s a bit vague.”

“Can you remember anything else about yourself? Maybe I can do some research.”

“Hell, yeah!” Ro took an eager step toward him. “That’s the thing. I *do* remember now, most of it anyway. Who I am, all of that.”

Tam said, “Your full name?”

“Roman Michael Janz. I’m thirty-eight, born November second, two thousand two. I’m an associate professor in biology, specialty in botany, for

Saint Torvenas College. I also have a five-year travel grant from Kilon Pharmaceuticals to collect plant specimens for research.”

“Wow.” Xavier blinked. “Okay. Ro. Or do you prefer Roman?”

“No one calls me Ro. Although you could.”

“Roman.” He adjusted his perceptions, trying not to get too distracted by the comforting thought that his Ro wasn’t a ghost. Well, probably not a ghost. And not *his* anything, either—all that research, trying to find Ro, had somehow made him possessive. But Ro was alive, somewhere. That had to be good. That was *really* good. “So do you know what happened to you?”

“Not really.” Roman frowned. “The last thing I remember, it was the end of winter term. I think. I was walking across campus to the shuttle, and someone called my name. I turned, and a bug stung me on the back of the neck. I think. And then, I’m not sure. I remember a fight, but it doesn’t seem real. A dream maybe. A nightmare. Maybe I had an allergic reaction and went into shock?”

Tam said, “I bet Xavier can find out. He can do a hospital search for you. He’s like a genius, a Hawking-hacker with a touchpad.”

Xavier said quickly, “She’s exaggerating. But I can look.”

Roman said, “Um. Maybe carefully? Because I just, I don’t know, I feel like there’s something off. Something really wrong, not just me being sick. When I’m there, in that hospital, it seems like a bad place.”

Tam said, “I don’t get it.”

“I’m not explaining it well. It’s just a feeling. It’s not safe there. Like, I don’t want anyone to know I’m out here walking around instead of back there, sleeping. I don’t want anyone to see you online looking for me.”

“I always have good computer security,” Xavier reassured him. “It’s my profession—the way I made my money—selling and testing security systems. Let me get my tablet; it’s better than the house system.”

Roman shifted from one foot to the other, biting his lip. Xavier hesitated. “Or is there something more urgent. Does it hurt standing like that? What can we do?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, it’s not comfortable.” Roman looked down, and eased his leg sideways just enough to shift the laser an inch. “But... damn. Crap.” He looked up again and his eyes were haunted. “I will do anything, *anything*, not to be jerked back into the grey at someone else’s whim. Ever again.”

"We'll help. But you can't stand here forever."

"I don't even know why this is working. And I'm so fucking scared it'll stop. I was a kid in a rough part of Chicago, I was a soldier in Uganda in some of the worst fighting, and I don't think I've ever been as scared as when the laser went off last time, and I felt myself sucked away." His voice rose. "It's *nothingness* in there, I mean, not life, not death, just waiting. I can feel my sanity shredding away in that place."

"Like sensory deprivation?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Roman frowned. "I wonder if the real me is being put into sense-dep. It makes no sense though. That's a torture technique, and I have nothing anyone would want."

"We'll help," Xavier promised. He started to touch his cell-com, then remembered what he'd done with it. Crap. "Tam? Maybe you could call a local hardware store. Order three more range-finders like this, same model if possible. And have them delivered?"

"Good thought." She clicked her com, and placed the order.

Roman said, "I'll pay you back."

"Not a problem."

"So, is it okay if I ask who you are? Where we are?" Roman flicked an uneasy glance at the laser Tam still held, then looked back at Xavier.

He realized that they held the key to Roman's life right now. It made him a little ill, to think that they could, with one touch of a button, condemn this vibrant man to a torture of sorts. But he couldn't think of a way around that. Maybe stability would help, though. He said, "How about if you sit, and we can set the laser on the floor. Then you can have more control over where you take the beam."

"Good idea," Tam said. "Trying to hold it still is getting annoying."

"Are you tired?" he asked Roman, as they managed a careful dance to get everyone safely seated. "Can you get tired?"

"I don't know." Roman's laugh was almost genuine. "I assume that about twenty hours from now, when I still don't dare fall asleep, we'll find out. If it's okay for me to stay that long?"

"Of course you can."

Roman folded his legs, glanced down, then shifted over carefully and raised one knee. "Sorry. I don't mean to flash you. I don't know how to fix the no-clothes problem."

Xavier didn't like the careful deference in Roman's voice. "It's not a problem from where I look at it. *Definitely* not a problem." He was relieved when Roman laughed, instead of getting angry.

"For me either," Tam said brightly.

Roman laughed again. "Thanks. So. Um. Who are you two, beyond just your names?"

Xavier wasn't sure where to start, but Tam jumped in. "He's the nerdy but kind-hearted millionaire, and I'm his damsel-in-distress sister."

"I'm not kind-hearted," Xavier protested. "And since when have you been a damsel?"

"Shut up and let me tell this."

Xavier sat and listened as Tam and Roman talked. Tam didn't reveal anything that wasn't in their cover story, but she made it a good tale. Roman mostly nodded. Xavier watched and wondered. Tam was animated, interested, better than she'd been in a month as she spun their story, her hands waving and her curly red hair bouncing with each vigorous gesture. But he thought Roman's eyes turned his way more than hers.

Maybe. He reminded himself that Roman was a ghost, or at least, not really present. *You've gone far too long without a fuck when you're crushing on a naked ghost, just because he's in the same room.*

Although to be fair, Roman was pretty much his type. Tall, lean, fit, and he must be smart, given his job. *And brave.* He added that, because there Roman sat, laughing at one of Tam's jokes, with a laser burning on his leg, one click away from oblivion.

Xavier broke in to say, "Tam, you want to check on that hardware order?"

She looked irritated at the interruption, but said, "Sure. In fact, I'll go up and get your tablet, and some bottled water. You want one? Roman?"

"I doubt I can touch it," Roman said.

"Hell. Right. I forgot. You seem so real, sitting there."

As Tam went up the stairs, Roman said quietly, "I *am* real."

"She didn't mean it like that."

"I know. But this is almost as crazy to me as it is to you. What if I'm actually in a coma somewhere, dreaming all this?"

"Or I'm dreaming you." Xavier scooted a little closer. "No. That'll just drive us nuts. More nuts. Pick the simplest explanation. You're having an out of body experience that somehow we can share."

"That's simplest?"

"Given that Tam can see you too, yeah."

"How sick is she?" Roman asked softly.

"She's fine, right now. In treatment, but fine. There's some long-term risk. Um." He wasn't going to give the cancer more power by even talking about it. "She'll be okay."

"So you're both retired. And restoring the house." Roman dropped his gaze, moving his leg a fraction back and forth, watching the red dot slide around on his thigh. "If you have some spare time, is there a way I can persuade you to try to find me?"

"Your body, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Of course!" He reached out to touch Roman without thinking, and his fingertips passed into the space occupied by Roman's arm. He jerked his hand back. His fingertips had felt something, yielding, insubstantial but not just thin air. They tingled oddly. Unless he was imagining things. "Crap. Sorry!"

"Are you okay?" Roman asked urgently.

He flexed his fingers, looked at them, carefully rubbed the tips against his sweatpants. If they'd been numb, it was wearing off already. "Fine, I think. You?"

"I'm still here. That's all that matters."

"So, I can't really touch you. I guess that's good to know."

"And that it won't kill you if you try. Also good."

They looked at each other. There was a moment of silence. Xavier felt his breath speed up, as he forcibly kept his eyes focused on Roman's face. He was glad he was clothed, so that sudden hot flash of awareness wouldn't show.

But maybe he didn't hide it that well, because Roman said, "Just for... if I ever get back to flesh and blood... Are you bi or gay? Not that it matters, but I just wondered."

"Gay. Well, K-five maybe, not pure six. If a young Michelle Pfeiffer in her classic Catwoman suit happened to want to blow me, I wouldn't say no, but most women don't do much for me."

"Gay, definitely," Roman said. "A six. So they do less than that for me."

Xavier lost the thread of the conversation, caught in the realization that he was face to face with a gorgeous, naked gay man whom he liked, for the first time in far too long. Although no. Gay *ghost*. Or whatever spirit walkers were. He really needed to remember that.

"And your sister?"

"Tam's a three. I've never been able to figure out why she dates who she does, but gender's never been an issue. I'm sure she thinks you're worth a second look."

Roman dropped his gaze, looking almost shy. In a softer voice, he asked, "Do you?"

"Are you kidding? I've been watching your naked ass walking away for days. I'm well past second looks."

Roman flushed. "Oh. Right."

Change the subject. "Won't someone have missed you by now, back home? I'd expect a missing person report to have been filed. No?"

"Maybe not. I live alone. If it really was the end of term, well, I was all set to take a sabbatical for spring term. I have—had—a permit for a research trip to Brazil, and a plane ticket waiting. People at Saint Torvenas would assume I went off as planned. People in Brazil, well, they might curse unreliable Americans when I didn't arrive, might even send me a few messages. But none of them would care enough to come looking for me."

"Do you have a tracker implant?"

"No." Roman looked embarrassed. "When I got out of the service I did, of course. But there was this time when I, um, had this idea that they were following me. Waiting to draft me again. It was crazy, but when I got the tracker removed, the nightmares stopped."

"Whatever works." He'd seen net-vids of the war, and the things the rebels had done. He'd seen the vicious fighting, and the poisoning of water-sources, ending in a scorched-earth nightmare of death. He'd seen the hollow eyes of returning soldiers. Taking out a tracker was probably one of the saner things some of the veterans had done.

Roman gritted his teeth. "But if I'd just been man enough to wait it out, let the nightmares fade without pulling the stupid device, it would be simple to find me—the physical me—now."

"You don't know that." He leaned toward Roman, speaking earnestly. "After all, they're useful, but not foolproof."

"They weren't proof for this fool."

"Don't. You're not a fool. And we will find you."

"And then what?" Roman rubbed his hand over his face. "Don't answer that. We can't know yet. I should just be grateful someone is actually talking to me. I *am* grateful."

"But you can't live in our basement forever. It's natural to worry about what comes next."

Tam came back down the stairs with a box in her hands, which she set on the floor. "Your tablet." She passed it to Xavier. "My water." She set it down near the wall. "A pillow, because your bony ass may like two-century-old concrete, but mine doesn't. Three range-finders, because that hardware store seriously wants to please a good customer. Their delivery guy probably broke a speed limit getting here." She placed them side by side on the floor. "And this." She held up one of the bug-detectors. "Because paranoia isn't just for Sundays, it's a way of life."

Roman watched her as she circled the room and then checked the new devices over. The light stayed green. When she was done, he asked cautiously, "Um, what that looks like—are you seriously checking for a bug?"

Tam shrugged nonchalantly. "He's rich. I'm a cop. Paranoia comes with the territory."

"Oh." Xavier thought Roman didn't look convinced, but he let it drop, and said, "Can we look me up on the Net now? See if there's a clue?"

"Sure." Xavier scooted over so Roman could see the tablet, since the angle was crap for the heads-up projection. "Tam, you want to set up at least one more laser, just in case?"

She got one out, connected it to a charger, and turned it on. She drifted the target dot around on the floor, sliding it toward Roman. "So, big boy, tell me where you want it."

Roman hesitated, then tapped his other leg. "Other side, maybe. Then if I move away from one, I move into the other."

"Got it."

Xavier watched them line the beam up. Roman flinched visibly as the new laser touched him.

Tam said, "Sorry."

"No, it's good. It's fine." Roman settled into it. "It does make me feel like a bug pinned to a board, but it's good. It's grounding."

Xavier tapped his tablet and activated his security and anonymity to online search levels. "So... Professor Roman Janz of Saint Torvenas College, and Cincinnati, Ohio."

"My fair city. Right."

There was quite a lot to find, but most of it was old history. Papers, awards, classes taught—clearly Roman was good at his job. A couple of biomedical shared patents. A link to his military service that Xavier didn't follow.

"That?" Roman pointed at a link about the college faculty for the current spring term.

"Sure." Xavier sent an info-bot out to harvest what it could. But all they could find was that Roman was listed as on-sabbatical, and unavailable. He checked the local news for a few days on either side of end-of-term, but there were no police reports of a medical emergency, and no missing person notices. Roman's passwords got him into the college system far enough to make sure that grades had been posted for the classes he'd taught.

"Well, that gives us a boundary," Xavier said. "Somewhere between March twentieth when the last grades went up, and March twenty-second when you should have left the country on that plane, you went missing."

"What date is it again?"

He couldn't refuse to answer. "April eleventh."

"Almost three weeks. And no one's noticed," Roman said. "What does that say for my life?"

"That you're self-sufficient? And a bit of a loner?" Xavier shrugged. "Takes one to know one. Seriously, if Tam wasn't around I don't think I'd be that different."

Tam said, "And don't think he's kidding. In all the time we've been here, with Lexington, the gay Mecca of the region, just an hour away, I haven't been able to drag him there."

"I'm glad," Roman said, then flushed. "I mean, it's nice to not be the only guy who isn't burning up the club scene."

"I hate clubs," Xavier said. "Meat markets, most of them."

Tam stood. "Well, I'm going to leave you guys to bond over search bots and Tri-Power superhero vids, while I go get my nails done."

"You *what*?" Xavier asked.

She wiggled her fingers at him. "Don't you think I need to check in with my manicurist?"

He stared at her hand, trying to remember the last time he saw her actually wear polish, then realized what she was saying. Their FBI contact liked physical meet-ups, in populated venues like malls. "Oh. Right. Go for it."

"Call if you need me." She headed up the stairs. Xavier saw that she had a bounce in her step, and a little smile on her face. Clearly, this whole messy situation was working for Tam. Lucky her.

He turned back to Roman. "I don't *really* watch Tri-Power."

"No?" Roman tilted his head, one corner of his mouth curled up. "I do."

"Well, occasionally."

"So what does it say when a cop is more interested in getting her nails done than in a missing man whose disembodied ghost is haunting her cellar?"

"Um."

"Don't worry. I can tell you all have something else going on. I don't mind playing second fiddle."

"Not second. First, really. Well, co-first. It's complicated."

Roman had a great smile. "I bet. And this is simple?" He gestured at his naked form, which had sunk an inch into the floor while he wasn't paying attention, and at the two laser devices pinning him in place.

“Completely,” Xavier said, keeping a straight face. “So. Now what?”

“You got any of the new Tri-Power accessed?” Roman shifted position, spreading his legs unconsciously in a way that was rather distracting. “I’m at a loss for what else to do. I mean, if you have ideas, say so. If I can give you more access codes, anything that might help, I will. But...” He bit his lip.

Xavier pulled his attention from that lip up to Roman’s shadowed eyes. “But?”

“More than anything, I just want to talk to someone. Casually. While I do something normal. And it’s clearly been weeks since I saw Silverman do one of his trademark bad guy takedowns.”

“I don’t have the virtual reality headsets handy. I hate to leave you to get them.”

“No!” Roman shot out a hand, but stopped just short of touching Xavier. “I don’t need VR. Flat video is fine.”

“I’ll keep our searches running in the background. Nationwide, for hospitals and institutions. It’ll take a while, to get into patient rosters without triggering privacy alarms. We might as well enjoy the wait.”

“You can do that? I thought they upgraded medical security laws.”

“Sure. But that’ll hardly stop me.” Xavier let himself grin wickedly. “If we were on Tri-Power, I’d be the grey-hat hacker that Silverman agonizes over arresting.”

“I always did like a guy with brains.”

They each caught a breath, looking at each other. A little flush of color marked Roman’s cheekbones. Without comment, Xavier tilted his tablet a bit closer, and went looking for the best of Silverman.

Chapter 5

Roman glanced across the basement room. He had no real sense of time, but he knew he'd been down here for hours. Tam had come back from her mysterious errand. Xavier had taken a couple of bathroom breaks. The solid-flesh members of their little secret club had eaten pizza.

Roman had found that he could smell it, and even want it, but with a little twist of his stomach that said actually eating might be a bad idea. Anyway, when Tam set a bit on a plate in front of him, he could lick at it until his tongue merged with the cheese, but there was no flavor and only an odd sense of yielding pressure. It had crept him out enough to make him gag, but Xavier just pulled the plate away calmly, like the idea of ghost puke didn't revolt him.

And then Xavier had started a conversation about where spirit-walking puke would go, and whether it would be visible, that had ended with Roman spitting on an empty plate, just to see. They'd all watched as his spit thinned in the air and was gone before reaching the surface. The shudders that traveled up and down his spine were a nice complement to the nausea.

He was trying damned hard to seem cool and confident, and wanting, more with every minute, to curl up and sob. Preferably against a nice male chest, although there didn't seem to be one he could actually touch. Not to mention how unattractive emotional breakdowns were.

Xavier had gone upstairs a minute ago, leaving his sister as the live person in charge. Tam sat on her cushion, her attention fixed on him speculatively. He fought the impulse to hide further behind his raised knee. It was stupid to keep coming up against the fact that he was naked. There were plenty of nudie types out there who walked around their homes with no clothes full-time. Maybe it was because it wasn't a choice, that it made him so uncomfortable. He'd tried to picture clothes, zen himself into clothes, but he hadn't even managed a pair of shorts. He slid his knee over more.

Tam smiled, although not unkindly. "Don't worry. I'm not interested in a guy who's not interested in me."

He tried to relax. His thighs ached, down to the bone, from the lasers. It didn't seem to get worse, but it wasn't getting any better either. "Am I messing up whatever it is you two have going on?"

"No. You're making life more interesting while we sit around watching paint dry. Which is good, up to a point."

"What point?"

"The one where Xavier gets attached." She sighed. "It might work out okay. Maybe. And I'm not the kind of sister who interferes with her brother's life."

He snorted involuntarily. Even a few hours around Tam had pretty much convinced him she was exactly that kind of sister.

"Be quiet, you." She flashed him a grin. "Okay, I feel a bit responsible. He's my little brother. And for all his brains, he's made some bad choices about men. He's also like a white knight. Well, maybe a slightly grey knight, but once he tries to help somebody, he's in all the way. He'll shred himself trying to help a friend. So you understand why I'm worried about him getting attached to someone who is only half here, and who might be..." He could almost hear the fact that she discarded both "*crazy*" and "*dying*" before going for, "...in deep trouble in his physical life."

"I do understand. I just have so fucking few choices here. I can't go anywhere else. I've never managed to speak to anyone but you two. It's this, or the dark." He swallowed back bile, dreading the idea of returning to his body, paralyzed, blind, listening to things that whispered in his brain with foul meaning.

"Yeah, just, I don't know. Try not to be so perfect, huh?"

"Perfect?"

"The last guy willing to sit around watching superheroes with him was probably when he was fourteen."

"She lies," Xavier said from the top of the stair. "Tam, for all you know I've been with a dozen guys who love The Protectors, and Tri-Power. Maybe I even had a guy who was into Silverman and Masque role-play."

"Role-play?" Roman couldn't help smiling. He'd never come close to going there; still he couldn't help teasing, "I'd be Masque."

Xavier said, "I'm Masque," at the same time, and then smiled back.

"Uh huh." Tam folded her arms. "Not buying it, brother. You told me about enough of your guys to know you weren't dating superheroes."

"Well, in my young and stupid days I did tend to go for the strong silent type."

“And recently?”

“Not so much.” Xavier shrugged. “How the hell did we get onto the subject of my sex life? Roman, I checked the progress of my searches. You’re not listed in any hospital in the continental US. These days, with ninety percent of the population gene scanned, there are almost no John Does, and the few there are, are all older.”

“My gene scan was done when I was in the military anyway, so I’d be on file.”

“So unless someone screwed up or misregistered you on purpose, you’re not in any of those places. The quasi-medical facilities are harder. There’s a ton of rehab and assisted living and other institutions. And some of them keep pretty crappy records.”

“I don’t think I’m in a big, professional place.” Roman closed his eyes to remember what he’d heard, then opened them fast. Dark was not good. Dark was not helpful. “I don’t recall hearing many hospital sounds, just one or two attendants, a word or two of conversation.”

“Well, I’m scouring the smaller ones too. I started locally, on the theory that you’re less likely to spirit-walk across the continent. Nothing so far, though.”

Roman tried to hide his disappointment. Probably not very successfully, since Xavier looked sympathetic. “So we should talk strategy,” Roman said, trying to channel the Staff Sergeant he had been at the end of his tour. “Worst case scenario, if you can’t find any record of where I am, what then?”

There was an uncomfortable silence, as they all thought about it.

“Let’s not all jump in at once,” Tam muttered.

“You can simply stay here,” Xavier said.

“Pinned in place inside a cellar forever?”

“Well, maybe not. The lasers are movable. Tam managed to bring you down here. So if one of us had the device, we could walk with you, go places. Maybe even outside.”

It sounded like being walked on a leash. His instinctive, “Hell, no!” was perhaps a bit forceful. Xavier recoiled. “Sorry. I know you meant well, and really, maybe, as a last resort...” He let his voice trail off. “I guess it’d be like being paralyzed, sort of. Experiencing a very filtered kind of life. Never touching anything. Never eating, drinking.” A dry-dust life, although if Xavier

was there, that would be like a little water in the desert. Or maybe like a mirage, untouchable.

"It won't come to that," Xavier said. "I'm damned good with searches. I'll find you. I promise."

"Don't promise," he said fast and hard. "Or, just promise to try. I've seen how useless good intentions can be, if the fates aren't with you." He slid his hand into one of the red-light beams, feeling the bite of the laser shift from his thigh to his palm. He winced, thought about aiming it at his head. Maybe later. "I'm a scientist. You're an analytical type. There must be something, some kind of experiment to try. Something that might help."

"I'm running a search on spirit-walking and finding your way back from it. Some of the stuff is pretty woo-woo crazy though."

"Like?"

"Well, some of the most mundane say your body's physical needs will pull you back."

"They haven't so far." Although he'd never stayed away so long, and it was still possible.

"You're supposed to have a silver cord between your astral and physical selves, leading back to your body. Lots of people say you find that and follow it home."

Roman looked himself over, trying to take it seriously. Because even if it sounded like total marshmallow fluff, he was hardly one to talk about rationality at the moment. Unfortunately, he didn't seem to have some silver cord waiting to be found. "I don't see one. I've never seen one."

"There are supposedly spirit helpers on the astral plane you could petition. Although also evil spirits, so making a big noise out there is frowned upon."

"I never saw a trace of anyone but me." He wanted to sound amused, but perhaps it wasn't a success.

Xavier said quickly, "Or mirrors. There was a bunch of stuff about mirrors, but one place said seeing yourself in a mirror will suck you back to your physical self."

"At this point, I'm about ready to pray to my left toe, rub two goats together, and try to create a fire if it would point us in some general direction."

Tam said, "I'll get a mirror. Hang on."

But when she brought one down and held it up for him, no matter what his angle, he couldn't see himself in it. He ducked his head lower, twisted it sideways. "Do you see me? Is my reflection there for you?"

Xavier crowded closer and he and Tam tilted the mirror, angling it around, as Roman sat very still, fighting back a new panic. Xavier's reflected face was clear, looking drawn and anxious, already so familiar. His own was nowhere to be seen.

"Nope," Xavier said. "Let me try my tablet cam."

It turned out he was invisible to cameras too. "Maybe you're a vampire," Tam suggested.

"Not funny!" He turned to her and the left-side laser slid over his thigh to touch his groin. He yelped and jumped, almost losing contact, then froze, trembling. "Fuck. Crud. Hell." His whole body was shaky and aching, even though until this moment he hadn't felt the strain of sitting still.

"Hey, easy." Xavier kept his voice calm and low. "It's getting late. Tam needs to go up and detox. I'll hang out here for a while. Maybe bring down some blankets and sleep here. Tomorrow's another day, right?"

"Sure," he said, because it would make Xavier look less worried. "It's a plan."

Xavier brought down bedding. Tam went off to bed, with a soft "Goodnight, guys." They watched another two hours of a classic Batman tale, and then Xavier checked his fruitless searches again.

"Nothing." He set the tablet aside. "I'll leave them running." He yawned widely. "Sorry. It's been a long day, but I'll stay up with you a bit longer. Do you feel tired at all?"

Roman tried to feel for that, but he couldn't tell what his body needed. It was too distant. "Not right now."

"Any requests? I've got some classic humor films on here."

"You should sleep. Really. I don't know what you have to do tomorrow, but I'd hate for you to be too tired from babysitting me to manage."

"Hell, in my development days, I stayed up three nights in a row sometimes."

"We'll save that for when something is actually critical, huh?"

“Smart man.” Xavier said, “Let me just get fresh lasers set up.” When that was done, and Roman’s thighs ached from the process, Xavier told the autoswitch to dim the lights to twenty percent. In the resulting gloom, he settled down in his blankets. “I wish...”

“What?”

“Well, everything you do, probably. I wish you were whole, and here.”

“Me too,” he said softly. “Oh, yes, me too.” And in that moment he wasn’t thinking about sex, or even kissing Xavier. He was thinking about pulling Xavier into a hug. He was thinking about having the right to take Xavier’s time and energy and attention, because he would have something to give back. “If wishes were horses.”

“Huh?”

“Something my grandmother used to say. *‘If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.’* She was a realist, very down to earth.” She’d had to be, saddled with a wild young boy, when she’d thought she was past raising children.

“We’ll find a way. Something real. Don’t give up hope.”

“Hope is good,” he temporized. He was trying.

“Hey, you’re not dead, right? It was so fracking painful when I was searching for you as a ghost, thinking you were already past help. Because I may have an ego, but even I can’t fix dead. But you’re not, and that means maybe I can help, and I will. Trust me.”

Roman thought, *I do*, as he watched Xavier gradually sink into sleep. He moved enough to make the lasers slide across his skin, welcoming the pain. It meant he was here, even as the house grew quiet and the touch of the floor against his ass and legs was a nebulous pressure he didn’t want to think about too hard. He didn’t want to sink into the ground. The lasers were sharp and focused, bright and piercing.

But. But. He couldn’t stay here forever. Or technically, maybe he could. But what kind of existence would it be, living in a basement, tethered, with Xavier giving him pity visits? Or maybe marching him around the house on a laser leash. Never touching. Always naked, which made him feel less real. If he was real and had a choice, he might choose to be naked around Xavier. But not always, and definitely not around Tam.

Would he age as his body did? Or would his astral self, whatever the fuck that was, stay unchanged, built only from his memories? How long before he turned bitter and jealous? How long before he just went a different kind of crazy?

He stood, carefully, keeping one laser focused on his leg as he moved. The other beam slipped off him, and he took a breath of mingled relief and anxiety. Nothing else changed. His left leg stopped aching. So he could sit back down and wait through the night. See if he could sleep, although he didn't feel either tired or hungry. Or he could find his damned courage, and choose otherwise.

Last time, when he lost the beam, he'd snapped from the house into the dark. Yeah, it had been scary as fuck. But he'd survived. He hadn't gone crazy. And eventually he'd found his way back here.

And in between, he'd gone back to his body, and heard things. He was pretty sure he'd heard things. His memory of that time had faded strangely. He couldn't remember words now, but he remembered his feeling of uncertainty, of fear, even. If he was going to contribute to his own rescue, he needed to go back there, listening, maybe looking, if he could open his eyes. Anything he could glean might be helpful. And he was *so* not ready to just be the new damsel in distress in this scenario.

Slowly and deliberately, he moved his right leg over, further, further, hesitating as the beam danced on the surface of his skin. Then he took one full step away. And the darkness swallowed him.

Roman tumbled, weightless, sightless, reminded of the old, old vids of the first astronauts discovering free fall. He focused on that image. They'd been excited, gleeful to lose the confines of gravity. He tried to feel the same. Don't fight it. Go with it.

He wasn't as nauseous this time. But the panic, the feeling of being trapped without any restraint, was still bad. He tried to picture his body. Tried to imagine himself, lying flat, his skin touched by movements of air, a sheet, maybe, and some kind of mattress under his back. He imagined smells, the odd antiseptic-and-plastic tang of a hospital. That should be familiar. He'd been in more than one.

Instead of being sucked into his body, he saw a blue light. He had a moment of hesitation. He'd left the house, because it seemed like a dead end. He shouldn't hurry back there. But there was a chance this light led elsewhere, and it was at least something concrete in the vague and formless dark. He reached for it.

As he slid along it, he saw another blue beam nearby. And then another. He debated changing over, but as he concentrated, it seemed to him that the beams were converging, coming together as he moved along. There was the glimmer of a fourth one, off to his left. After a moment's thought, he let go and reached to his left, moving from one anchor to the next. It was more like a cluster than a highway, an array of beams in star shape, all leading toward some central goal.

He followed one at random, slid down it to its vanishing end, and found himself in Xavier's empty kitchen. Huh.

When he turned, the blue doorway was behind him. Instead of clinging to the real world, he stepped back through, and moved sideways in the dark to the next beam. It opened into the familiar living room. The beam next to it reached Xavier's study. He went back out, up and around, and found himself in Tam's room.

She was asleep in her bed. A complex device at her bedside showed a few dim indicator lamps, but she didn't seem to be plugged in anywhere. He moved closer. Her breathing was slow and deep. Lying there sleeping, without the energy she had when awake, she looked thin and pale. The remnants of her health problems had left purple shadows under her eyes, and her cheekbones stood sharp under her thin skin.

He hated to wake her, but if Xavier was still in the basement Roman had no choice. The blue light had never sent him down there.

He said quietly, and then gradually more loudly, "Tam, it's me. Tam, wake up."

Her eyes snapped open, and she rolled out of bed with startling speed, pulling a Taser from under her pillow. For an instant, she aimed it at him, then she relaxed visibly and lowered it. "What are you doing up here? Where's Xavier?"

"I don't know. I came a different way." He hesitated. "Tam, if a laser is a range-finding device then your house is being..."

"Hush!" She held up her hand, and spoke softly but forcefully enough to shut him up. "Come on. Downstairs."

"I can't." He stopped when she held up one of the range-finder devices, with a little smile.

"Don't leave home without it. We got extras." She clicked it on, caught his thigh in the beam without hesitation. "Let's go."

When they reached the ground floor, she led the way immediately to the cellar. The minute they closed the door at the top of the stairs, Xavier woke. He stared up at them. "What happened? Roman, are you all right?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." He glanced back at Tam.

She gestured with her free hand. "Go on down. Sorry for the melodrama, but we've had a problem with bugs."

For a minute, it didn't click. Then he said, "Listening devices?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." He hesitated, then walked over to the laser still running on the floor and stuck his ankle in it. "Ouch. Damn. Okay, I don't know what you two are into but is there a reason someone might have half a dozen lasers aimed at your house? Big ones? Is there a chance we're going to be in the middle of a missile attack?"

Xavier looked startled. "No. I can't imagine it. Why?"

"Because I was out there in the dark, and I saw a blue light like before. And it brought me here to the kitchen, also like before. But then there was another one leading to the living room, and another to your study, and then upstairs. Like someone was aiming to blow your house apart."

Tam suddenly said, "Holy crap. No. Not a missile. Damn."

"Don't be obscure," Xavier snapped. "Share it with our weaker brains."

"The difference between a range-finder and a laser pointer isn't just strength. One is Doppler, in a feedback loop, while the other isn't."

"And you think that matters? Which means what?"

Tam grinned at both of them. "You know what else Doppler laser is used for? Listening devices. Aim one at a window, and you can register the sound vibrations in the room, from as much as half a mile away."

Xavier said, "That's an old technology."

"But it works, especially when a place has regular glass windows and not the multilayer isolated low-E kind. Like this place with its historical authenticity."

"It makes sense."

Roman said, "You think someone is bugging you with laser beams."

“Sure.” Tam spoke faster. “It makes a lot of sense. They probably got the devices in place ahead of time, set up and aimed at all the relevant rooms. That could even have been those single beams you came in on, over the span of several nights. And then we had the, um, contact incident that they are interested in. Now they’re all turned on, listening to see what we say and do about it.”

“Incident.” Roman was getting a little tired of doublespeak.

Xavier held up a finger to hold him off, and said to Tam, “One problem. Eavesdropping laser systems don’t have visible light. If your room glowed blue every time it was turned on, it would hardly be a secret.”

“Maybe that’s because of Roman,” Tam suggested. “Maybe the blue is from him causing, I don’t know, interference or resonance or something. Like, I don’t know, a hologram?”

“We could try that out...”

Roman broke in, “Just stop. Wait. I’m sick of not knowing what the hell you two are talking about.”

“Police business,” Tam said shortly.

“Oh, fuck, no. You’re retired, right? And Xavier never was a cop.” He glanced at Xavier, who looked uncomfortable. There was something fishy in Denmark, for sure. “If there’s something dangerous going on, I want to know.”

Tam tilted her head, eyeing him. “So you can do what, exactly?”

He didn’t know, but blindly following orders had never been his forte, even in the army. “Whatever it takes. I just like to know what I’m letting myself in for.” And what Xavier was facing.

“This isn’t your problem.”

He gritted his teeth. “Yeah, it kind of is, because I’m not getting much choice about being here, am I?”

Xavier said, “Cut it out, both of you. Tam, he just wants to help.”

That was maybe a generous spin to put on his curiosity, but Roman let it ride. Xavier turned to him. “If you had the choice to go elsewhere, would you? If it’s really a surveillance laser, I can get another one delivered here in an hour. Two hours if we don’t want our own surveillance to know about it. I can create a path for you to go, well, somewhere else within half a mile.”

"No!" he said quickly. "No. God, finding two people who can take this in stride is already more miracle than I could expect. With my luck, I'd give the next person a heart attack. And, well, I'm invested I guess. But I feel like I'm missing something vital."

"Like a pulse?" Tam quipped.

Xavier shot her a look. "Oh, that's helpful."

"Well, he shouldn't leave himself open like that." She sighed. "Look, it's not that we don't trust you, it's just, well, I guess it is that. In a way."

He tried not to look hurt, but he must have shown something, because Xavier quickly said, "*She* doesn't trust you. I do."

Tam frowned. "If you were a stranger who wandered in our front door and seemed friendly, we wouldn't be telling you all our secrets within twenty-four hours, you know."

"I need something useful to do," he said. "So don't tell me the details for now. But how can I help?"

Xavier glanced at Tam. "What if he tried to follow the surveillance lasers to their source?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Odds are they're feeding the signals remotely somewhere. But... yeah, if we know where they're planted the FBI might be able to catch someone removing them or find where they were purchased or get something else helpful from the information."

Xavier turned to him. "So, can you do that? Follow the beams the other way?"

"I don't know. So far it's been, um, like going down a slide that shoots me off the end. Maybe I can reverse that."

"You'd feel better if you had some control."

"I would. In fact, I do. When I think about it, this time, with multiple beams, I was moving around, going back and forth. It didn't even register, but I *was* choosing where I went." The relief of realizing that was immense. He wasn't just some puppet caught in the damned beams of coherent light. He had made actual *choices*. "Yeah. I want to try."

"How? Do you have an idea?"

"Help me get upstairs to a room that's affected, and I'll try to step back through the blue door."

Tam said, "And as a side note, we should probably have some kind of plausible conversation in one of the bugged rooms. The you-know-who must be wondering why we never talk about anything where they can hear it."

Xavier said, "Good thought. Right."

Roman managed not to grit his teeth or ask again to be let in on the loop. Even though it was *his* spirit being jerked around, he'd have to wait for their trust.

Tam said, "Maybe we'll let it slip we've set up a still in the basement to brew bathtub gin. Or we're growing hallucinogenic mushrooms. Good reasons to spend time down here."

"Because a person on dialysis would be tripping. Maybe we're painting the walls or cleaning it up."

"You're no fun." Tam hefted the laser. "Ready when you are, Roman."

As he moved away from the stationary beam and felt the pang of it slide through his not-flesh, his involuntary tremor made his cock swing against his thigh. He casually slid a hand in front of himself. He really, really hated being naked without any choice. He felt so damned vulnerable.

Grandfather had claimed to spirit walk all the time, and Roman couldn't imagine the old man let himself wander around in the nude. He tried again to clothe himself in his mind, as he walked up the stairs ahead of Tam and Xavier. Imagined his favorite pair of denim jeans, soft and warm. Imagined the texture, the weight of them, the restriction across his groin. Unfortunately, when they reached the kitchen, he was still naked. Damn.

As he stepped into the kitchen, Tam and Xavier both drew in a breath. "What?" he asked.

Xavier said very, very softly, "I didn't see the blue light until you walked into it. Tam?"

She shook her head and raised an eyebrow at Roman.

"It looked blue to me the whole time we approached down the hall," he whispered. He stuck his head out to peer back down the hallway. "There's blue light under the other doors too."

They both followed his gaze, then shook their heads.

"Huh." One more mystery. He set it aside for now, and gestured at Tam to shut her beam off.

As the red laser snapped off, he felt the shifting tug of the blue. Carefully he took a step toward the blue door, although it showed no sign of closing.

Xavier grabbed a tablet, typed and held it out. *~You're sure you can get back?*

He nodded with more certainty than he felt, moved closer to the doorlight, reached the brink, stepped through. He felt the tug, that odd dragging force, aiming him back into the kitchen. Resolutely he faced away from it.

Behind him, he heard Tam and Xavier, voices raised in a natural-sounding argument. Ahead of him, the blue beam led into darkness. Off to each side, he could make out the glow of others. Last time he'd side-stepped from one to the next. This time he followed his beam away from the house.

It was like wading against a strong current, but doable. He tried stepping a little to the side, and decided that yes, he probably could leave the path for the darkness. It was an experiment he decided to postpone. The beam lanced straight out through the dark, and he imagined striding out along it, forging his way forward. He got far enough that the other beams in their star-shaped array faded and were gone. He kept on, feeling as if he was walking although he was not aware of solid ground under his feet. When he paused to think about it too much, he began backsliding so he decided not to wonder too much. *A step forward, and another step forward.*

And then it ended. The beam just stopped, and beyond that flat, sharp end, the dark fog stretched in unending distance that felt empty and cold.

Now what? He could feel the tug against his stomach, the wash of energy pushing him back toward the house. There was nothing to indicate where he was. So, could he do anything here? See anything? What if the source of the beam was ten feet up in a tree? What if it was daylight outdoors by now? He had no good feel for how long he'd been walking. Would he die from the light or a fall?

Did it matter? At some point, you just had to do the next thing. He hadn't spent his life being careful. Even as a mild-mannered professor, he'd left his civilized spaces to spend a month roaming the rainforest every chance he got. All he needed now was to figure out how to take that next step.

Unlike the other end of the beam, he didn't see a door. This end narrowed down, like a dot on a blank wall. A small dot, even though the glow spread out from around it. He pushed a finger through the dot, feeling spongy resistance.

When he pulled his finger back, it looked unchanged. Of course, it wasn't even his physical finger. Maybe this body would always just look the way he expected it to, no matter how damaged the real one got. *Bad thought. That way lay the real craziness.*

Okay. He would never fit through that dot, but assuming this was all some kind of illusion anyway, that didn't matter. He stepped forward, aiming for the dot with the middle of his body, against increased resistance. Suddenly the resistance stopped. He found himself uncomfortably stuck, in a *goddamned fucking tree*, with a branch through his hip, another piercing his shoulder, and a laser housing embedded in his stomach. None of it hurt, but it was oddly uncomfortable and it looked grotesque. At that thought, he slipped downward, tumbling slowly, passing *through* enough bits and branches to thoroughly discombobulate him.

He found himself sprawled on the grass, under the tree. Overhead, the sky was an ebony dome full of stars, fading to smoky azure off to his left in the familiar glow of city lights. The dark bulk of the tree loomed above him. The blue beam of the laser wasn't visible at all.

He had a moment of mingled exaltation and panic, so strong that his vision swam and his chest hurt. He was *out. Seeing the world*. But he had no idea where his body was, or Xavier, or anything that linked to his life. Except the tree, and the laser housing. He didn't want to even blink his eyes. He stared up at the stars and counted his breaths in slow, steady rhythm. He wondered for a moment if his physical self had gasped and now breathed easy. Or was he totally disconnected from his body?

Fuck. He slowed his breathing again. Obviously, there wasn't a lot of point in applying conventional logic here. One step at a time. He rolled over and stood slowly. That worked, although leaning on the tree-trunk didn't. He jerked his hand away, out of the bark.

Since he was here, standing under the tree with the laser device, he might as well look around and find a way to identify the spot for Xavier and the FBI. *Item: one tree, large, in a field, with a white fence.* Yeah, that would be helpful. But he was scared to move too far, looking for more clues. Somewhere up there in this tree, maybe, was his route back to Xavier, and known territory. If he wandered away in the dark, he might never find it again.

Out of curiosity, he moved closer to the trunk of the tree, and tried to pick at the bark, wondering if he could mark it to make it easier to find. His fingers sank in without visible effect. Scratch that. Or rather, fail to scratch that.

He was out of ideas he was willing to try. Time to head back. Somehow. From down here he couldn't see anything blue, no beam, no glow. The camera had been up there about thirty feet or so. Maybe if he got back up to that level, he could line up with it. He reached up for a branch, and his hands passed in and then out of it, with the sensation of dragging his fingers through thin jelly. The branch didn't move a millimeter, just slipped through his hands. Literally through. *Double fuck.*

Several tries convinced him that climbing the tree was not happening. He shied away from the question of why he'd been able to climb stairs in the house, in case next time he convinced himself to fall through them.

Alternatives, alternatives... When he'd fallen out of the tree, he'd passed gradually through the branches, not around them. Maybe he could rise the same way. *Could rise... come on feet, rise.* Nothing happened.

He wished he'd paid more attention to Grandfather's talk about spirit-walking and astral planes. Back then he'd figured the old guy was a little cracked. Wonderful, but talking in obscure metaphors. Not giving him the help-links for his future life.

He'd fallen out of a tree. Well, that was pretty normal, right? Other than the reduced speed. Rising was more... unusual. *Picture a balloon. A bunch of balloons.* He raised his hand, feeling stupid and deeply grateful no one was watching. He imagined a long rope attached to a bunch of helium balloons, gently tugging him upward. *Gently. Tugging.* To his surprise, he felt himself begin to rise.

His shock was enough to drop him down to the grass again. All right. This time he was more certain, and it took barely a moment before he started to rise. At the first branch he hesitated, hovering, four feet off the ground. He couldn't make himself go headfirst through it. With a bit of maneuvering, though, he could slide past it and up, gaining confidence. He even slid through a side-branch with his shoulder, and the pressure was no worse than it had been on the way down.

He moved on up the tree. There was the laser, fastened close to the trunk, aimed off into the distance. When he followed the line of sight, he could make out the turreted shape of a distant house. Although he'd never seen it from the outside, he could believe it was Xavier's, given the matching shape of the odd alcove in his bedroom.

That was an added welcome assurance. If he failed to get back there the laser way, he could probably walk it on two feet. But preferably he'd find the

faster route. It took some juggling to get in front of the laser, and he almost aimed the beam at his head, before chickening out. Lasers and eyes were bad, and he didn't have enough faith to assume that wouldn't apply here. He tried to center the device on his chest instead.

Then he held still, closed his eyes and actively sought the darkness. He felt the world thin and fade as he slipped away. For a moment, it was too hard to accept. He clung to the tatters of reality behind him. He held to the shape of the tree, the field of stars, and they wavered and solidified again.

Dammit! He was no coward. If he could charge a sniper's position, he could handle a little fuzzy greyness. Right? He let go, trying to embrace the dark. It was empty and formless, and he shuddered at being back there, but he turned left and there was the beam close beside him, arrowing away at an angle. He leaped into it. Letting it tug at him, slide him inexorably forward, was exhilarating pleasure this time. Lasers as joy rides. Hell, yeah!

Then he was out and through, and there was the now-familiar kitchen, with Tam looking cool and Xavier looking relieved. He grinned with the sheer relief of having something work. He'd had control over his life for a few minutes, *personal control*, and it felt so good he could almost have floated up off the floor. *Oops*. He carefully returned to walking. *Walking is good*.

Tam put her finger to Xavier's lips before he could speak, and shook her head. She said to the empty air, "Well, I'm sick of discussing the whole situation. We'll see what happens next."

She lifted the range-finder and raised her eyebrow at Roman. He wanted to try to do without it, but he wasn't sure just where his new-found control ended, so he nodded to her and braced for the burn on his thigh. They trooped quietly down to the basement.

At the bottom of the stairs Xavier turned. "If you weren't insubstantial, I would hug you right now, Ro. I was worried."

"How long was I gone?"

"Over an hour."

"Oh." Subjectively it hadn't felt that long; clearly he'd lost his time sense somewhere along the way. "Sorry."

"I'm just glad you're back."

Tam said, "So, what did you find? Anything?"

"Yeah. Although I don't know if it'll help much." He tried to describe the location, the tree and fence.

Tam said, "I expect, if they know what to look for, the FBI can probably find it. Maybe even find all of them by their power signature. I'm not up on surveillance and counter-surveillance."

"I can try locating a different one. Maybe I'll find something more distinctive."

"You don't have to," Xavier said quickly. "You heard Tam. Now that we know what's going on, the FBI can take care of it."

"I want to. It makes me feel less,"—*useless, naked, dead*—"bored."

"Oh."

"Not that I was bored hanging out with you. Okay, maybe I should have gone with useless. It makes me feel like I'm still worth something."

Xavier looked like he wanted to argue about that, but he didn't. Tam said, "Okay. Maybe an upstairs room? The angle might land you somewhere that isn't the top of a tree?"

"Good thought."

"How about my room? I'll pretend to go to bed. Xavier can pause to get on the wire to the Feebs and then come up and check on me."

Xavier said, "You should go back to bed for real. You look tired."

"Are you kidding? Most fun I've had all month." But after a moment, she added, "I guess I should, though. They must be wondering why we're wandering around the house at all hours. One of us should probably bed down. Plus I haven't hooked into my personal garbage disposal yet tonight."

They paraded up toward Tam's room, with Xavier peeling off at the kitchen to, in his clearly enunciated words, "...make myself a midnight snack before coming up to check on you."

Tam said, "You don't need to babysit me. I'm not going to leap out the window into the dark." All three of them got the giggles. Xavier covered his by loudly clanking plates around while Roman and Tam climbed the stairs with hands over their mouths.

It was easier this time. Stepping in and out of the dark was less of a plunge off an unknown cliff, and more like walking into a familiar wilderness. A

moment to gather himself and it was done. This time the laser was housed in what looked like a weathered birdhouse on a post, close to a road. There was another house nearby that made a decent landmark. And he didn't even have to fall out of a tree. He fixed the details in his mind, turned and took the plunge and the swift ride back home.

When he came out in Tam's room, she was sleeping. Xavier sat in a chair at her bedside, dozing. He hesitated, looking at his friends. Definitely friends, even after so little time together. He hoped what he was doing was actually helping them.

They both looked tired and thin. Roman wondered what these last weeks had been like for them. Awake, Tam was a powerhouse of energy, and Xavier was all smooth and elegant, but asleep the cracks showed. He wondered how close Tam had come to actually dying.

The surveillance beam still lit her room blue, so he didn't want to speak. He leaned down and passed his hand across Xavier's arm. His fingers sank in, and it felt just like the branch, but it was a connection, something physical, and he treasured that. Especially when Xavier reacted, jolting awake. They were close, his face a foot from Xavier's. In the dim light, Xavier's eyes had soft blue highlights in the grey, and Roman could see his pupils dilate with surprise. Or maybe with something else, because they both were breathing faster, and those gorgeous eyes stayed blown wide. Xavier's mouth opened slightly.

Roman ached to lean forward, close the gap and kiss his parted lips. But touch was weird enough this way, with just hand and arm. Feeling a kiss become some kind of flesh-merger would probably send Xavier scrambling for cover. Roman wasn't taking that kind of chance. He stepped back and gestured at the range-finder on the bedside stand. After a long moment, Xavier picked it up, stood stiffly, and shepherded him down the stairs.

Chapter 6

Xavier sat up from his nest of cushions and stretched out the kinks in his back. At some point, he'd clearly fallen asleep. He'd been hanging out with Roman in the cellar, just talking about spirit-walking, looking crap up. It was warm, and the pillows he'd brought down were padding enough. The conversation had slowed into comfortable silences, and then he must have dozed off.

He tapped his com to get the time, or rather, tapped the bare skin behind his ear where the com should have been. "Crap!"

"What?"

He looked over. Roman was still there, lying on his stomach on the floor with his head propped in his hands. His eyes were open, and the red dots from the range-finders shone on the smooth muscle of his shoulders.

What was the question again? Oh, yeah. "I killed my com. I'll have to replace it. Sorry, I guess I was tired."

"You looked it. I didn't mind."

He wondered if Roman had slept. Wondered if he could sleep, in this odd state of whatever-it-was. Roman swore his body was alive somewhere, but as much as Xavier wanted to believe that, it was probably healthier to remind himself that he could be wrong. A ghost might think that too, unaware that he'd already died. He had to keep reminding himself not to count on anything, unless and until they rescued Roman alive and whole. It gave too much hope.

He must have been lost in his thoughts too long, because Roman said, "What? Do I have something on my face?"

"No. Just taking in the fact that you think I looked all drawn and haggard."

"Did I say haggard?"

"I inferred."

"Now you're fishing for compliments."

Was he? Also a bad idea. "So it's probably morning out there. Now what?"

Roman said slowly, "I don't know. I don't think I'm like a vampire that melts in the sun. It was daylight when I arrived in the kitchen... yesterday? Was that yesterday?"

“Yeah.”

“So I can survive daylight. But as for what we should do next, I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do? You can stay here, if you want.” *You can stay here forever, if you want, watching movies and talking about nothing much.* He couldn’t imagine Roman being happy with that, though.

Roman shook his head before the words were even out of his mouth. “Don’t get me wrong. I like hanging out with you. But it’s not like I can just live in the basement like your pet phantom.”

“What, then?”

“I think, um, I want to use that out-of-body research we were doing. Use everything you found from any semi-reputable source on spirit-walking. I want to try to get back inside my physical self, and then do this out-of-body traveling right. Moving slowly. With control. If I can look around there, like I did with the lasers, maybe I can figure out exactly where my body is now.”

It made sense. That didn’t mean it was going to be that simple. “Some of that research was clearly mush-brained craziness.”

“Probably. Although my tolerance for craziness has been expanded lately.”

“Well, yeah. True.” Xavier frowned. “There was nothing in all the stuff I found about Doppler laser, and we have proof that works.”

Roman’s mouth tipped up in a little smile. “You gonna write a scholarly article?”

“That’s your job, Professor.”

Roman’s humor faded. “Right. My job. You know, if I could lure the students into a lecture hall, like in the old days, I could still teach like this. Even better if I could somehow figure out how to appear on camera.” He sat up, carefully staying in the beams, and glanced down at himself. “Well, maybe not naked. Hell, I keep forgetting that. Maybe we’ll keep any career plans in reserve.”

Xavier *hated* not being able to touch, having nothing to offer to ease that bleakness. “You’ll find your real, well, your *physical* self. I’m sure of it.”

“And the first thing I’ll do is put on a pair of pants.”

“Really? The first thing?” He tried to inject a little suggestiveness into his voice, to lighten the mood.

“Hell, yeah.” But Roman did look less grim. “I’m not saying there wouldn’t be a second and third thing though.”

“And what now?”

Roman looked up toward the stairs. “Seems like I’ve done everything I can for your FBI case that you won’t tell me anything about.”

Xavier started to explain, but said, “Tam’s rules.” When he and his sister had decided to cooperate in this unlikely sting, he’d agreed that when it came to the law enforcement stuff, she would call the shots. “I’ll ask her again, though. She has to be less suspicious of you by now.”

“I’m worried, you know. About the two of you. And don’t try to fob me off with saying she knows what she’s doing. There’s something big going on, if someone bothered to set up special technology to listen in on you. That’s serious.”

“It’s actually a good sign.” He bit his lip. “I do want to explain it all. I’ll try to get Tam to tell you more when she wakes up.”

Roman looked at him intently for a long moment. “You do that. And be really, damned, fucking careful, all right? Both of you.”

“We are.”

“Uh huh. Well. Right now, I want to try to get back to my body. I’ve already done it by accident, a few times. Once was when Tam’s laser powered out, right here.”

“You want to try that again?” He didn’t like that thought. The idea of deliberately switching off the range-finder and watching Roman blink out of existence, again, made his gut ache. But he had no right to even say so. *Let me keep you here, like some kind of pet, because talking to you is the most fun I’ve had in years.* That was simply wrong.

“Yeah. I think it’s my best chance.” Roman stood up, keeping one ankle centered in a beam. “After all, as long as the listening devices are still aimed at this house, I can find you again. Right?”

“I hope so.” He had a thought. “I’m going to order one of those myself. I’ll set it up outside, aimed at a window, like theirs. That way, if they turn theirs out, you can still come home.”

Their eyes met. There was something in Roman’s gaze that looked warm and sweet, before it faded into regret or doubt, or maybe fear. Then he blinked

and went stoic and blank. "I'll remember that. I'll look for it. Switch the range-finder off now."

Xavier tried not to make a big deal out of it. He took two steps, bent, put his finger on the switch. He wasn't planning to look at Roman, but he couldn't help it. As he hit the button, he thought he saw a flash of panic cross Roman's face, before he winked out like a VR character when the power was cut. Standing there; then gone. *He's gone.*

Xavier had to force himself not to switch the laser back on. Stupid. It hadn't worked that way before anyhow. Plus Roman was gone on purpose and wouldn't want to be yanked back. He had plans. He wasn't dead.

Xavier hefted the device in his hand, then set it back in place. He took three steps, bent down, turned off the other one. It was stupid to feel like he'd killed Roman. Although if Roman never came back, if he was trapped forever in that grey darkness he talked about, then it was almost the same, wasn't it? Or assisted suicide?

He pushed the morbid thoughts away, and hurried up the stairs. The light streaming in through the window over the front door told him it was early morning. He could make some breakfast and start his day. Roman would do whatever he needed to do. Time for Xavier to do the same.

But the first thing, even before telling the coffee pot to start brewing, was to order a long-range Doppler sound-surveillance laser online. With every precaution he could think of in place to hide the order. And same day pick-up at a drop box in town.

Tam came downstairs while he was digging in the fridge, trying to find something he actually wanted to eat. She said, "And Ro?"

He almost answered, but he had no way to know if they were being overheard. He had to assume so. He shrugged and gave her a look. If it was cryptic, well, it served her right. She had her secrets. "Hey, g'morning. You look better."

"Better than you anyway." She reached for a mug and poured herself coffee.

He got out a bagel at random, set it on a plate, casually pulled his tablet close, making sure all the external links were off, and silently typed, *~He asked me to shut the laser off. He wanted to try to get back to himself. His body.*

Tam brought her coffee over and broke a bite off his bagel. As she chewed, she typed, *~Did he have an actual plan?*

Aye, there's the rub. *~Not so much. A hope, maybe.*

She eyed him, her eyes oddly kind, and then wrote, *~He still could be dead, or some kind of bodiless spirit, or something. You can't know for sure.*

He brushed her fingers, hurrying. *~He says not. I believe him.*

"Do we have any butter in this place? Plain bagels are boring." *~You want to believe him.*

~Don't you? "The groceries haven't been delivered yet."

"I wouldn't mind a shopping trip." *~I want to. But I think it's possible that he actually died, in that hospital. There's a lot more support behind ghosts than astral walking. And I can't believe I just typed that.*

~See. Either one is crazy, so either one is possible.

~Or we're both crazy.

~You, maybe. "Sure. The local village has some nice little shops. You could take a run out."

"I think I will." *~I know you like this guy. I like him too. But it's not like he's real.*

"Jesus!" He covered for that by adding, "Spilled my coffee. Sorry." *~He is fucking real! He may not be solid, or all here, but he's real.* He paused, added, *~We looked him up. Remember? Everything he told us was real. His codes got me into the college database.*

~Sorry. I didn't mean it like that. Just that you should keep a little space.

~Fuck space.

~Well, it's not like you can fuck him.

Xavier didn't think he could answer that, without some extra swearing. And maybe lying, because if he said, "*I don't want to fuck him,*" it would be a lie of sorts. He'd been spending hours with a gorgeous naked guy who rang all his bells. And who, judging by the occasional sign of interest, wasn't averse to him either.

Eventually, he typed, *~It's not always about sex.* Hadn't she said that to him often enough, about the guys he met? He added aloud, "You can finish that bagel. I'm going to get started sanding the porch rail. Painting." Work would be a good distraction.

“Okay. You know, you can pay people to do the boring stuff. You have the money.”

“I like doing it. You can go spend some of my money.”

“I will.” She gave him a look that maybe said she was sorry. Or, knowing Tam, said that she was willing to wait until he admitted she was right.

He left the room and went down into the cellar for the paint. The basement was an empty, hollow space. A pile of cushions and throw blankets were the only evidence that he and Roman had ever been together there. Well, that and the range-finders sitting on the floor, powered off. He picked them up, checked the charges, clipped the fuller one to his belt, and started looking through the paint for the outdoor white.

Roman had vowed he wouldn't panic. So he was definitely not panicking about how long he seemed to have been nowhere, in nothing. Time was subjective in the grey, he was sure of that. When he wandered out to look at those lasers, his estimate of time and Xavier's clock keeping hadn't agreed very well. So he might only have been drifting for a few minutes. Or an hour. He turned off the little voice in his head that whispered, *or a decade*.

The problem was he had no real plan. Getting back to his physical self hadn't ever been something he did on purpose, like following a laser, it had been something that happened. And it wasn't happening.

He closed his eyes again, pressing his hands over them until little lights sparked. That was good, because it was *something*. He took calming breaths, slowing them, more and more, counting evenly. He pictured himself for the hundredth time. As he remembered, he'd been lying on his back, naked, on something very resilient and soft. There had been a quiet humming sound, and then voices... He shied away from the voices.

Well, maybe he was picturing it wrong. He had a vague recollection that hospital patients who couldn't move on their own had to be turned over now and then. Maybe he wasn't on his back. Maybe he was on his left side, or his right. That thought had an odd resonance, so he calmed down, *and when the hell had every little thing made his heart race... if he even had a heart*. Calmed down again. Wondered with bleak amusement whether they had a heart monitor on his body, and if so, whether these changes showed on it or not.

Okay, right side, naked, soft mattress, light sheet, hum, moving air... He tried to fall into that sensation. There was *connection* there. Eyes closed,

breathing easy, hands down. He tried to orient himself that way in the blank enveloping dark. Raise one leg a bit, bend the knee. A brief flash of how this felt like preparing for sex, an imagined touch from Xavier's hand behind him, threw him out of it. His stupid libido could just go fuck off. Or not fuck, right now. It was irrelevant.

He tried again, this time falling faster into the sensations. Lower his elbow, move the other arm. Raise his head a fraction on a pillow.

Suddenly he was there.

He clenched his jaw not to cry out. And *felt* it clench. It was different from doing it in his astral body, because there was a hint of the unexpected. A stale, pasty, unfamiliar mint flavor coated his tongue. A twinge of pain lanced one cheek. It felt real, and for a second he battled back tears. He wasn't dead. He *wasn't* dead!

He lay still, trying not to move, because he was afraid of finding out that he couldn't. His jaw was still clenched tight. He could feel the pull. He tried to slide his tongue around in his mouth and thought there was some kind of response. Even though he was out of the grey, there was still a fuzzy distance between him and the world. So he counted his breaths, trying to change their rhythm, and listened for something that was clearly not inside his own head.

The mechanical hum was still there, faint enough that it could have been anything. A fan, a refrigerator, a medical device. But it was something he hadn't heard in the dark, and he valued it for that. *Nice, lovely hum.*

Okay, maybe he was a little crazy. He needed to man up. He tried to open his eyes and look around. Nothing happened. He did wonder if he felt a flutter, or a twitch of his eyelids, but it definitely didn't extend to opening. Fuck. Double fuck.

Tried again; more of same. Tried moving a finger, a foot, his tongue. He thought he got a little from the tongue, but it could have been an illusion. He tried holding his breath. That at least worked. He tried it again, longer, starting to see bright spots behind his eyelids. A loud chime startled him into taking a breath. There was the sound of hurrying feet.

"What happened?" A woman's unfamiliar voice came, close to his side.

"Not sure. It was an oh-two alarm. Check the strip." That was a man. Someone who made Roman glad his eyes were shut.

"There. Over a minute of apnea."

“Strange. What does the oxygen sat look like now?”

“Looks fine. Respiratory rate twenty-six, oh-two at ninety-nine percent.”

“Well, let’s roll him over. Just in case.”

He felt hands on his body, grabbing, pulling at him. He was shifted up and turned onto his back, and then there was a different hum as his head was slowly propped higher.

The man’s voice said, “Move the oxy-tab too, just in case.”

There was a fumbling on his left arm, then a touch to the other side, near his right elbow. The woman said, “Still reads normal.”

“Okay. Well, keep a closer watch. The boss will be very unhappy if something happens to this one. He’s worth millions.”

“What about her?”

The man said coolly, “Her too, but she’s up tomorrow. So it won’t be much longer.”

“Oh, well, that’s good then.”

Both sets of footsteps moved off into the distance. Roman had no desire to get their attention and bring them back. He lay still, listening, long after the sounds had returned to that single hum. And also, he realized, a very soft sound of breathing that didn’t match his. He wasn’t alone.

Her. The voices had said, “*her.*” There was probably a woman in the room, perhaps in the same condition he was. The nurse or attendant or whatever she was had lumped them together.

Worth millions. She’s up tomorrow. There was a connection he wasn’t making. He couldn’t imagine how he was worth that kind of money. He had enough money to live on, but any extra had gone to his Amazon trips. He’d banked a nice finder’s fee for the anti-malarial *Cinchona* variant he found five years ago, but it was locked up in a pension fund and didn’t come close to being millions. As a rule, he didn’t do much more than break even.

Maybe they planned to ransom him to Xavier, who did seem like he had real money. Except that made no sense. He hadn’t even met Xavier until after his accident or assault or whatever put him in here. Not to mention, there was no reason Xavier would care enough to spend millions on him. They’d known each other less than a week. That couldn’t be the right answer.

He couldn't figure it out. His brain ran around in circles, and exhaustion weighed him down. He should leave this flesh prison and go do something else. Something useful. At least go talk to Xavier and put the guy's big brain and fast researchy fingers—long, clever, fingers—put him to work on the “worth millions” problem. But he couldn't bring himself to give up the actual, physical rise of his chest, the little skin-pinch of whatever was attached to his elbow, the occasional huff of breath from the sleeper across the way.

Eventually, he dozed. And sank deeper. And slept.

He woke with a start, which somehow didn't translate to any movement of his body. He listened intently. Someone was approaching. They didn't speak to him, just stood by his bedside for a moment. Then the head of the bed lowered with a buzzing mechanical sound, and the attendant bent over him and wrestled him to his left side.

He hated the way his body flopped over, unresisting. The person—man, he was pretty sure, from the smell of him and the size of his hands—the man's grip was impersonal, but not rough, and Roman was tugged about, rearranged, and left without a word. Quiet footsteps receded. A door whispered shut.

He lay there, wide awake. He thought if they, whoever *they* were, happened to be monitoring his pulse, they might see it racing. But perhaps that was a normal response to being turned, because no one came running to check on him, before he found his calm again.

Okay.

He was still in the hospital bed. The sounds, the temperature, the mattress under him hadn't changed. He still couldn't open his eyes, or move more than a twitch. But he felt less fuzzy and disoriented. So now it was *really* time for something else.

Xavier had collected a lot of information on spirit walking or out-of-body or whatever you chose to call it. And some things people chose to call it were very froofy, and unhelpful. But many had agreed that you should relax and visualize yourself slowly rising out of your body, lifting up into the astral plane. Not waiting around to be flung randomly and unwittingly into darkness. It was time for him to learn how to work this thing. Right the fuck now.

Or, you know, not exactly now.

It took a long time. A long, long time, because whenever he felt himself maybe rising from his flesh he either decided he was deluded, or made a frantic

mental grab for his body. But eventually the fear of having someone come manhandle him again, maybe move him, or drug him, was enough for him to let go.

It wasn't like floating free, at least not for him. It was like deliberately stepping away. He found himself standing beside his own bed, looking at a blank wall. The wall was painted pale-sunshine-yellow. The universal hospital room color, calculated to the perfect degree from those studies in '24 about anxiety and PTSD and calming effects of color. He'd been in enough hospitals to recognize the exact shade.

For a moment he collected his thoughts, and then he turned. His body lay on a bed beside him. He was rolled facing away, and the oddness of seeing himself from the back made him dizzy. He looked thinner than he remembered, maybe paler. Even with the very best sunblockers, and he did use the best, he often picked up a little tan as a legacy of all his time outdoors. He hated sunscreen shirts. Now his neck and shoulders were pasty white. And yet that body sucked at him, called to him. He turned away, before the pull of his inert flesh dragged him back home.

There was a second bed beside his, empty and stripped to the mattress. And two more across the room. The further of the two held a woman. She was asleep lying on her back, or more likely unconscious. There was one complex fluid line hooked up to her, disappearing under the sheet. He resisted the temptation to turn around and see if he had a similar one, and instead walked closer.

She lay flat and absolutely straight, her arms at her sides, uncomfortably reminiscent of a corpse laid out for a funeral. Her face was pale, but her cheeks were plump and round, whether siliconed for fashion or because she carried extra weight he wasn't sure. Her body was covered by a sheet to her chin, although the shape under it suggested she was tiny. Perhaps she'd had implants.

He moved closer, and slowly reached out to touch her. When his hand passed through the curve of her jaw he felt an incredible flash of disappointment. It wasn't logical. There was no reason to feel like someone kicked him in the gut. He'd done this already. How many times had he proven that he couldn't really touch anything solid? Not even Xavier? He had no reason to expect that just because he was out of body more deliberately, that would have changed. Still, he spent several minutes dipping his finger into the lobe of her ear and the tip of her nose, before realizing how stupid and intrusive that was.

He bent to put his mouth close to her ear. "Wake up." He kept his voice low but intense. "Wake up and look at me." He held his breath, waiting, dizzy with hope.

She didn't stir, but the door at the end of the room swung open. A young woman in scrubs glanced in, looked over his still body carefully, and eventually backed out and closed the door. Her eyes had passed over where he stood several times without stopping, without so much as a hint of surprise at a naked guy looming over her patient. Clearly, she hadn't seen him standing there, staring back at her. He blew out a breath.

So. He seemed to be invisible now. Was it the laser that was missing? Tam had suggested a hologram effect. Or was some kind of specific psychic ability needed to see astral walkers? Maybe Tam and Xavier both had some unusual skill.

Or was he just dreaming this? He didn't want to be dreaming. He urgently wanted this to be his choice, his deliberate walkabout. And yet, he was relieved at being unseen too. Despite the clean, bright room, he had a sudden desire not to be noticed by anyone working here. He wanted Xavier.

No, really, he wanted information. Which he could then take to Xavier, to work on together.

He stared intently at the sleeping woman, trying to memorize her face. Whoever she was, she was on his side of the bedpan, and that made her particularly relevant. He tried to fix the young nurse's face in memory too. Then he explored the room.

It didn't take long. There were the beds, the two patients, a couple of rolling stands with drawers that he couldn't open. He tried reaching into one, pushing his hand through the side, and trying to identify stuff by texture. Watching his hand disappear up to the wrist creeped him out too much to concentrate, though, and it all felt like the same indistinct mush, so he quickly gave it up.

He walked to the door. Looked at it. Put his hand on the push pad. Put his hand *through* the push pad. Crap.

For all the weirdo stuff he'd been doing, he hadn't actually walked through a solid object yet. Although he'd stuck his hand through a drawer and fallen through a branch, so this was really just more of the same. He just had to shove an apparently solid door through his head and his heart. Or vice versa. No problem. He took one quick stride forward.

The pressure was odd, wrapping around and through him, but he thought of it like diving into deep water and didn't freak about it. He found himself outside the closed door, standing in a short hallway. *Yes!*

He turned in a circle, looking around. At one end of the hallway another similar door stood shut. At the other end, a pair of windowed doors blocked the way. He spotted a camera, high up in a corner but unconcealed. He wondered if there were more subtle back-ups in place. The whole set up was odd, quiet and deserted for a clinic or nursing home.

The double doors looked promising so he headed that way. This time he stepped forward with confidence. The door pressed against him, tough and resilient against his stomach and thighs, not letting him through. After leaning into it and managing no more than another uncomfortable inch, he took a step back. He bit his cheek, breathing hard through his nose. Who the hell had astral-blocking doors set up? Did they know he was out of his body? Were they perhaps watching to see what he would do?

He took a slower breath, steadying himself. Back when he'd tried holding his breath, it had brought someone running. They hadn't hesitated or lurked and spied with cameras. So, odds were, if they could actually see him now, someone would have showed up to deal with him. But here was this impenetrable door.

He looked at it. A polished metal bumper plate protected the lower half of each door. Through the windows, he could see only the wall of another yellow corridor. He reached up tentatively and pressed his palm on the window. His hand passed through without much hindrance. Now that looked weird, seeing his hand wiggling on the other side of the door. He pulled it back, pressed down lower, and found that the metal plate resisted him, letting his fingers penetrate less than an inch while tightening around his fingertips.

Hm. Metal? Light reflection? Density? The scientist in him wanted to experiment with different substances, but he managed to stay focused. The way out was obviously through the clear lexite windows. Or the wall.

Hell, he'd been trapped by conventional thinking. Once you were walking through solid objects, why was a door better than a wall? Other than worrying about copper power cables and metal pipes and conduits and... okay, the door might still make more sense. Save walls for later.

He put both arms and his head through the window, and wriggled. For the first time, he felt like he was really making contact with the outer world. The

metal edge below the window pressed against his stomach with unexpected solidity. He even thought the door moved slightly, as he kicked against it. Then he pushed up and through, and fell headfirst. This time he absolutely didn't mind the mushy give as he sank into the floor, sprawled, and picked himself up.

He had a near-irresistible temptation to charge the door-plate with all his weight and see if he could make the door move. But if it was alarmed, that could be a bad idea. He resolutely turned away.

A few feet down the hallway was an office, with the door standing open. It looked like a nursing station, a mounted split-screen showing camera feeds for eight hospital beds. Most of them were empty, stripped to the mattress, but in addition to the unconscious woman and his own immobile form, there was one bed that held a little child, equally motionless. He wrenched his eyes away from that tiny, still figure, and the unsettling image of his own body, to look further.

In a corner of the room, there was a data station, with a big heads-up screen displaying repeating blocks of numbers, probably monitoring the patients. The female nurse who'd failed to see his astral form sat tending the desk, scrolling something on a handheld, occasionally glancing at the displays.

Roman had only a moment's warning as a man in scrubs came barreling down the corridor, hurrying toward him. "Hey, Ginny," the man called.

The woman looked up. "What? I'm busy."

"We need to get ready..." At that point, the man collided right into Roman.

Fuck! He'd been trapped by habit, expecting the man to slow down, thinking he had nowhere to get out of the way. He realized as they hit, collided, *merged*, that he could have stepped into the actual wall.

The man jolted into him and through him; as they occupied the same space, Roman's body twisted and chilled. It felt immeasurably different from passing through a door. The man felt something too, staggering back half a step, prolonging that impossible sensation. "What the hell!" the man grunted, and his voice buzzed *through* Roman's chest.

It was too much. Roman twisted, desperate to get away, and fell into the dark.

Nothing. Grey. Silent.

He panted, shocked and nauseous from the collision and the abrupt transition. All around him was the dark, and for once, that was good. He took

slower breaths, trying to feel all of his body. Or astral body or whatever he was wearing, that had been tainted and stretched and felt dirty on the inside, from sharing that space.

Slowly he felt more like himself. He made a mental note *never* to do that again. Although what didn't kill you couldn't be ruled out in a pinch. Still, he needed to adapt. Next time, he needed to fucking-well remember that he was not the same as his flesh and blood self. Right now, he needed to get moving. Somehow.

He could have tried to relax and sink back into his flesh. But something called him outward and away. He wandered, trying to feel that pull and follow it. He located the blue of the lasers faster than he ever had. There was a new blue beam too, a slightly different color and much shorter. A fat, bright beacon.

It had to be Xavier's promised addition. He smiled at the thought of Xavier setting that up to guide him home. He picked it to ride in on, and wasn't surprised to find himself in the kitchen, with Xavier seated at the table.

What he didn't expect was for Xavier to raise a haggard face, stare at him, and rasp out, "They have Tam!"

Chapter 7

Xavier roused from his deep, stunned immobility when the kitchen suddenly shaded to blue. His heart leaped at the thought that Roman was coming back. Then he felt a wash of shame that anything could make him feel happy right now. He waited until Roman was solid. Or as solid as he ever got. Still naked, still tall and lean and steady.

He let himself take one more look, and then he said it. "*They have Tam.*" Saying it made it true.

Roman gestured at the range-finder urgently. Xavier grabbed it, jolting out of the misery of the last hour. He clicked it on, and they did the awkward downstairs trip almost at a run. As soon as the door was closed and they reached the basement he said harshly, "They kidnapped her right out of the grocery store."

"She was a cop. She must have a tracker," Roman said.

"Two of them. Her department one, and then when I started to be worth real money, I guilt-tripped her into a biosensor one. They were left behind in her car, in a clone box."

"Clone box?"

"Tube of blood, with a heater, oxygen, fake heartbeat. The biosensor stays happy. I brought it back here."

"So they cut them out..." Roman's eyes widened.

"Yeah." He really hated the image of Tam being restrained while they probed the trackers out of her flesh. Although it was a pretty minor procedure. Really minor. "I've had a security service monitoring the biosensor one, ready for an emergency, for three years now. But they've always been a passive service, because she didn't like the implication she couldn't take care of herself. And I kept it that way, when we started this case. I figured no one would be surprised they were there. It might look suspicious if they weren't. But I wanted to have space for something to happen. And this didn't even blip their radar. Frack!" He hid his face in his hands.

Roman's voice was quiet, calm. "What case? Do I finally get to know what's going on?"

Xavier looked up, and met Roman's supportive gaze. To hell with Tam's rules, he decided. She wasn't here to enforce them, was she? In a few simple words, he explained the organ-legger case, what they were doing in Kentucky, why there were listening devices aimed at their windows. "They contacted me, and I sent the first installment payment two days ago. I was waiting for their next set of instructions, but instead they grabbed Tam."

"Are you sure it was them? I hate to make it complicated, but if you're rich enough, this could be a genuine kidnapping for ransom."

"No. They left a note on her car with the clone box. *'Down-payment received. We will send instructions for the remainder after the service has been rendered. You know how to keep this safe.'*"

"What does the FBI say?"

"I haven't told them," he admitted. "The last part is pretty clear. If I bring in the FBI, who knows what might happen to Tam?" He knew what Tam would think of him stonewalling the cops, but she didn't get to make that call right now.

Roman frowned. "What do you think they'll do next?"

"I don't know. We'd originally figured they would make contact again remotely, to arrange for the surgery to happen with guarantees on both sides. We'd planned to keep track of clues we could pass along, and when it got too risky we'd claim cold feet and bail out. The only reason we were allowed to be involved in the case in the first place was because I have enough money to pay the fee. Not many law enforcement departments can hand over five million dollars on the front end of a sting, with no strings attached. We figured that would make the organ-leggers feel safer."

"Five million. So." Roman paused, an odd expression on his face. "The donor—would you say he or she is worth millions? Just as a hunk of meat?"

"Yeah. I suppose." Not that he would describe anyone that way, but Roman spoke over his half-formed protest.

"When I was supposedly unconscious in the bed, I heard an attendant say I was worth millions and the boss wouldn't like it if I died."

Xavier stared at him. "You think *you* might be the mysterious donor? I had the impression it was a woman." He clenched his teeth as a sudden thought occurred. "If you *are* her donor, they might be getting ready to remove your

kidneys right now. Both of them!" The more he thought about it, the more horribly possible it seemed.

Roman's voice was amazingly steady. "Maybe, but I was thinking more along the lines of me being someone else's donor. I got the impression I was to be kept on ice for the long term. But there was a woman... Yeah, listen. There was a woman in the other bed. And they said something about tomorrow, for her."

"Other bed?" He didn't get it.

"Shit. Yeah, let me tell you quick what I've been up to."

Xavier listened closely, as Roman told the whole tale, from standing up out of his sleeping body to colliding *through* a male nurse. It sounded awfully plausible.

Roman's stoic expression couldn't hide the fact that he'd been badly shaken by the experience. Xavier couldn't imagine looking down at himself, seeing his own body unconscious and vulnerable. And if the unconscious patients really were intended to be donors, then the danger of being medically disemboweled was looming and real. Xavier reached for Roman, laying a hand on his arm in reassurance. They both jerked apart as his fingertips sank deep into Roman's forearm.

"Sorry. God, I didn't mean to do that." He rubbed his fingers on his own shirt. His mind kept wanting to shunt the out-of-body weirdness aside. Roman was just a guy, a friend, *this person he cared about and couldn't touch*.

He tried to return to logic. "So, if this is all connected—our case and what is happening to you—it gives us an edge they can't be expecting. An inside view from the donor end of the process."

"Except I didn't get much information. I should have tried to go back and learn more, but I felt like I really needed to come and see you." Roman glanced down at his bare feet. "Dumb."

"I'm glad you came. Really glad. I don't know how long I was just sitting here, staring into space, doing nothing useful at all."

"Well. Maybe not so dumb then. But we need a plan. Are you sure you don't want to contact the FBI? Dealing with kidnapping is their expertise, right?"

"Yeah." Xavier hated the way his thoughts were scrabbling around without good data. "But I'm worried. No organization is leak-proof. And these people

are dealing in millions of dollars. How hard would it be for them to buy a Feeb? And if they find out this is a sting, they'll kill Tam for sure."

"Wouldn't you be expected to call the cops? Wouldn't they expect to hear you do that, if they're listening in, I mean? Isn't there something fishy about not doing so?"

"If I was serious about wanting this transplant for Tam, if this was the real deal, then I wouldn't want anything to screw it up. I would just let it happen. I surely wouldn't get the cops involved."

"So you're supposed to just sit by, let them do risky surgery on your sister, and then send them a boatload of money afterward?"

He had to breathe hard a few times before he could answer that. "I guess." He wanted to pace, remembered at the last moment to keep the range-finder focused on Roman. "It's my fault. I didn't think it through. What the *hell* made me think I could play cop in the real world? Just because I know a little about security? I was all the fracking back-up Tam had, and now they have her!"

"Wasn't back-up the FBI's job?"

"It was my plan!" He clenched his fists. "My idea to throw my *damned* money around and make Tam bait. They didn't think it would work. I got her into this!"

Roman drawled, "Oh, yeah. I can just imagine how hard you had to twist your poor, defenseless sister's arm..."

"Screw that!" He turned on Roman, chest burning with anger. "Screw you! What the hell do you know? You're just some floating useless image from a dead guy's mind!"

Roman's sharp, pained gasp stopped his rant short.

The look in Roman's eyes made Xavier feel sick. He heard his own words echo in his head and winced, tried to stretch out a hand and remembered that was useless. "Sorry. God, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it. I just feel so fracking helpless."

"And I'm not good for much," Roman said evenly, but the hurt showed through.

"You are. You really are. You're keeping me from going crazy right now, for one thing."

"Uh huh."

He tried to joke. "Although that was pretty crazy talk from me right there, so you need to step up your game a bit."

"It was true."

"No!" He moved closer, wishing there was a way to bridge the gap between them. "Well, mind image maybe, yeah. But you're not dead. And far from useless. And I am so, so glad you're here."

For a long moment, they stood there, face to face. Their breath should have mingled, but Xavier felt no shift in the quiet air. Roman's expression slowly softened, and a little of the stiff tension seeped out of him. Xavier wanted to give Roman something, to make up for those unthinking words. "I'm such a coward sometimes. Tam's the tough one, you're right. Without her, it's like I'm frozen in a useless lump. I'm so scared. But you being here... unfreezes me."

"It's scary stuff," Roman said quietly.

"Worse for you. I do know that." Xavier rubbed a finger across his numb lips. "I'm scared for both of you. I don't want to be. It'd be a hell of a lot easier if you were just like a VR character from my favorite show, the sexy unreal hero guy who goes away when you turn the power off. Untouchable, invincible, immortal."

"I'm not a hero."

"Yeah, you are." Xavier held his gaze, trying to make Roman see what he saw. "You keep trying. You don't let being unconscious, insubstantial, lost, any of that—you don't let it stop you."

"If I did there'd be nothing left." Roman raised a hand, and traced the line of Xavier's cheek, hovering a millimeter off his skin. "If I quit, I might never see you again."

"I'd try to find you."

"Thanks." Roman dropped his hand. "Me, that woman, Tam. All of us lost. You and I need to get our A-game going, whatever that may be. So. Any ideas? How would Tam's organ thing go down if we did nothing but play along?"

Xavier tried to focus. The kidnapping made the stakes really simple. "Any criminal exchange happens only if both sides feel safe. Both have some kind of security. Their security turns out to be having Tam in their hands, until it's done and we're committed. Mine is the fifteen million they're still supposed to get."

"That's a lot of money all right."

“Yeah.”

“You already paid five, right? If this isn’t a one-off then someone is already getting rich. But fifteen million is a whole lot more money.”

“If all they wanted was the first five million, they didn’t need to bother to kidnap Tam. They could just tell me they suspected a double cross and the deal was off. As far as they know, there would be nothing I could do about it. They’d be free and clear.”

“So the only reason for them to go further is the full payment. Which means that Tam isn’t in any immediate danger.”

That was true. Xavier’s heart rate slowed a notch. “Well, except for having surgery she doesn’t want.”

“But you do want for her,” Roman said very softly.

“No!” He could taste the lie in that. But he repeated it. “No.”

“Are you sure? Easy enough to just let this play out and then go to the FBI afterward. Safer for Tam, maybe.”

Xavier dropped his gaze. Trust Roman to find the dark, little thought he’d been trying not to admit. But he needed to face this, and squash it. “I can’t pretend I don’t want her to have a transplant, especially one that good. But only honestly, from a real donor.” Saying it, bringing it out into the open, did help. “If she gets her health back through someone being murdered, she’ll have a hell of a time living with that. And if I could have prevented it, she’ll never speak to me again.”

“Maybe this *is* a real donor. Maybe she and I were, I don’t know, diverted from the queue, but still real candidates. Brain dead.”

Xavier said quickly, “You’re obviously not brain dead, though.”

“Well, not spirit dead, or soul dead, or whatever part of me’s wandering around talking philosophy. But my body looked pretty damned uninhabited.” Only the hard swallow after the words showed that Roman wasn’t as calm as he looked.

“No. I can’t believe that!”

“When I’m in that body, nothing much is happening.”

“Maybe you’re drugged. Clearly, you’re still thinking, even then.”

Roman took a rough breath. “I guess.”

“Tam’s a firm believer in fairness. She’d hate even jumping the queue. And anyway, who knows how good their surgeons are, or what the risks might be.”

“They’d have incentive to be good, if they want to be paid millions.”

“That’s true, of course. You can go to India or China and buy a donor under the table. Everyone knows it. But the match is likely to be crappy, especially if you’re Caucasian, the surgeons who will do the job are a mixed bag, and the hospitals have lots of problems. Still, that’s their competition. They have to be much better.”

“You sound like you researched it.”

“Yeah.” There was nothing wrong with research. “That’s how I heard rumors of a North American service that was ten times safer, if you could afford it. But no one is going to stand up and give testimonials.”

“And no one has stood up screaming murder?”

“No. That could be due to threats as much as successes though.”

“Maybe.” Roman rocked back and forth, his feet sinking just slightly into the surface of the floor. Xavier watched that, his reminder that Roman was only half here, that he must *not* think of Roman as anything more.

Roman stopped. “So if calling the cops is out, then it’s up to us. We have to find Tam, and stop the surgery.”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t hold back a little hysterical laugh. “That simple.”

“No. Not simple.” Roman had an intense look, like someone giving a complex lecture. Smart, focused. “They’ll need three things, no, four things for the surgery to happen, right? A facility, a donor, a surgeon and Tam. Maybe we can find one of those.”

Xavier tried to match his objective tone. “The facility doesn’t have to be anything fancy. It’s not like a heart transplant.”

“But the odds are they use it for all kinds of surgeries. Why move around? And I bet hearts are in big demand on the black market. Not enough of them available the honest way.”

They looked at each other. Roman dropped the hand he’d pressed to his chest.

Xavier said, “Yeah. True. I’ve had search bots out looking since we got into this, and the FBI has been searching for an unlicensed or over-booked surgery

too, with no luck. And their programmers are good. Same goes for the surgeon. I know they've been looking for candidates with more money than they should have, or a history of cutting corners. The chance any further search of mine will find the place or the doctor in the next twenty-four hours is... not good." He didn't want to admit how not-good it was.

"I guess the scumsuckers have to be practiced at hiding the recipient during surgery, if they commonly kidnap wealthy people. Even temporarily."

"That clone-box was slick, almost commercial, not jury-rigged. Yeah, I bet Tam's not their first kidnapping."

"But this time, we may have information about the *donor* that they can't be expecting anyone to find."

Xavier met Roman's gaze, a spark of hope dawning for the first time since he'd received the call about Tam's tracker being *unusually stationary*. "Right. If the woman you saw really is the one."

"Worth a try."

"Absolutely."

Roman stood straighter, feet apart, chin up, strong body poised, just solid and ready and so determined. So perfect. "We need a plan."

Xavier remembered to nod, eventually. "Any ideas? You know more than I do about what you can manage."

"I haven't experimented enough. I should try to get back to the facility soon." His determination sagged slightly. "And I don't think I should try to come back here again until I have good information."

"No partial reports?" He hated the idea of waiting, and wondering, and not knowing.

"It clearly takes me time to get here, wandering around through the dark looking for the blue. I don't know how long or what might be happening while I'm wandering. I shouldn't be away from the donor, unless I know enough to make it worthwhile."

"What will you look for?"

Roman shrugged. "Anything I can find out, I guess. Her name. The donor storage location. When or where the surgery will be."

"Which is where Tam will be." He closed his eyes. So much could go wrong. Would they just be making it worse?

"If I can, I'll try to follow her to surgery, wherever they're doing it."

"Do you think that's possible? You haven't had much control so far."

"I don't know. I was able to walk outdoors before, moving in and out of the dark. I was able to wander the facility. If the surgery is in the same building we're in, probably not a problem. If they move her in an ambulance... All I can do is try. Whether I can get there. Whether I can get... back."

The hesitation in Roman's voice made Xavier look up to meet his eyes, and quickly say, "Promise you'll come back here, if you can. If you find Tam, or if you lose track of the donor. Either way, come here."

"I'll try. And if I can't find the surgery, I'll try to snoop for more information. I'll do my best to locate Tam. That I promise."

"I know." Xavier rubbed his eyes. "I feel useless. I'll keep doing the searches, but I don't expect them to work. I'll do a new missing persons search, too. Young, small, blonde, twenty to forty, missing in the past week or so."

"If you could hack into the national DNA-scan database, you might find out who's such a perfect match for Tam. That could lead you to who the donor is."

"Maybe. Database security is supposed to be good."

"I bet you're better."

Xavier felt a flash of warmth at Roman's confidence. "Thanks. You know, there have to be ways into the data, no matter what they say. If doctors and law enforcement have access, then there's no way it's locked down tight." *He should have done that, weeks ago.* "God, I'm stupid."

Roman said, "The hell you are. And... if you get in, you could maybe find my scan, see who's my match. You might check on them..."

Xavier realized that the unspoken part of that was, "*And see how sick they are, and which parts of my body they want to take.*" "If I get in, and can find you there, I will."

Roman bit his lip, then met Xavier's eyes. "So. You know everything I do. I should head back."

Xavier clamped his fingers tighter on the range-finder, but didn't touch the power-off button. "I set up a Doppler laser outside the kitchen for you, just in case."

"I saw it. Like a candle in the window."

“Yes. To bring you home. Back. Will it work?”

“I came in that way this time. So yeah.”

“Good.”

For a long minute, and then another, they just looked at each other. Then Roman said quietly, “Switch the laser off.”

He didn't want to. Really didn't. But Tam was out there somewhere, and the rest of Roman too. This wasn't really a moment frozen out of time. Events were rushing on, outside this quiet cellar. He moved his thumb, said, “Good luck,” and clicked the button.

Roman's tight smile lingered in his mind's eye, long after the last trace of him was gone.

Chapter 8

Either it was getting easier, or his time sense was just screwy, because Roman found his way back to his body in what felt like minutes rather than hours. He woke to the sound of movement, and voices.

“...bring it closer.”

“Lift together, on three. One, two, three.”

“Watch the fluid line.”

His own body was lying still; nothing had changed, no one touched him. It didn't take a genius to realize the commotion had to be about his roommate.

Shit! No more time! He tried to relax, tried to submerge himself in alpha state or whatever the hell that out-of-body state of mind was. It was difficult bordering on impossible, with the people moving around him and that sense of impending disaster.

He counted breaths, swore, counted again, and caught a wisp of memory, a moment years ago, desert heat and Sergeant Daley. *“Movement is the easiest thing to pick up. So if you think a sniper has a bead on you, go still. I'm gonna teach you to freeze your body, your emotions, your mind. Go deep, go still, and wait for him to lose interest.”* In the middle of a war zone, with drones dropping heavy loads only a few miles away, he'd learned to go into the silence or have Daley's large fist land on him.

Go deep, go still. He breathed without counting, breathed, breathed, stilled himself, and stood up out of his body.

The bed across from him was empty. The room was silent. He ran.

The first door was easy. He went straight through it with barely a hitch. The pressure registered, but it didn't even slow him down, although he did close his eyes before he hit it. And probably held his breath.

The corridor beyond was quiet too.

The double doors were closed, but he had their measure now. Thinking back to his Army days brought the obstacle course to mind. He envisioned the windows as gaps in a wall, took a breath and dove up and through. His hips hit the base plate, hard enough to bruise him if this form of his could get bruises. Hard enough to make the door shake open an inch, which he noted in passing.

But he was through and falling without much pause. No alarms went off as the door behind him quivered and closed again.

He scrambled to his feet. At the far end of the hallway, two men in scrubs stood on either side of a motorized gurney, in front of an elevator door. Neither of them looked at him. He waved, but their bored expressions didn't change. All right. Invisible then. He controlled a slightly hysterical snicker at the simplicity of that realization. Out of body and invisible, check. His life was so damned strange. But not being noticed was a good thing right now.

On the wheeled bed, still as death, was his roommate. He hurried toward them, managing just a glance into the nursing station as he passed. It was part of the weirdness to be reassured by the sight of his own still body on a monitor, but he was. This was working as planned. The nurse at the desk was an older woman, no one he recognized. She didn't react as he went by, and he didn't pause.

The elevator doors opened. The attendant with the bed-controller steered it in and his assistant followed. Roman managed to dive in after them, before the doors shut. Even though he aimed for a clear piece of floor, one shoulder smacked painfully against the stainless leg of the gurney, and the other passed uncomfortably through the taller attendant's ankle.

The man grunted and rubbed his leg, as Roman scrambled for the back corner of the elevator. There was just enough space for him to crouch there, knees against his chest, out of the way of random contacts. The elevator rose slowly. One of the men grumbled about it under his breath, but otherwise they didn't speak. The woman on the gurney lay still as a wax figure, flat on her back, and if she breathed, which he presumed she did, it was too softly for him to hear.

He'd worried for a moment about the elevator and whether he might tend to sink through the floor of it. Either it had unusual density, or his mind was leery of falling down the shaft, because it felt more solid under him than anything else had in recent days. After a pause, it slowed, stopped, and the door wheezed open. The attendants guided the gurney out, its motor whirring. Roman followed quickly. He didn't want to find out the hard way if the elevator was solid enough to trap him.

To his surprise, they'd entered a modest open garage space. The floor was concrete, the ceiling high, the walls insulated and lined with a few metal shelves. The space was only big enough for a couple of vehicles at a time. At the moment, an ambulance was parked waiting, with the rear doors open.

Without a word, with the smoothness of practice, the men loaded the gurney in the back. Roman managed to slip in after it, brushing one man's arm but nothing worse. The space in the rear was tight, and he ended up scrunched down on the floor behind the end of the locked-in gurney. One attendant climbed in, taking the jump seat. The other said, "Good to go?"

"Yep."

The second man shut the back door, went around to the front, and got in.

Roman's position wasn't great. He could see forward through the windshield, but at a sharp upward angle. He could only get glimpses, first of the door rolling up and then of the overhanging shapes of trees as they pulled out. Clearly, his time sense was wrong again, because the light made it clear it was morning, not late afternoon. Presumably he'd wandered all night unaware. Unless it had been more than one night. Roman felt a pang for Xavier, waiting without a word. He set the thought aside. He couldn't afford to dwell on that.

The ambulance moved smoothly and silently, running on electric only, siren off. The driver guided them for several minutes, presumably over smaller roads, before they hit a tollway and the auto-drive took over. The robo-voice had been silenced, so Roman didn't even get to hear what road they were on, but the driver got up and turned to stand in the gap between the front seats, looking at his co-worker. "Everything good?"

The man in back checked a telemetry panel and nodded. "Solid as a rock."

The guy up front sat back down and pulled out a touch-pad to play some kind of game, the sound effects muted enough to be unintelligible to Roman. The guy in the back closed his eyes and appeared to be dozing. They rode on smoothly at tollway speeds.

Roman tried to keep track of time, but he couldn't see the clock, so it was a guess at best. He watched the little patch of sky he could see out the front. Occasionally a sign flashed overhead. The angle was crappy to read them. He thought one might have said something about Mount Vernon, but he wasn't sure what.

The motion felt odd. Sometimes his body was floating, almost left behind by the van, and he would come up against the back of it, pressure building against his shoulder until he snapped back into place. He had a panicked worry that he might sink through the floor and fall out on the road. He knew he should be paying more attention to where they were, but it took everything he had to keep himself together, stay still and in the moment.

He guessed it had been about half an hour of driving when they pulled off the highway, and the driver took up the controls again. To Roman's surprise, the brief glimpses of signage suggested a major hospital, with directions to an emergency entrance, ambulances only. They drove into an underground parking lot. He braced himself for getting out of the ambulance, but when they pulled over down inside and stopped, the attendants made no move toward the gurney. There was a pause, as the guy up front fiddled with some controls. After a while, they circled around and drove back out.

Huh.

There was no conversation. The men acted like that was routine. They kept going, leaving the hospital behind. Another stretch of time on featureless roads, and they began passing three- and four-story buildings. The bits he could see looked generically grey and square against glimpses of sky. They passed close under some large, leafy trees, their green tops crossing his patch of sky. After another couple of minutes, they slowed, turned, bumped over some ridges, and pulled down into another underground garage.

All he could see out the front was a cement wall. By the time the driver came around and opened the ambulance door, the main door to the street was rolling down. Roman got a glimpse of a suburban downtown neighborhood, with the familiar striped facade of a Joe's JellyShop outlet, before the view was cut off. Roman tumbled out the back, away from the gurney as the men extracted it and powered it off across the garage bay. He found his feet and hurried after them.

On the other side of the double doors, they passed into what looked like a clinic or small hospital. More yellow walls. Roman decided he was never going to paint anything yellow. If he ever got the chance to make that call again. The halls were quiet but not deserted. Two people in scrubs passed, going the other way. They each gave the gurney a glance that was mildly curious but unsurprised. Clearly, none of them saw Roman either.

Their little procession, complete with phantom, passed through two more sets of automatic doors, down two more hallways, and ended up in a larger room, lined with medical equipment. A young man in white and two women in scrubs stood waiting. The man looked over, his expression cool. "The donor?"

"Yes, Doctor," the taller attendant said.

"Good. Put the gurney a little further over there."

"Her scan and information are on her wristband."

“They’d better be. We’ll double check it, of course. This is hardly my first time.”

The attendant’s mouth twisted, but he just said, “Yes, sir. Do you still need us?”

“No. Get the vehicle out of here. I’ll let him know you made the transfer.”

Roman watched the two men leave. He had a moment of panic—he wanted to run after them, and clutched futilely at a counter-top to restrain himself, staggering as his hand passed through it. God only knew where his body was now. They were his last contact with his physical self. He reminded himself that they might not take the ambulance back there anyway.

The doctor turned to the two women. “Get her cheek swab, and the recipient’s. Run them through the scan. I’m not taking anyone’s word for compatibility. And hook up the brain imaging. Let’s have a nice, flat, legal reading before we assume this patient is done with her own kidneys.”

“Yes, doctor.” The women bent over the gurney for a minute, one hooking a headset with contacts over the donor’s unmoving face and skull, while the other slipped a swab inside her lip, then inserted it in a matte-grey metal box.

“I’ll go get the recipient’s sample,” she said, picking up a fresh swab and turning for the door.

Roman realized almost too late that the *recipient* was potentially Tam. He managed to slide through the doors after the nurse before they fully closed. There was no window in these, and a leap over bumper plates through a solid door, while probably possible, was not on his bucket list. The nurse turned the opposite way down the corridor, and hurried off. Roman kept pace invisibly behind her.

They passed through two more locked doors, each opened by the nurse’s retina scan, and then reached a third with an attendant sitting at a desk outside it. The nurse said, “The doc wants a mucosal swab.” She pulled an old-style facemask up over her mouth and nose.

The attendant scanned her ID clip, and pressed a control, swinging the door open.

The room beyond was far from being a dungeon cell. It was, in fact, perhaps the most luxurious hospital room Roman had ever seen. There were the usual monitors and connections for oxygen and who knew what, but the floor was covered in soft, cushion-tile in a faux-marble pattern. Three of the walls were—what else—yellow, but the other had a ceiling-to-floor flatscreen with a moving

scene, a view from a New York high-rise with the sea walls and the harbor in the distance. The ceiling had a sky-projection, the lights were concealed and indirect, and there were comfortable-looking chairs spaced about.

The bed in the center was clearly a hospital bed with all the bells and whistles, but wider than the norm. Tam looked small on it. Her eyes were closed and her wrists were restrained in Velcro cuffs against the lowered rails on each side. Roman hurried over, and was reassured by the steadiness of her breathing. Sleeping, maybe drugged, but alive.

As the nurse approached, Tam opened her eyes blearily.

"Just a little mouth swab," the nurse said with professional cheer. "Won't hurt a bit."

"Eat crud 'n die," Tam mumbled. As the nurse held her jaw still and slid the swab under her lip she made an obvious but futile attempt to bite.

The nurse managed easily, and let her go. "I don't know what your problem is," she muttered. "You should be glad someone with money likes you, because psych-cases usually go to the *bottom* of the list, not the top."

Roman hesitated as the nurse strode to the door. Part of him wanted to stay and try to communicate with Tam, to reassure her somehow that she wasn't alone. But the door looked solid, and the last thing that would help Tam was for him to be trapped in this room. If he had to go into the dark to get out, he'd lose precious time before he'd gathered any really useful information. He slid his hand over and through hers, hoping she might recognize the sensation, and rushed after the nurse. Behind him, Tam muttered, "'s weird..." But it was all he could do.

Out in the hallway, he began a systematic search, trying to read name badges and signage. He found out that the doors were, in fact, damned hard to get through on his own, but there was enough foot traffic for him to wait and follow people through. He'd accumulated a few names, but no location, by the time he went through a new door and found himself in a much more public area.

Patient exam-rooms lined the hallway, and a series of tiny cubbies held vid screens with nurses doing remote consults. The familiar set-up of a small-town clinic surprised him, but perhaps it was a good cover for the illegal one behind it. Five minutes of peeking over shoulders and searching posted placards gave him the clinic name, street address and e-dress. *Rochelle Community Hospital*.

The feeling of relief and success made him dizzy. He could go home now. Find Xavier. Tell him everything. Stop, for just a minute, and be with someone in a quiet space, where he wasn't dodging, wasn't scared, and didn't care that he was naked. He needed that so fuckin' bad.

He backed away from the bustle of patients, the crying baby behind door number two, the nurse loudly losing her patience with the woman demanding a pain script over the vid. He waited for the staff door to be opened, and headed back into the calmer space beyond. It was a matter of a minute to find a quiet corner and sit, legs crossed, hands on his knees.

Go into the dark. Find the grey. He'd made the leap into the dark without choice when shocked by the laser switching off, or the collision with the nurse. Doing it voluntarily was harder. Twice he felt he was close. Each time some sound or distraction held him back, keeping him in his astral form, crouched in the corner. He thought of Xavier, of the route home, blue light in the dimness. Nothing.

Stupid. Now, when time really mattered, was not the moment to mess around. Abruptly he stood up. The next person coming down the hallway was a tall, thin man in scrubs. Who cared who it was, though. Roman took a breath, braced himself, and strode right through the man.

It was slightly better this time, or perhaps it was just a matter of being prepared. The abrupt twisting, the sharing of space that shouldn't be shared, nauseated him but didn't knock him as far off balance. He was thrust into the dark, and he welcomed it. The gasp of the man he left behind was useful confirmation, especially when it cut off short, like a door slamming shut between them.

.grey

.silence

.lost

.silence

.grey

The darkness was the same. It would always be the same. Absence of light that was not really black, absence of sound that was not true stillness, absence of touch that left him alone in the universe. He clenched and unclenched his jaw, flexed his fingers, searching for the ragged edges of himself. The grey clung to him, but had no real resistance. He heaved, nauseated. Bile stung his

throat, and he welcomed it. Real acid. Real pain. A taste, however foul. Body. Self.

Xavier. He needed to find Xavier. Now. Fast. It was urgent, life or death, and he used that to drive himself forward, searching for the blue, the feel, the man, for the way home. A moment later, however long that actually was, he found it.

The star-array of eavesdroppers was still there. He chose the different short beam, for love of it, and slid home.

Xavier sat at the kitchen table, his head down on his arms. Before Roman could speak, Xavier sat up and looked at him, eyes wide and full of relief. Roman reached for him, and their hands met, and for an instant seemed to cling, before flesh and phantasm merged and then pulled apart. "Laser. Downstairs," Roman whispered urgently.

Xavier tried to pull himself together as they hurried down the stairs. He kept the laser in his hand steady, although he really wanted to shake apart. The last twelve hours had been a little slice of hell. Not knowing where Tam was, or if she was safe, was bad enough. Add in not knowing what was happening to Roman, or if he might try something dangerous or damaging, and Xavier's imagination had indulged in a horror-movie field day. He'd pictured Tam dumped and dead, Roman vivisected, Tam dying from botched surgery, Roman trying to follow someone out of his hospital room and burning his astral self to a crisp in the sun. And those were just the logical nightmares.

Roman whirled as soon as they were downstairs. "I saw Tam. She's okay. Here's the address." He reeled off street, city, com line, online tags. Xavier managed to fumble out his pad and get it all down. Roman finished with a breathless, "The doc was doing their gene match. There's a little time, but not much. Now you should call in the cops."

Xavier hesitated. "What if... what if they want to go charging in and she's in surgery? What if they aren't careful enough and the doctor runs off halfway done?" A dozen nightmare scenarios came to mind. Maybe it would be safer to wait.

Roman looked at him, his head tilted, and said softly, "Are you looking for reasons not to stop them until the transplant is done?"

"No!" The twist in his gut matched the skeptical rise of Roman's eyebrow. "I'm not! Not really. I just... Damn!" He took a sharp breath. "You know, it

was never meant to get this far. We were going to back out and turn the case over. Actually having the surgery wasn't supposed to be in the cards." He'd always dismissed the temptation with the thought that it would never happen.

"She wasn't happy to be there," Roman said. "Although she did seem a bit doped up."

"But healthy? Safe?"

"For now, yeah, I think so."

"Thanks. Really. Thank you!"

"I'm just glad I was able to be worth *something*."

"God, Roman, do I have to tell you again what you're worth?"

Roman flushed. "No. Sorry, that was a bit needy, wasn't it?"

"I wish I had something better to give you than just words."

Roman's eyes met his. "Raincheck?"

"Yeah. Definitely." There was another of those silences, full of subtext.

Then Roman coughed and said, "So. What now?"

He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "What about the donor. Was she... awake?"

"No. In fact, the doctor said something about confirming her brain death."

Xavier felt better for a second, until all the implications hit him. "It doesn't mean you're brain dead too." Surely it didn't!

Roman lifted one bare shoulder. "Not relevant right now. You need to get help to Tam. And you need to decide how fast you're going to do that."

There was only one real answer. "If I wait, she'll never forgive me. However it turns out." He took a long breath. "The wired link to the FBI is upstairs. Coming up with me?"

Roman shook his head. "Set the laser down and I'll wait here. Just, come back when you can."

"Yeah. I will."

Climbing the stairs was like wading through quicksand. He realized that at some point during the night he'd found a happy place by assuming that at least Tam might get her life saved out of all this. Even if she hated the idea, it could

happen just by him being unable to stop it. But now, it would only happen if he did something she would never forgive. He reached the kitchen, grabbed the secure link, and punched in his code.

Getting to the right person, and convincing them he was serious and had good information without explaining how, took time. At every moment, there was a temptation to say, "A ghost told me so." It was the truth, or close to it. He couldn't be faulted for telling them the truth. If it slowed things down, that wouldn't be his fault.

Except it would. For all the razzing he and Tam shared, despite the teasing, sometimes fighting, and often misunderstanding one another, they never lied. There were a lot of ways of lying; he wasn't going to pretend he didn't recognize this one—telling the truth in a way so unbelievable that it's discounted. Instead, he invented a plausible story, an anonymous tip from someone who recognized Tam, a specialized search program. He named names and descriptions. It took perhaps an hour, for them to assure him that rescue was headed Tam's way.

They didn't warn him to keep away from the scene. Maybe they figured it was unnecessary. Idiots. As he hurried downstairs, Roman looked up at him. He said breathlessly, "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Where do you think?"

Roman nodded. "All right. Yes."

Xavier hesitated for a second in the garage, then gestured Roman toward the Excalibra. There wasn't room in the sports car for a third person, but there was basically no chance Tam would ride out with them anyway. The car was fast, agile, powerful and brilliant, and he wanted every ounce of that right now. He opened its doors.

He kept the laser aimed at Roman as he got in on the passenger side, and wedged it into the dashboard nookbox, centered on his chest. Roman gave him the flash of a smile. "Wow, I'll happily take a laser through the heart to ride in this thing."

"Sorry." He adjusted the beam up toward Roman's shoulder.

"Just drive."

He hurried around, slipped into his seat, and drove.

The Nav system had no problem finding the address of the clinic. It gave him a forty-two minute transit at the posted speeds. He hit the illegal override box under the dash, the car leaped forward, and Roman grinned. "I do love a man with style."

For a moment, he looked over at Roman's open, bright expression. For just a moment, a feeling of anticipation hung between them, heavy with promise. Then all the rest of the anxiety and fear crashed back in, and he turned away to glare out of the windshield, willing the car to go faster.

When the Excalibra powered back down and pulled off the tollway, leaving what was probably a fortune in overspeed tickets behind, he put his hands back on the wheel. The Nav guided him through a modest town, down a side street, and announced his destination in one tenth of a mile.

It was a suburban downtown, very middle-class. The ad-boards were big but not too bright and flashy, and the silence in his ear suggested they respected the ad-blocker on his new cell-com. He spotted what looked like a medical building in the next block, with signs for an emergency entrance and below-ground parking. He pulled over to the curb, stopped and looked at Roman.

"Now what?" Roman asked.

"I don't know. I can't imagine the FBI wants me here." He didn't want to get in their way either. His sister the cop had some very forceful names for amateurs who didn't leave policing to the professionals. He'd just needed to be close by. "Tam will kill me if I screw up their case."

Roman snorted softly.

"Well, she will." It was odd how that little sound had eased some of the tightness in his chest. "Maybe you can sneak in. See what's going on?"

"I can try."

Xavier popped the door open. Before Roman could get out, a middle-aged woman walking by looked at him and sniffed in eloquent disdain, her gaze dipping to his crotch and pointedly looking away.

"Fuck! Close it!"

Xavier triggered the door shut. They looked at each other and Xavier giggled helplessly. "You're naked; I forgot."

"I'm not sure I like you laughing at my naked dick."

"It's a very nice dick." Xavier leaned his head on his forearms, hands tight on the wheel. The lack of sleep was making him punchy. "I thought no one else could see you."

"Apparently the key really is the laser. But... we can't just turn it off." Roman frowned angrily. "This is such total crap! When you switch it off, it bounces me into the grey. Who knows when or where I'll come out? I might be back at the house, or in my body again. But if you leave it on, I'll be even more conspicuous than you are."

They stared at each other. Xavier said, "What if we do it slowly? Attenuate it down, bit by bit? Could you fade out?"

"I don't know," Roman said. "Maybe."

"Can it hurt? Right now, we're two guys sitting in a car we don't dare get out of to do anything useful. If it works, you can at least do *something*. If it fails, I'll just still be sitting here." He hesitated. "Not that I wouldn't far rather have your company than be alone, but..."

"Try it. We have to try something. Do the windows tint any darker?"

"Are you kidding?" He went for a superior smile, feeling it coming out a little wobbly around the edges. "It's an Excalibra, the limited edition. My best toy. Well, after the high speed comp-array back at the office." He hit the control to one-way-smoke the side windows completely, then added front and back. "There. Complete privacy."

"Okay. Let me try to get into that alpha state first. When I think I'm there I'll do this." Roman flicked his index finger twice. "Then you try easing down the laser. If I do this,"—he spread his hand wide—"then stop there for a bit."

"Okay." As Roman leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, Xavier did a quick mental inventory of what he had to work with. He needed to rig some kind of light-beam attenuator... Increasing sheets of paper? Starch-plastic candy wrappers? Or... the door pocket held a pair of his polarized shades. He dug them out, and popped out the lenses.

Roman glanced over at the first sharp snap, said, "Good thought," and closed his eyes again.

Xavier sat quietly, holding the lenses. Somewhere out there, only a minute away, Tam was either waiting for surgery or having surgery, or done with surgery. Surgery she didn't want that could save her life. Always assuming it was done right.

Suddenly, Xavier was glad that he had no doubt what her choice would be. He could just try to do the right thing, and not second-guess himself. Her body, her future, her choice. He'd always believed that was everyone's right, and if she chose to risk herself going into gang territory to try to talk the youngest kids out of getting jumped, that was her right. If she chose to walk away from a chance at a long healthy life, because it required her to break her moral code, that was her right too. Love didn't give him control, over his sister or anyone.

He turned his head. Roman looked solid, unless you stared really hard at where his naked body met the seat. He wasn't handsome, but his features were strong, his muscles lean and workmanlike, his chest would be perfect for leaning up against. That dusting of curly hair across his pecs would brush Xavier's cheek if he laid his head there. The pulse beating slowly in Roman's throat would be echoed by the steady, deep beat of his heart. If he was really there.

Xavier jumped when Roman raised a finger twice. *Showtime*. Slowly he eased one of the two lenses between the laser and the red dot where it hit Roman's shoulder. Held at a calculated angle, the beam passed through the polarized lens with only a little attenuation. Roman didn't move or change. After a moment, he raised the finger again. Xavier angled the lens, a fraction at a time, watching the red dot fade slowly. When it started to brighten again, he held the lens still.

Roman sat motionless, at ease, each breath a little softer than the last. His finger moved.

Xavier took the other lens and slid it in, careful to match the angle. Even so, the dot faded abruptly. Roman's breath hitched, and then resumed. For long minutes neither of them moved. Then Roman's finger twitched again. Slowly, very slowly, Xavier rotated one lens against the other, crossing the polarizations so the dot faded, and faded, faded and thinned. And went out.

And Roman vanished.

Xavier cursed, and almost dropped the lenses. But if Roman was actually still there, slamming the laser back on him might undo all they'd accomplished. Holding the tinted glasses together in one hand, he reached out and switched off the laser. So. Invisible? Back in the grey? Was there any way to tell?

He wanted to reach out, to try to touch Roman. He might feel something, that odd brush of almost-flesh through flesh that had become welcome, rather than creepy. But he remembered how colliding with someone had knocked

Roman into the dark before. He kept his hand well clear as he sat back, and tapped the control to open the door.

As the Excalibra unfolded her passenger door, Xavier felt it. Just a touch, above his wrist, as if ghostly fingers slid through his arm. He took a deep, shaky breath. "Good luck, Ro. Take care of yourself. And Tam."

There was no answer. The seat didn't creak, the dust on the sidewalk outside the car didn't swirl. Although he unsmoked the windows fast, there was nothing to be seen but a quiet suburban street on a sunny morning. He left the door open a long, long time, before tapping it shut.

His new cell-com behind his ear was silent too. He had it set to screen calls, and only let through the law enforcement codes. Apparently, none of them wanted to talk to him right now. He coasted the Excalibra forward half a block, electric engine silent, until he could make out the wide handicap-access entrance to the clinic down the street. He didn't dare go closer. Even this was stupid. How many luxury sports cars would usually park on this block? But he couldn't make himself drive away. Prayer was illogical, so he didn't pray.

Chapter 9

Roman stood for a second, getting his bearings outside the car. He had a hard time deciding if this felt different from ten minutes ago, but given the way Xavier's gaze had failed to follow him, he assumed that it was. No one was mocking his naked state, and the lady with the toddler coming out of the boutique didn't glare at him, so he assumed he was now fully astral. Or whatever. Invisible, anyway.

He walked toward the clinic, checking the surroundings for any hint of law enforcement. Patients were entering and leaving as if everything was normal. Surely, *someone* should be here by now. Xavier's car was fast, but they'd been half an hour away. The FBI had to have had someone closer, even if it was just town cops. Maybe they didn't trust the locals, or were waiting for more manpower or more evidence, or a warrant. Fuck if he knew how these things worked.

Tam was in there, though. And one thing he did know was that the surgery was probably moving forward. He followed a family of four through the front door. Chances were good there'd be nothing he could do, on his own and insubstantial, but he could at least go back and watch over her. At worst, Xavier was sitting back in the car. While Roman couldn't hold a gun right now, he knew that Xavier had a new Taser in his pocket, and he was willing to bet Tam had taught her brother to shoot straight. Somehow, he'd get the idea across if it came down to the wire and Xavier needed to play cavalry.

Or not... He realized, as he slid after a nurse into the back of the clinic, that there were more than the normal array of armed guards. Clinics had been hiring their own security for decades, given the drugs they kept on hand. But these guys weren't the overweight and greying ex-cops who usually pulled that duty. To a man, or in two cases, woman, they were young, fit and alert.

Whether they'd been warned to keep an eye out, or they knew there was more at stake than a few vials of narcotics, he couldn't tell. But if Xavier came in and insisted on going back to the surgery, he wasn't likely to get far. All the guards had legal Tasers holstered, and at least one had a bulge in the small of his back that suggested something less legal and more lethal. That settled it. Even for Tam, he wasn't going to encourage Xavier to come in here.

He had to wait five minutes to follow someone through the door from the clinical space to the hospital area. Once there, he wandered, following staff

through doors and halls, until he located the familiar pre-surgical area. The gurney was gone, and the room was empty.

He wished he knew more about the process. Would they take the donor to surgery first? Or both patients together? He tried to recreate the route to Tam's room. Once again, he came up to a closed windowless door with a half-bumper. This time he tried diving through the pressbond upper section. It turned out to be possible. Good to know.

The guard was still sitting outside Tam's room. That was a good sign, right? The man seemed at ease, watching something on a hand-held. Whatever the FBI was planning, clearly no alarms had been raised yet.

This door didn't have a bumper plate, and Roman strolled through with what he decided to call confidence. The room on the other side looked unchanged. Tam still lay on the bed, wrists bound and eyes closed, looking no paler, no different. Roman took a long, slow breath of relief.

He walked to the bed. Tam didn't rouse to his voice in her ear, or to his fingers brushing her arm. He tried a harder grip, flesh in flesh, and she flinched slightly, but her eyes remained closed. Crud. Not that he knew what he would achieve by waking her, but if this were him, he wouldn't want to sleep through things. He stepped back and then took a run at her bed. Sure enough, hitting the solid bed-frame with all his force made it quiver. She blinked and muttered, "Huh?"

He immediately grabbed her arm, pressing his fingers in, three long, three short, three long. Three long, three short, three long. Or maybe it was supposed to be the opposite but it didn't matter. After a moment she whispered, "Roman?"

He gave one long squeeze.

She tugged against her wrist cuffs, although clearly without much force. "Not rescued, huh?"

He squeezed twice.

"Does anyone know we're here?"

Once.

The room door opened, and the guard looked in. "Do you need anything, miss?"

"I need to get out of here," Tam said tartly.

"I'm sure the doc will be along shortly." The man closed the door again.

Tam made a face at it. She muttered, "If someone's coming, it better be fast. I was prepped for surgery a while ago."

He went for one squeeze, even though he didn't know for sure what the FBI would do. Probably something, probably soon.

"I'm glad you're here. If you're not some figment of my damned imagination. Christ, I'll never live this one down. Snatched off the street like a fucking novice."

He squeezed twice.

She managed a laugh. "The least I could do would be agree with myself."

He made the next two extra hard, and they both shuddered. *Not* a good sensation.

He wasn't prepared when the door suddenly swung open. There was just time to jump away to a corner of the room before two attendants hurried in. The woman picked up the leash for the bed, while the man disconnected a cable from the wall and coiled it.

Tam said, "I'm here against my will, you know. I didn't ask for this."

Without a word, the woman pressed an injector to Tam's arm and triggered it.

"You're drugging a police off... off... pol..." Tam's eyes closed.

The man said conversationally, "I hate when they change their minds. You think she's really a cop?"

The woman shrugged. "Not our business. Let's go."

Roman followed behind as they guided the bed out into the hall. The guard got up and followed through the first set of doors before turning aside. Roman stuck with Tam and her nurses. They reached a surgery suite. The outer room was busy with three people in full gown, mask and glove regalia. The two nurses guided Tam up beside a steel table, stripped the covers off her, and lifted her limp body from the bed to the table, and the bed was rolled out.

A gowned male figure said, "She's two hours from pre-med. Full sterility from here on. Get her positioned, please, and move the organ box into the suite."

One of the gowned individuals rolled a cart topped by a complex white box toward the inner set of doors. Roman couldn't resist sliding along the wall until he could see into the clear top of the box as the person paused to step on the door control. Damn. Kidneys, looking startlingly like the textbook pictures. Two of them, bathed in fluid and threaded with a couple of small-diameter tubes. He felt a wash of intense sorrow for the donor, a woman he'd never known but who surely deserved better than to end up dissected into a high-tech cooler.

At that moment, a buzzer went off, high-pitched and shrill. The doctor snapped, "Shit!" He turned for the door, pulling the mask off his face. But before he could take another step the door opened. Two men stood there, weapons out and ready.

"FBI. No one move."

There was a frozen moment, as both sides stared at each other. Then more people in dark clothes began pouring into the room to take charge, patting down the medical folk and slapping on handcuffs. The doctor backed away, protesting, "This is a medical surgery. You can't come in here."

"We just did." The first agent walked toward him. "Hands on your head. You're under arrest for kidnapping. Other charges to follow in due course."

One of the female agents turned toward a tall, grey-haired man coming in the door and said, "Special Agent McGregor? What do you want to do with that?" She pointed at the rolling cooler-box. "It has, um, body parts in it."

The man she called McGregor hesitated for a second, then said, "Take it in and log it as evidence. There'll be a lot of stuff to keep track of. Call for a truck for transport."

"Wait," the surgeon said urgently. "Those are donated organs, prepped for transplant. Don't just *waste* them."

"You can hardly expect us to let you go on with illegal surgery!"

"Why not? It would be humane. Or if not, then take the organs and the gene scan to the National Health Transplant MedGroup, and let them find new recipients. Those are fresh-prepped, good for another forty-eight hours."

"They're evidence."

"Take pictures. Don't let them just rot. And the donor is in Surgery Room Two, still prepped for extractions. She came to me brain-dead. Let her death mean something."

McGregor shook his head, and signaled to his subordinate to bring the surgeon's hands down and cuff them behind his back. "If she's dead, she won't care. Dead folks don't get to have a say." He smiled at his own humor.

Bastards were going to put what was left of the woman in a freezer to decay. Roman slammed his fist on the steel table beside him and was startled by a hollow boom.

Everyone in the room jumped, and the agents looked around quickly.

He did it again, for the fun of making them twitch. And then for the pleasure of making noise, of something that every living, breathing person in the room could hear. And again.

One of the agents pointed at the table, shivering a little from the impact of Roman's fist. "It's... that."

Roman slammed it with both hands, managing to move it a fraction of an inch.

McGregor glared at the surgeon. "Whatever you're doing, stop now."

"I'm not doing that." The surgeon glared back. "I'm a yard away from it."

Roman hip-checked it, enough to roll it two whole inches. Everyone in the room glanced at each other. One of the agents drew a Taser and pointed it at the table, then blushed and holstered it again. Roman beat out shave-and-a-haircut. His hands hurt, but it was oddly gratifying to have everyone in the room looking at him. Even if they couldn't see him. He remembered he was naked, so that was probably just as well.

McGregor cleared his throat. "Recording cameras are on, correct?"

"Yessir," a young man said.

"Play that bit back, one cam only."

The man brought over a pad, and tapped it for him. Roman held still, curious. He'd like to have looked at the screen, but didn't want to get that close. Everyone heard the playback, complete with thumps.

McGregor said, "So this is a real, um, phenomenon."

"Apparently, sir."

The senior agent glanced around the room. "Get the suspects out of here. I want this room cleared of everyone but us. Have someone take care of the victim too." He gestured toward Tam on her wheeled table. "Quickly now."

The doctor said, "Remember the patient's been immunosuppressed. Don't take her through the common areas."

"What do you care?"

"I'm still a doctor," he said coldly.

A man in a paramedic uniform stepped forward. "You have a steri-drape?"

One of the nurses gestured. The paramedic shook out the clear cover, and they transferred Tam to a waiting gurney in some dance of covers and monitor leads and gloves and drapes. No one spoke up until she was whisked through the doors and gone.

Roman held still and let it happen. He thought about following Tam as they wheeled her out, but he figured he could trust her to be taken care of now. He was held in place by some odd sense of responsibility to the woman he'd so briefly shared captivity with.

When the room held no one—well, no one visible—other than four dark-suited agents, McGregor said, "So now..."

Roman figured that was his cue to bang the table again. Beethoven's ninth, this time. Bam-bam-bam Boom.

He could hear McGregor swallow. From the way the other three agents carefully didn't look at their superior, he figured they'd heard it too. McGregor's face darkened. "If someone's decided this is the moment to get funny..."

The other three didn't answer. Roman wasn't sure there was a safe answer. Eventually McGregor said, "If there's someone doing that, thump twice."

Roman hesitated. Did he really want to get into a prove-you're-real demo with the feds? Everyone knew that being interesting to government security was a good way to end up in some jail cell, possibly where no one would ever find you again. Still these were the FBI, not one of the secret alphabets. And he was pretending to be the dead woman. He thumped twice.

McGregor said, "Show yourself."

Roman laughed, which got no reaction. He tried saying, "Over here." Still nothing. No wonder ghosts became fucking poltergeists. It was the only way to get attention. He glanced around. There were a series of small metal probes in a rack. He reached out and swiped his hand across them. His fingers passed through and among them, prickling painfully, but one was shaken loose and dropped to the floor.

He put his finger to his mouth, sucking on the sorest bit, and waited.

McGregor said, "What does the camera show?"

"Here, sir." The young guy hurried over and showed him a replay.

"Huh." McGregor looked back up, his eyes fixed two feet to Roman's left.

"One thump for yes, two for no. Are you a person?"

Well, what the hell. Thump.

"A living person?"

Thump, thump, thump.

"What does three mean?" the remaining female agent said.

"Yes and no?" the young man suggested.

McGregor gave them a quelling look. "Are you a ghost? Jesus Murphy, I can't believe I said that."

Thump, thump.

"Dead?"

Thump, thump, thump.

"Not alive or dead," the middle-aged man said. "That doesn't leave much."

"Unconscious?" McGregor asked.

Thump.

"Huh." They all glanced at each other. "Is your body in the next room?"

Roman hesitated. If he was pretending to be the donor, then the answer was yes. But if he was telling the truth... He went for three thumps.

McGregor swore under his breath. "Because this doesn't peg the freaking weird-o-meter already. Anderson, check out that table. Scan the damned thing for prints and then examine every inch of it. Now!"

The older of the two other men approached the table cautiously, pulling on plastic gloves and taking out a small scanner from his pocket. He aimed the device at the tabletop, and Roman stepped away, quick as a cat. With his luck, that was some kind of laser. The man ran first the scanner and then his hands lightly over all the surfaces, then looked at his boss and shrugged. "Hell if I know."

"Move the table all the way over to the other side of the room. Wait. Fuck. High-res pictures *in situ* first for evidence, all angles. Then move it."

Roman lounged against a wall, thinking about how far he wanted to take this, as the recording was being done. He'd just wanted to shake them, and make them think about the donor differently. But it was shifting to some kind of paranormal investigation. He didn't really want to be investigated.

The prep room door opened briefly. A woman stuck her head in. "Just to let you know, sir. I got a report that the victim is awake. The medic reversed her sedative in the ambulance. She should be able to give a statement at the hospital soon."

"Good. I assume someone went along with her?"

"Yes, sir. Special Agent Cleary."

"Fine. Now get out. Actually," He waved a hand at the door. "Set yourself up outside there. No one interrupts us, no one comes in without clearance. If you need me, call my com."

"Yes, sir."

When the door had shut again, Agent Anderson pulled the table across the room to a new location. McGregor pivoted, watching him, and then addressed the air above the table. "You still there?"

Roman thumped the instrument tray on the counter instead. All four agents spun that way. McGregor looked like he might bite something. "Can you move around to where the table is now?"

There was no obvious trap. Roman walked over and banged the table once.

"Huh." The woman frowned. "That's pretty freaky."

"That's not a technology we can match," McGregor said. "Yet."

"You think it's a special effect?" The older man looked relieved.

Roman went for two thumps.

McGregor made a sour face. "If not, I have to believe in the supernatural. I would much rather think it's artificial and can be figured out, wouldn't you? Figured out, maybe used."

"I'd prefer that too, sir," the younger guy said.

Roman slammed into the table, hard enough to bruise his hip, hard enough to make it shake.

McGregor cursed and waved at the older guy. "Check it again. Wait, grab that steel probe and hold it against the surface in case it's magnetic."

Roman let the guy do his thing, then banged his hand down inches from where the probe was being held out.

The guy almost dropped it in surprise, but said, "Not magnetic, unless it's really focused."

"What do you think they want?" the woman muttered.

McGregor pulled at his chin with one hand. "To wreck the case by making half the arresting officers look crazy?"

Roman whacked out a definite no to that. Maybe he should just stop there.

But the younger man said snidely, "Maybe it's the voice of a pair of kidneys."

Their smiles faded when Roman whacked the table hard enough to shift it. Once. Yes.

"Okay, that tears it." McGregor straightened his shoulders. "Look whoever or whatever you are. We'll do everything by the book, including handling the evidence. So you can stop this game. If you explain how you did this, I'll make sure you're well rewarded."

No. Thump-thump.

McGregor signaled to his two younger agents, gestured toward the ceiling and floor. As they moved casually toward the door, he said, "Now, will you tell me a bit more? Are you..."

Roman double thumped before the question was complete. *Nope. No more.* The last thing he wanted was to become FBI exhibit nine. He moved well away from the table and waited silently. The two agents eased out of the room, presumably to check above and below the room for magnets or whatever they thought he was using. He meant to follow, but the doors swung shut on him.

This idea wasn't panning out right anymore. McGregor and the other remaining agent asked a couple more personal questions that he wasn't about to answer. He tapped out a little jazz rhythm, just for a distraction. McGregor looked more and more like he'd bitten into a lemon.

When the younger agents came back to report no success, McGregor swore loudly. "All right, Special Agent Chu, you're on this. Figure out how that table-thumping is being done. I want a report on my desk tomorrow. The Homeland

boys will look at these tapes and want to know why we didn't catch this so-called ghost that can move objects remotely and invisibly. I need some good explanation for them. Do *not* make me have to tell them I believe in fairies, got it?"

The older man looked uncomfortable, but said, "Yessir."

McGregor turned and strode to the door. Roman decided he was failing as the voice of his fellow donor, and really didn't want the FBI to find out anything more about him. Time to leave before he was trapped. He stayed close behind McGregor, through the doors and all the way out to the front lobby.

The front of the clinic was quiet, the nursing stations shut down, all the patients sent home. He had a moment of regret. Hopefully the place would reopen soon for its proper use. Without the illegal surgery in the back.

It wasn't likely that Xavier was still nearby in the car. He'd have been told that Tam had been found, and he would be on his way to her. Driving like a maniac, no doubt. Which was as it should be, of course. There'd have been no sense in Xavier waiting around on the street for Roman to reappear. Still, he decided he would check, before trying to get back through the dark to his body. If he could. Checking for Xavier was a good reason to put off that moment of truth.

He wandered along the sidewalk, and realized to his astonishment that the Excalibra was still parked at the curb in the next block. He hurried over, and paused outside the passenger door. *Now the fuck what?* Although the windows were cleared, Xavier didn't react to him at all, even when he waved wildly. He tried to reach through the window, and was blocked. He tried again, bruised a knuckle. Damn; bullet-proof glass was probably standard on a multi-millionaire's car. The door, although it didn't seem like metal, was no more willing to let him through. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

Maybe he could manage a thump. His current specialty, like some kind of ape-man. *Ook, ook, beat on something.* He raised his arms, cupped one fist in the other, and brought his hands down hard on the roof. The resilient composite accepted the blow with the smallest of clicks. He tried again, this time on the hood right in front of where Xavier stared unseeingly out the windshield, drumming his fingers.

The hood rippled slightly, deformed and sprang back under his blow. The thump was very muted. But this time Xavier did turn slightly, and a frown crossed that high smooth forehead.

Yeah, you oblivious mutt, notice me. He slammed the hood again, harder. Xavier straightened, eyes wide, then he reached down and the door of the car swung open. "Roman? Are you there?" Xavier switched on the control of the nook-box laser as Roman dropped into the seat.

The beam hit him in the side and he grunted, welcoming the pain if it would only make him real. Or as real as he got. The seat under him felt mushy. He looked down at his hands, but he could never tell what others could see. He cleared his throat. "Xavier? Can you hear me?" Xavier was looking his way, but not quite meeting his gaze, and he didn't answer.

Roman moved, sliding the beam across his flesh. He hesitated before moving further, aiming it deep in his chest. He didn't think it could actually kill him, and here and now he desperately needed Xavier to see him, and hear him. He imagined the beam penetrating, forming his body, from heart to lungs to shoulders and back, sliding back and forth. It ached, deep in him. He muttered, "Please." As if that was a signal, the beam burned more painfully, until he actually glanced at his shoulder to see if there was smoke.

When he looked back up, Xavier met his eyes, reaching out in an aborted gesture. "There you are. God, Roman, I'm glad to see you."

"Not half as glad as I am to be seen. And heard. Holy crap, that was... annoying."

"Annoying?"

"I'll tell you about it. On the way. Do you know where Tam was taken?"

"Yeah. The local hospital." Xavier shut the door, smoked the windows, and pulled out onto the street. "Seven minutes. Talk fast."

Explaining took five of those minutes.

Xavier said, "I'm glad that Tam knew you were there. So she felt less alone."

"I hope so."

"I can't believe you played table-rapping with the FBI."

He'd had time to think about that, as he described it. "I'm hoping McGregor finds it embarrassing enough to bury the evidence and keep the others from talking."

"Why?"

"Think about it. What if the government finds out they have a citizen who can move around through walls, invisible, listening and seeing everything, and then can come back and report what he saw?"

"Oh." Xavier finally looked as uneasy as Roman felt. "That might seem awfully useful, huh?"

"Right. And what are the odds that their first thought will be to help me get back into my body and walk away as a normal human?"

"That's my priority, you know." Xavier gave him a quick, tight smile. "Other than the *away* part."

"Yeah. I know." He did. It was a deep warmth on a day suddenly turned cold and nerve-wracking. He folded his shaking hands together in his lap. "I should have resisted doing anything. But they were going to just throw her away."

"You don't actually *know* her, do you?"

"Only that she's me; she's who I would have been, if the unknown guy who matches my DNA happened to be the sicker one first."

Xavier said, "At least that's not likely to happen now, right? They'll find your body and the little kid, and whoever is running the show won't be able to use you."

"Right." He was not going to think about all the ways things could still turn out wrong. Not now. "Hospital is coming up; I should go invisible again."

"Can't you just, I don't know, think about clothes? If how you look is just your imagination of you, an image of your mind, is there a reason you have to run around naked? Not that I'm complaining."

"I've tried that." He sighed. There was some appeal to not wandering invisible and naked around another hospital. "I don't know. Maybe you can go see Tam, and I can sit in here and work on it some more?"

Xavier pulled into the visitor parking area. "Don't you want to come in?"

Roman felt tired, an odd reluctance to move hitting him. "Not now. Too many people there I might bump into. Or bump through. Give Tam my best though. I'll try to wait here."

Xavier turned off the engine, and hovered, his hand on the doorswitch. "You'd better."

Roman just said, “Go find your sister. If you can, suggest that the donor woman would rather not have died in vain. And if she’s not as brain dead as the doctor insisted, maybe your money could pay for her to get her own damned kidneys back?”

“I’ll do my best,” Xavier promised.

Roman watched him walk away from his seclusion behind the one-way glass. “Yeah, you usually do.” He leaned his head back. He should think about clothes. If he ever had to do this in front of strangers, it would lower the embarrassment factor by eleven. But he was wrung out, and the dark car was safe and warm. He let his eyes drift closed. Just for a moment.

Chapter 10

Xavier was pissed. Furious, even. He admitted, somewhere in the back of his mind, that part of it was fear.

The various medical people associated with the case hadn't made time to speak with him yet, other than to assure him that Tam had received only a standard pre-transplant prep, and would recover just fine. He hadn't seen Tam yet either; she was probably still busy giving statements, and maybe looking at mug-shots. He knew where her priorities would be, and they would not include mushy sentimental reassurances.

Which meant basically no one was talking to him. He paced the hospital waiting room, letting his search bots roam the interwebs to see if there were any mentions of the case online yet. A man walked past in the rather obvious dark suit of a Feeb. Xavier managed not to grab at him—Tam had broken him of any impulse to unexpectedly manhandle someone with self-defense training. But he did plant himself in the man's path, and blocked him again when he tried to go around.

The man reached for his pocket, and pulled out a badge folder. "FBI, sir. Please get out of the way."

"Not yet. I want to know what's happening. I want to talk to..." *Who had Roman mentioned?* "Special Agent McGregor."

The man's eyes narrowed. "How do you know the SAC?"

"I haven't met him directly but I've been working closely with Special Agent Colridge, who I believe is his superior." It was only a guess, but Colridge worked out of an office in Washington, while McGregor was boots-on-the-ground.

From the wariness of the agent's expression, Colridge's name was worth something. The agent said, "I have an assignment right now, but I'll mention to Special Agent McGregor that you're looking for him."

"I'll be right here," Xavier said, with an arrogance he'd learned to adopt back when he started meeting with investors. "If I don't hear within the hour I'll be calling Colridge directly for an explanation. Special Agent..." He reached out and steadied the man's badge for a closer look, noting the little twitch that suggested the man was wishing he'd kept it in his pocket. "Brinkowski. Thank you, Special Agent Brinkowski."

Brinkowski inclined his head in a minimal nod and then hurried on down the hall. Xavier sighed. He hated acting like some entitled rich guy, but he hated waiting in ignorance more.

His cell-com told him new search results had popped, but when he asked for a scroll, they were all about a drug raid on the clinic, couched in the vaguest of terms. The FBI clearly wasn't leaking information yet. He didn't ask for report details; no point in getting a fetch just to hear ten minutes of ignorant locals bemoaning the crime in their neighborhood.

He'd begun to wonder if he'd have to call Colridge after all, and whether he'd even get past the man's secretary, when the elevator doors opened and a man who was clearly FBI strode out. He was also clearly irritated and impatient. Xavier resisted the temptation to just let his questions slide. He straightened his shoulders. Roman was counting on him, and time might be critical.

The man stopped in front of him and said, "Special Agent in Charge McGregor. You would be Xavier Faulkner?" He didn't extend a hand.

"Yes." Xavier returned his own best cool look. "I appreciate you coming to tell me how my sister is doing, and whether there's any chance to retrieve my five mil down-payment for this sting." That was a really clumsy reminder of his place in the case, but he didn't let his wince show.

McGregor glowered. "This is hardly the place to discuss it. If you'll follow me." He turned and strode off without waiting.

Xavier didn't want to play that little one-upmanship game, but he really wanted information. He paused to tuck his coffee cup into the recycler before following at a more leisurely pace. He caught up with McGregor at the elevator.

"I don't have time for this," McGregor said. "And you haven't given your own statement yet."

"Two birds with one stone," Xavier suggested mildly. "You answer my questions, then send someone in and I'll do the full statement now."

"All right." McGregor waited until the elevator doors closed, then said, "The doctors assure me your sister was not injured during her abduction."

"That's a relief."

"You should have requested more coverage for her security if you were going to let her wander around town alone."

"I don't *let* Officer Faulkner do anything."

From McGregor's involuntary little grunt, Xavier assumed he'd met Tam.

McGregor led the way to a small conference room. Once inside he held up his hand, moved to the table, and hit a switch. The feedback whine in Xavier's cell-com made him jump. He reached up fast to switch the device off.

"Sorry." Despite the word, McGregor's smile held no apology whatsoever. "Standard jamming."

Xavier ignored that, and just said, "Fill me in on the case."

"You're not in the need-to-know. Sorry."

"How about I ask some questions and you give me what answers you can?"

"I have three minutes."

"I'll make it fast."

"The doctors will be able to tell you far more about your sister's condition."

"Then I won't ask you about Tam."

McGregor sighed. "You can ask."

Xavier figured he might get two or three answers before McGregor cut him off. *What was most urgent?* "Any leads on where other donors might be housed?"

"We don't know there are other donors."

Yes, we do. But he couldn't say so. "That woman. Is she in fact brain-dead? Tam was really upset about the possibility they were using healthy donors." He added, truthfully, "So am I."

McGregor hesitated, then said, "Yes. Flat-line neural scan. We even had her transported to the local transplant group here at Unity, to have them do an official confirmation process. The docs say she has no cortical activity. Fully legal donor, medically anyway."

"Tam will be relieved." His stomach twisted for what that might mean to Roman though. "Do you think that was, um, a natural condition?" *Was she murdered?*

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

"Right." He fumbled for what else he might ask. "Are any of the suspects talking about the bigger picture? There have to be dozens of, um, perpetrators

who weren't in the facility when you got there. Down to the ambulance drivers." *Who would know where Roman was.*

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

"Fuck!"

He surprised both of them by the force of that curse. McGregor said cautiously, "If it's the money you're concerned with..."

"Hell, no." Xavier couldn't help pacing, two steps down the table, two steps back. "There might be people out there, waiting somewhere to be harvested like fucking beef cows. Or others targeted and about to be grabbed. You can't tell me that it was purely coincidence that they happened to have a brain-dead donor who's a perfect match to Tam. There must be others."

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation. But." McGregor stopped, glanced at the floor, then up to meet Xavier's eyes. "The small players know nothing. The bigger ones are lawyered-up and not talking. We confiscated a lot of records. We're beginning to search them."

Xavier figured asking if they'd found anything would just get him another round of *no comment*. "I specialize in security systems, you know. Perhaps I could help."

"We have very good people. Thank you." McGregor turned to the door. "I'll send an agent to take your full statement."

Xavier said urgently, "If you find where other donors might be, you'll rescue them?"

"Of course. And have the docs check them out ASAP. *If* we find any." McGregor waved his hand over the lock panel. "I'll send you Special Agent Ngosi. Ask for identification."

Ngosi turned out to be a silent woman who was impossible to draw into any kind of conversation. Xavier had ten minutes to think, before she appeared, and the story he told her was truthful in every way it could be while not mentioning Roman. He refused to give her any links to his "anonymous informant" and speculated that it was someone distressed by being part of the whole scheme. He claimed to have never spoken to them in person, which was true enough if you considered Roman's person to be off in a hospital bed somewhere.

"And yet you believed them? Enough to pass the information along to us as highly likely?"

"They knew some details no one could fake," he said. "The placement of the eavesdropping lasers, for instance."

Ngosi nodded. "We'd like you to leave those in place. We'll continue to watch them for a while."

"They're pretty cheap." He'd bought one, and even with modern refinements, they were well below cutting edge prices. "I expect they'll be abandoned."

"Probably. Nonetheless. We will also be doing surveillance of your home and both you and Officer Faulkner for some time."

"You think someone might come after us?"

"Potentially. Officer Faulkner is a witness against several of the people we have in custody. They should have kept her fully sedated, but I imagine they thought she was in favor of the surgery."

"That was the plan."

"Well, she's recorded all her statements and IDs. She should be safe. But just in case, there will be some monitoring devices we recommend you both carry anytime you leave the house. And keep your home security on full alert."

He'd hoped to have workmen coming in this week, but she was right. Precautions might be good for a while. The house was over two hundred years old. It wasn't going anywhere.

"We will also need copies of all the communications from your informant, and any clues you have as to their identity."

"What part of 'No' didn't you understand?"

"This is not optional, sir. If necessary, we'll get a subpoena."

"I promised anonymity. Like when someone talks to a journalist."

"You're not a journalist. We can promise them immunity if they testify. This case will be tough enough. We need all the witnesses we can get."

"I thought you caught them red-handed."

"The medical staff, yes. We waited until they were in contact with the victim. But the case is much bigger than that."

"How much bigger?"

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

"But you want me to give up someone I promised to protect?"

"They'll have protection."

"Like Tam did?" That wasn't fair, of course, but he was still raw over how easily she'd been taken.

"Situations change. We will offer protection."

"When they provide some information? Or only if they agree to testify against the organ-leggers in court? How short of info are you?"

"I can't comment on active details of the investigation."

By the time he'd finished up, failed to pump Ngosi for anything useful, and found Tam's room, it was getting on toward evening. The agent outside her room let him in. There was an antechamber with isolation suits and directions, and he pulled one on. When he reached her bedside, she was sleeping.

He considered letting her rest, but when the door clicked shut, she woke immediately, her expression haunted and her hand scrabbling futilely at her side. A second later, she sat up, straightened her shoulders and managed a grin. "Fucktards won't let me keep my weapon handy."

"You have a guy outside your door."

"You know how I feel about delegating. Especially to a man."

"Reverse sexism. You'll have to do sensitivity training again."

"If I get any more sensitive, I'll start putting my hair in pigtails." She eyed him. "How are... things?"

He said in the same tone, "Things are... unchanged."

"Hmph." They looked at each other.

"I'm glad you're okay."

She held out her arms for him. It was so atypical of her; it hurt to think this had scared her enough to make her get huggy. But when he carefully put a knee on the bed and wrapped his arms around her, the steri-suit crinkling between them, she breathed close to his ear, "I told my tale Roman-free. You?"

He whispered, "Me too."

She clung another minute before she let go and pushed him away. Maybe the hug hadn't all been for show. She waved him off. "Go home. Have a shower. You stink. They should be letting me out, but apparently not tonight.

Some snafu. Come by in the morning. Do good work.” She gave him a meaningful nod.

“I’ll try.” He wished he had any plausible ideas. “See you tomorrow.”

When he reached the car, the glass was mirror-dark from the outside, the way he’d left it. Still, something warned him, even before he opened his door, that the passenger seat was empty. The range-finder still shone its little red light on the back of the seat at shoulder height. The battery hadn’t died. He carefully explored the interior with his hands, inch by inch. Nowhere did he encounter the odd yielding sensation of Roman’s presence. The man was gone.

He sat in the driver’s seat for a long time, with the other door open, in case Roman had gone for a stroll, or in search of information. Somewhere, anywhere he might come back from.

But eventually night fell, and he decided that waiting was dumb. If Roman really needed an ally here, Tam was up in her hospital room. He could probably go find her and nudge her again. More likely he’d fallen out of the beam, on purpose or by accident, and been sent back to his bed and body. In which case, the most likely place he’d show up, would be back at Silverlee.

Xavier drove at legal speeds all the way there, keeping his attention on the dark countryside and the road. When the shape of the house came into view, with its gables and turret and the surrounding trees, it resonated through him, easing his tension. It felt like home. Despite all the impersonal reasons he’d picked it, this house had become more than just a convenient project.

He turned in the drive, coded through the alarm system, and pulled into the garage. He left the Excalibra with a pat to her hood, remembering how the glossy surface had shivered and flexed under an invisible hand. So strange to see, and even more strange to have his heart leap at the sight. He let himself out the back door of the garage, away from the house.

In the garden, he detoured to make sure his own eavesdrop-laser was active, and aimed correctly at the kitchen window. He’d placed it safely inside his security perimeter. Roman had called it his candle in the window. Xavier adjusted the little solar-cell panel to where it would catch the morning sun, and confirmed a nearly-full battery for the night. He would never let this candle go out.

The house felt quiet without Tam or Roman there. He did a full tour, just in case, but there was no sound from the shadows, no blue lights, and no sign of

Roman's tall, lanky body in any of the rooms. He ended back in the kitchen. He knew he should eat, and sleep. But as the hours of the evening wore on, he sat in his chair, listening to music on his com, and staring at the darkness outside the window.

Transitions were getting easier. Or at least more familiar. Roman knew at once where he was, how solid, how mobile. The answers being *in bed, very solid, and not moving one fucking inch.*

The room around his unconscious body was deathly quiet. At first, he blamed that on the fact that his roomie was gone, poor woman. Although she'd been quiet, a sleeping person still has a presence. But as he listened, something else felt oddly off-kilter. He realized that in the past there'd always been that subliminal hum, of lights or ventilation or electric devices. He didn't hear anything now.

He was tired. He'd dozed a little in the car, in an odd half-napping state that hadn't really become sleep. More of a fugue, until he'd gotten up the nerve to slide out of the laser's beam. He thought maybe here he would sleep at last, just for a little while. He felt like he'd been awake for weeks, with exhaustion that was bone-deep, and yet now it didn't feel safe to drop off. That silence was fucking with his nerves.

He took a breath and clenched his jaw, just to confirm that he could. It wasn't a big success. Maybe a muscle twitched, but maybe not, in the inert lump of his body. He gasped, heart pounding, chest tight, wondering if he was dead and a ghost in his own decaying form. Until through the rush of his pulse, he heard the soft rustle of the pillow under his cheek, as his harsh breathing stirred it. Not dead. *Still not dead.*

He should get up and explore again. Really that should have been his first thought. He wasn't sure why deep fatigue was dragging him down, but he needed to get off his ass and do something. Tam was safe. The donor woman, well, she couldn't be helped any more. But his body was still here, hidden in this unknown place, and somewhere there was another room with a child. This wasn't over yet.

Getting up was easier said than done. The sense of urgency nagged him, making him try again and again. And then one more time, doing everything he could to find his alpha state, until finally he lifted his hand, and felt the strange

dissociation of movement and flesh. He sat up out of his body and looked around.

The first thing that struck him was how dim the room was. He didn't have a lot of trustworthy memories of his time here—maybe this was how they always kept it at night—but the only illumination was the Exit sign above the door, shedding a soft red glow.

He realized that even the monitoring panels above his bed were off, the little screens and indicator lights all dark. Power failure.

He stood up. This might be a chance to learn something. People reacted badly to a loss of power, shouting into cell-coms and bitching to each other about the links they'd lost. They wrote stuff on actual paper, and when systems came back on they might have to reenter user names and passwords.

He walked through the door into the hallway. It was silent here too. No one was checking on the patients, despite the loss of monitors. Lazy bastards. The door across the hall matched the one to his room. He stepped through carefully. The space beyond was just as dim, and stale, but not as quiet. There was a little whirring thump here, of some device that still had power.

The room was the mirror image of the one he'd been in. Four beds, two of them smaller, child-sized. He really hated the implications of that. In one bed, the little girl slept quietly. She had a double fluid line hooked to ports in the crook of her left elbow. The attached pump was making the rhythmic sound, clearly running on battery, pushing clear liquid down one line and cloudy down the other, a drop at a time.

He bent over the child. She was probably around two or three. Children weren't his strong suit. Small enough that her organs would be tiny, suitable for some other child. *Who would do this to a kid, to save their own kid?* Or did they just pretend not to know and accept a "miracle"?

He shouted at her, touched her arm, passed his hand through her wrist. Nothing changed. Not a twitch of her face, not a flicker of eyelids. She slept on. He brushed a finger over her lips, her throat, hesitated with his hand over her chest. He could try merging himself more deeply with her, in the hope it might wake her or communicate somehow, but he wasn't sure it was worth the risk of being jolted into the dark.

Leaving her in her little cot, he hurried out, down the hall, and leaped up and through the window of the double doors. He had that motion down now,

perhaps aided by a flash of fear. He barely brushed the metal lip as he dove through. He hit the floor, ignoring how odd it felt, rolled and picked himself up.

The nurse's station beyond was dark, and deserted. What was worse, every portable was gone. The wall screens were cracked, as if someone had swung a chair through them. The monitoring desk held a faint whiff of fried electronics. No one was coming back to that.

He ran. The unfamiliar doors turned out to be a breakroom kitchen, with silent, powerless appliances, a couple of bathrooms, dark and echoing, and a storeroom. He glanced at the boxes in the glow of the safety light. They seemed to be nursing supplies. Diapers. Canned complete diet. No address labels.

He hurried back through the door to reach the elevators. There was no hum of power, no light on the control. He waved his hand in front of it uselessly, frustrated. It probably wasn't working. Almost certainly it wasn't. But he'd never know, because the motion and heat sensor system couldn't see him, and he had no code for the panel. He slammed his fist on the doors. They shivered under the blow and hurt his hand enough to know they weren't going to let him through. Not that he wanted to fall down an elevator shaft.

Of course, he didn't have to fall. He'd figured out how to rise up into the tree. That could work again here, if he could get inside the shaft and then convince himself to fly.

He realized the doors weren't his only option. Time to use his own unreality as a tool. Walls, ceilings, ventilation shafts, there must be somewhere he could get through. He imagined himself getting lighter. Floating upward. Touching the ceiling... Unfortunately, the ceiling remained an unhelpful three feet above his head.

He was fighting his own stupid brain. Talk about unarmed opponents. He settled himself, and began trying to walk through walls.

It didn't work, or not well. He got into the walls in places, but he couldn't seem to get through. At times, he thought he was in some kind of space, but it was dark and never went anywhere. His head hurt. His shoulders hurt. His damned stupid chest hurt.

He tried to get into the elevator shaft through the side wall, and made even less headway. Maybe the shaft was metal-lined. Who knew? If he'd realized he was going to be trapped inside some mad scientist's lab he'd have spent his GI dollars studying architecture instead of botany.

His time sense got totally screwed. There was a time and date clock on the kid's fluid pump and he found himself compulsively going there to check it and check her. He named the little girl Lola. He'd had a cat named Lola, for a while.

He'd named an unconscious kid for his cat. He was officially crazy.

When his tour of the facility brought him to his own room, he slid back into his body for a moment to rest and fell asleep. He woke, startled, sure days had passed. Panicked, guilty, he struggled his way back to alpha. But when he ran to Lola's room, sure she would be dead, it had been less than an hour. He began his search over.

Once, he thought he'd spent an hour trying to find a ventilation shaft. There had to be one, surely. The clock said five hours had passed. He sat on the floor, right by Lola's cot, and hyperventilated for a while. Then he wondered if his body was doing the same, and if so, whether he was using up the last fresh air down here. Would they run out of oxygen first, or die of dehydration, or starve?

He went to check on himself. He stood over his body and watched himself breathe. His body was on its side, cheek turned down against the pillow and one arm under him. He wondered if he wasn't rotated whether the circulation to that arm would cut out, and he'd start to rot. He had another little panic attack right there. But forgot to check whether his body was breathing equally fast until he'd calmed down. At which point, he couldn't tell.

He was going crazy.

He *was* crazy.

There was nothing he could find in the whole place to say where he was. No paperwork with a convenient address on it, no packing slips on the supplies in storage, no service stickers on the machinery. No windows. No doors. No doors that worked, anyway.

Lola soiled her diaper, but he had no way to change it. He ignored the odor and sat with her, whenever he could.

Eventually, after hours and hours of futility, he lay back on his bed, closed his eyes, and tried to find the dark.

He drifted, exhausted, and thought he was sleeping. He dreamed he saw Xavier. He ran toward him, and Xavier turned and smiled. Their hands met. Xavier said, "I've been waiting," and his fingers were warm and strong, and his

mouth was soft. Then he faded in the dark grey nothingness. And Roman was left to wander.

Time passed. Nothing happened. Until finally, off in the distance, he saw a light. It was blue, focused, with just a hint of green in the edges. Short, fixed, and arrow true. His way home.

He fell gasping on the kitchen floor.

Xavier shot up out of an armchair he'd clearly brought to the kitchen to wait in. "Roman! Are you all right?" He dropped to his knees beside Roman on the floor, reaching toward him.

Roman moved his head just enough for Xavier's hand to brush through his cheek. The odd dragging caress was an anchor, something he could hold onto. He did it again, rubbing like a cat. Xavier very slowly brought his other hand to cradle Roman's head, carefully hovering, the pressure just enough for them to both feel it. Roman knew his cheeks were wet, but he hoped Xavier couldn't tell.

"Hush," Xavier said softly. "Hush. It's all right."

"I can't get out." He met Xavier's eyes, trying to keep it together. "I can't. I can't get out."

Xavier put a finger against, *into*, his lips and jerked it back. "Talk downstairs?"

He shook his head. "Only one Doppler beam now. One light, bringing me home." He was too tired to move.

"You think they're not...?" Xavier cupped a hand behind his ear in pantomime of listening.

"Not like before." It didn't mean they didn't have other methods. Maybe they'd hear him, and send someone back to finish him off. He was crazy enough to prefer that idea to slowly dying, wasting away down there in the dark, wherever there was.

"OK. I already scanned the house for regular bugs when I got home so... Tell me?"

He was going to lay it out, logically, but when he tried, what he said was, "What do you think will happen when my body dies?"

Xavier took a breath. "Soon?"

"I don't know. Will I go on like this as a ghost, do you think? Or the other way, astral walking, invisible, getting attention by banging on things? Or will it be over?"

"Hush," Xavier said again, lowering his hands to brush Roman's bare shoulders. "Explain it to me."

"I don't know where my body is, and they've all gone. The attendants. The place is shut down."

"They didn't... kill you?"

"No. I don't know why, but they seem to have just done an emergency evacuation. And left us lying there on the beds, alone."

"Us? That kid?"

"Yeah."

"Anyone else?"

"No. Just the two of us. But I can't get out of the facility to look around. Every time I try, I hit some kind of barrier. And there's nothing inside there to say where it is. Seven rooms, two halls, no windows, no way out."

"No address? Maybe on a tag or..."

"Don't you think I looked?" He jerked away from Xavier and stood. "I've searched. How long has it been?"

"Twenty-eight hours. And some minutes."

"So, that long. Looking and searching and trying to get through wallboard and rock and metal and whatever other shit I can share space with and not, not..." He ran out of steam.

Xavier didn't say anything, just looked worriedly up at him.

"Damn. Sorry. I know you're trying to help." He sat on the floor again, but far enough away not to touch. Or merge or whatever it was they did when flesh brushed crudsucking ectoplasm.

"Okay. Let's think." Xavier didn't get up either, just pulled up his legs, wrapped his arms around his knees, and tilted his head, frowning in concentration.

Roman thought Xavier looked like the nerd kids he'd crushed on, back in his teens when he was busy being a bad, bad boy. "You think. I'm thinked out."

"I wonder how long we have, realistically. Before you, um."

"Die?"

"Yeah."

Wasn't like he hadn't faced that before. He'd been a soldier, for fuck's sake. He tried to be objective. "I don't think oxygen will be the problem. Or CO2 build-up. There are six rooms, a couple of them big, and two hallways. And our bodies are resting. So... I don't know but a week or so, even if it's sealed up tight?"

Xavier tapped his earpiece, muttered and calculated. "Depends on the room size but yeah, this says maybe a week. Could be less if there's really no air circulation though. The carbon dioxide will tend to build up around you, right where you're lying."

"Well, isn't that peachy?"

"Dehydration..." Xavier subvocalized a query to his com. "Well, three to nine days, depending."

"Nice wide margin. At least there's no point watching the clock."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Can't take it, rich boy?"

"Don't. Please don't."

"What?"

"Pretend it doesn't matter."

Roman laughed. "Didn't you see me having a breakdown on your floor? Of course, it matters. I just don't know what to do about it."

"We'll figure it out. I swear."

Roman looked around. "Where's Tam? Not still in the hospital?"

"Well, yeah, in a way. A news group *somehow* got hold of the human-interest story about the donor, dying for no reason. And Transplant Management got into the act. Anyway, short version is they approved the woman as an official donor of all functioning organs, six lives saved for one lost. And since Tam was prepped for transplant, all that heavy-duty immune suppression was a new risk factor, and moved her up the priority list. Ironical, right? They didn't find good matches ahead of her, she was a perfect match and

right there; she got one of the kidneys. She's been out of surgery for... four hours now."

"Why aren't you with her?"

"She's doing well, just sleeping. I get hourly reports from the private nurse I hired. But there's no one else I trusted with... I needed to be here."

For me. He had to swallow before saying, "I appreciate it."

"So Tam will be fine, but she's not going to be much practical help for a while." Xavier sat up straighter. "We just have to figure this out. We have days, right? We can do this. Tell me about the place, every detail." He reached across the table for his bigger tablet. "Size, shape, everything you saw or remember. Go."

Roman tried not to feel that little flash of hope, but it came anyway. He'd never liked depending on anyone else for help, but if he was going to trust in someone, then bookish, quiet, determined Xavier would be at the top of his list.

Chapter 11

Xavier rubbed his eyes, and glanced at Roman, who still sat cross-legged on the floor. Or slightly into it, which might explain how four hours hadn't made him as stiff as a board. The sheer window curtains Xavier had pulled closed hadn't eliminated the faint blue nimbus of the laser around him, although he'd turned on one range-finder first, pinning Roman's shoulder for safety. The dot on that tanned skin had a purple tone, in the combined light.

The mix of real and unreal made him dizzy. Or maybe it was sitting with Roman that was doing that, diverting blood from his brain. Xavier stood, stretched painfully, and moved back to his armchair, dragging it closer to Roman's spot on the floor.

He tapped his com for more details, and said, "So, most likely it's an underground bomb shelter, with the Greenberg design. Modified a bit, but it's a damned close fit." He reviewed his notes. "Somewhere about half an hour away from Unity Hospital. That gives us a circle radius of no more than fifty miles, even if it was all done at top tollway speeds. With a nod to the north-west, since that's the Unity side of the transplant clinic."

Roman's voice was slow and dragging. "Why do you think they drove through the hospital, before the clinic?"

"Camouflage." The FBI wasn't telling him much, but he'd figured that out. "The FBI can probably do a sat-trace on the ambulance, working back from the clinic, looking at the satellite views. Several identical ambulances pulling in and out of the garage at a major hospital would confuse the issue pretty well, especially if they changed the plates and transponder while they were in there."

"Oh. Right."

Xavier sighed. "You're still sure you don't want to come out to the FBI now?"

Roman hesitated, but when he spoke his voice was steady. "I think I'd rather actually die than wander around half-real for the government for the rest of my life."

"You think that's what would happen? That they'd keep you... like this?"

"CIA? NSA? Even the FBI's first thought was that I might be a useful technology. They aren't going to have my best interests at heart."

“True.”

“Not to mention what might happen to you guys if I’m secret weapon number twenty-six, and you and Tam are the two civilians who know about me. Think about how many people the alphabet agencies have fucked over on a need-to-know basis.”

After the last thirty years, that was undeniable, no matter how many laws were on the books. “Hm. All right.” If Roman was ever passed out, fading, clearly dying, Xavier wasn’t sure he could resist asking for any help he could get, but he would think hard and long about it until then. “What about sending an anonymous tip? Would you trust me to do that? I’ll attach enough detail to make them take notice. They can do the brute-force checking of all the listed Greenberg shelters. If they find your body, they’ll have no reason to suspect what you can do outside of it.”

He saw hope and fear battle in Roman’s expression. “Can you make it really anonymous?”

“Trust me.”

“I do. OK, do that.”

He’d prepped the message already, waiting for some of his searches to run. He sent it winging on its way, routed through enough proxy servers and repeaters to disguise the origin. And then he was stuck, unable to think of anything else to do.

Roman closed his eyes. “So. Now what?”

“Maybe one of the people they arrested will tell them something. Maybe they’ll find the information in the database from the clinic. Maybe...” He ran out of words.

“Or maybe not. Either way, we have at least a couple more days. Or whatever part of them you choose to spend sitting around talking to a ghost.”

“Dammit.” He leaned forward. This not touching thing was *fracked!* If anyone needed to be held, it was Roman. And he needed that too. But not the sinking of his hand into Roman’s skin, that constant reminder that they were passing each other on opposite sides of some mirror reality. He clenched his fingers together. “My sister had surgery, and I’m here. What does that say about where I want to spend the next... whatever time we have?”

“That you’re crazy?” But Roman looked a little less bleak.

"Talk to me." He tried to ease back in his chair. "My mind works best sometimes when I just let stuff happen subconsciously. I did some of my best security work that way, going off to ride my bike and letting the problem run in the background."

"Yeah, me too. There was this one time." Roman paused.

"Yeah?"

"In the desert. Back in '22. I was just a corporal then." Roman's voice became rougher, less urbane. "Just a regular grunt. Me and three other guys were pinned down by this group of rebels up on a mountainside. They'd ambushed a DRTH, a dry/rough terrain hover, and unmounted the front gun from it to turn on us. Had us out-gunned, out-ranged for sure. We were hoping for some back-up but they were busy. So we hunkered down for hours. I kind of fell asleep. Woke up with the answer."

When he stopped there, Xavier said, "What was it?"

"Oh. Nope." Roman's face looked shadowed. "Never mind. Just that it worked. I got a commendation, and extra respect for the nasty brilliance of the subconscious mind."

"Well, I hope mine can be brilliant too." It took an effort, but he didn't push for more details, no matter how curious he was. "So, you've been a soldier, and a professor. What else have you chosen to do with your time?"

"I was drafted, so soldier wasn't a choice." Roman shrugged. "I was a thief."

"*Seriously?*"

"In my teens. Gasoline, mostly, after the big price-hike and the start of distribution controls. All those old cars with the unlocked caps back then. I was a ninja with a siphon and no good choices."

"So being drafted maybe wasn't all bad?" He tried to imagine Roman sneaking around stealing gas for the black market. It made even less sense than Roman the soldier.

"Nope. I hated the army, but it got me off the street, like it did a lot of the guys. Got me into college, after, and I found I liked that. Never liked school before, but after nearly dying—repeatedly—it was... restful."

Xavier wouldn't have called college restful, but clearly it was a matter of perspective. "Then what?"

"I always liked plants, so I took some botany. Plants were my grandma's thing. She taught me more than either of us realized, I guess. Eventually restful became boring. One of my profs wanted grunt labor for a specimen collecting trip into the Thar desert, and of all the applicants I had the front-line sandbox experience. It got a bit hairy, which was... a change from the books. We found one new thornbush with an interesting water-binding chemical. That was really rewarding. I was hooked."

"Have you traveled a lot?"

"Some, yeah. South America, mostly. You?"

"Not really. Spent a lot of time behind a screen or on VR goggles, working or playing." That was kind of pathetic, wasn't it? He could have afforded to see the real world. "Virtual reality isn't the same as going somewhere."

"Not even close. There are places..." Roman sighed, but it wasn't a sad sound. "There's this little river in Brazil. At least, I hope it's still there, if clear-cutting for palm plantations hasn't hit it yet. It runs underground, then bubbles up, makes these little pools, drops down again. There are frogs there still, quite a few species. The air has a moist, heavy thickness that's *alive*, and as dusk falls all the frogs start croaking, in a hundred different voices. For a minute, it's like being back in some primordial swamp, before we started screwing with the planet. Just you, and all this lushness and noisy, vigorous *life*."

"You can't VR that," Xavier said softly.

"Nope." Roman glanced up at him. "If I get out of this, maybe I can show you. The permits are hard to come by, but between my name and your money, maybe."

"I'd like that."

It hung between them—possibilities, a future, shadowed by fear. They could be something together, he was sure, if they only got the chance. Xavier had never felt this connection with another guy, this desire to spend time together not just in bed but everywhere else, to learn a man's quirks, passions, interests, abilities... and to reveal his own. His heart sped up. The sudden mix of need and terror caught his breath.

Roman's voice was rough too when he said, "This is where, if I was real, I'd kiss the crap out of you."

"Unless I got to you first." Suddenly his body wanted in on the act. "On my knees."

“Ah, hell.” Roman held his hands over his groin, which did nothing to disguise his reaction to the words. The faint blue light around him shone on sleek muscles gone tense and aroused. “Fuck. No fair talking like that when I’m naked and can’t touch you.”

Xavier shifted around in his chair, his own erection making sitting still difficult. He forced a laugh. “Yeah. Major blue balls for both of us.” He pressed a hand on his jeans.

Roman’s eyes darkened. “You know that’s not helping, right?”

“Neither was walking around waving that ass in my face.”

“I don’t wave my ass. If it’s in your face, it’s ’cause you’re staring.”

“Maybe I am.” He rubbed himself a bit harder. So stupid, when this couldn’t go anywhere.

“Keep doing that,” Roman said.

“What?”

“Jerk yourself. I want to see.”

“Here? Now?” He glanced around the room, and at the thinly curtained window.

“You’re not expecting anyone, right? I like this room. It feels like home. And if I... Whatever happens, yeah, I want to see you lose it one fucking time.”

Xavier licked his dry lips, pressing his eager dick hard enough to hurt, to keep control. “I wish...”

“Don’t. Let’s just take what we can. All right? Just this once, do whatever we can. I want to hear you grunt and cuss and come.”

“Fuck.” He stared at Roman, at his eyes, burningly focused on him, at the rise of his cock, too big to be hidden by his hands. “You too, then.”

“Um.”

“You can touch yourself, right? So if I do this, then I want to see you too. Don’t tell me you don’t want to.” He deliberately stared at Roman’s dick, where a flicker of reflected shine showed that at least part of his body was definitely onboard.

“Jerking off together.” Roman’s tone was dismissive, but his hands shifted from hiding to cupping himself. He laughed, and the sound was softer, less

scornful. "That's how I figured out I was gay, you know. Joe Chu, and a couple other buddies, sitting around this hideout we had." Slowly, leisurely, he slid his hand up his naked shaft, and down, and up. Xavier watched, half-hypnotized by the slower rougher tone of Roman's voice, and the rhythmic glide of his hand over that rigid length. Again. Slow slide.

"You're falling behind," Roman said. He shifted up onto his knees, legs spread to brace himself, cock standing up to his hand.

"Hell." Xavier muttered a couple of commands in the com, to set the perimeter alarm up a notch. Then he reached for his jeans button, hesitated only a second, and undid it.

"Mm," Roman murmured, "Finally. The closest to naked I've seen you was under a sheet. It's been damned unfair so far. I want to see all of you for once."

"I'm not as ripped as you." He undressed quickly, dropping his clothes behind the chair.

"Nice and sleek, though. What I like." Roman's voice dropped even lower. "You're exactly what I like."

Xavier stopped when he was naked, and they looked at each other. Roman was right. It was like some last barrier had been breached. Before, Roman being naked had been this constant reminder of how fracked-up everything was, but now they were two naked guys, about to get off together.

He sat in his chair, scooting forward and letting his thighs fall open to expose himself. He loved the way Roman's gaze was fixed right *there*. Just the heat of that look made him harder. He ran the flat of his palm over his stomach and down to frame himself in the V of his fingers. "So. Joe Chu?"

"Huh? Who?" Roman's eyes looked glazed. "Oh, yeah. Thirteen and we thought we were hot shit. Breaking every law. We had booze in there, and one of the guys brought this new projection tablet he'd stolen and linked some porn. Straight porn, and he put it up on the wall life-sized. Pretty soon, everyone had their dicks out, and they're all pulling away, staring at the bigger-than-real bouncing tits, and I'm watching Joe Chu's hand on his dick. Gay. Definitely."

"Was it a problem?" Xavier touched himself, lightly, reluctant to start because he didn't want this to ever end. This moment would linger—Roman's slow voice, the strong muscles of his forearm, the shine on his cockhead as it slid through his fist, the catch of his breath. Whatever came next, he would remember this.

“Nah. Maybe the guys were colder for a bit, but Larry’s brother was gay and the meanest fucking bastard in the place. No one mistook gay for soft down there. At most, a couple of the guys would get up in my face for looking at them *that way*. When I never did anything about it, they settled down.”

He wanted to ask where *down there* was, what happened next. They’d talked a lot already, through the long hours of the last few days. But there was so much of Roman he didn’t yet know. Not the time now though. He wrapped his fingers around himself, and grunted at the jolt of sensation.

“Yeah, Xav, do that.” Roman grinned. “I’m way ahead of you. I want to see it.”

“Fuck.” He began stroking himself in earnest, using the slick that was already leaking as he rubbed across the tip.

Roman’s grin got fierce. “Spit in your palm. Make it wet. I want to hear.”

“Uh.” He’d never really done spit. Maybe he was too much of a planner, because he’d always had condoms available and lube ready and prepared, even for this. Never spontaneous and rough and dry anything. He compromised by licking his palm, sloppy and slow. When Roman grunted, he thought, *to hell with it*, and spat too. His next stroke slurped wetly over his cock, and they both moaned.

“Hell, yeah. Like that.” Roman’s hand matched his for a moment, so each stroke rocked them both. Then he sped up and Roman slowed, and their eyes met.

Xavier slid out of the chair to his knees, as close as he could get without touching Roman. They were a foot apart, hands working, chests heaving with rapid breaths, mouths dropping open to take harsher gasps. He shook with wanting, *needing* to take this farther. There was Roman, hot and sweaty and right there, within reach and yet not. He put his free hand between his legs, sitting back on his heels so he could reach under and touch himself in all the ways he really wanted Roman’s strong hands on him.

“Fuck yeah,” Roman said. “Do that. Balls, taint, rub, fuck, touch yourself. Come all the hell over.”

Xavier had never been good with the words, but he whimpered and grunted and let his increasingly desperate strokes do the talking. He ran his gaze over Roman’s body, the braced thighs, flat stomach, hard shaft and fast forceful hands. Again and again, he looked back to Roman’s face. That expression as

their eyes met, boiling with the need to do more, have more, feel more, brought him over at last. He gasped, groaned wordlessly, and came, in shuddering, pulsing jets over his hand and leg and the kitchen floor.

Roman muttered, "Holy fuck." He clamped his hand down on himself as if trying to hold back, until his knuckles visibly whitened, but his jaw clenched and his skin flushed red beneath the tan. A thread of cum spurted through his fingers. He loosened his grip, rubbing frantically, his climax visibly taking him over as he came in thick, white ribbons.

One drop of semen hit Xavier's thigh and faded, unfelt. He ran a finger over the spot, but there was nothing left. He reached for Roman's arm, touching him on the wrist where his tendons still stood out sharply, and could barely sense the incongruously soft, faint, yielding presence beneath his fingertips. It wasn't just the aftershocks of coming that made his voice shake as he said, "God, that was hot. I wish. Oh, hell."

They stared at each other, breathing hard. Xavier wondered if his pupils were as blown, if his face was as flushed as Roman's. Probably worse. His whole body twitched. He gritted his teeth and sucked in long hissing breaths.

Roman opened his fingers and looked down at his messy hand. As they watched, the slick, shiny mess faded from his skin, from the floor, everywhere, dulling, vanishing. Roman said, in a voice carefully devoid of feeling, "Well, that makes clean-up easier."

Xavier suddenly wanted to kiss him, more than he ever had. Without stopping to think, he said, "If I could hold you right now, I'd have my arms around you and my tongue in your mouth. And probably be halfway to hard again."

"Yeah. Well. I guess we have to wait for that." Roman looked down at his hands, opening his palms and fingers wide as if to find some remnant of what they'd done. Then he eased back off his heels and sat against the wall, his hands open and limp on his naked knees.

Xavier was suddenly aware of how naked *he* was, in the daytime in a public part of the house. Well, technically public. Still, you never knew. The FBI might come through any time. If the fates were kind, it would be to say they'd found the other donors. He stood, his knees still shaky. "Well since I don't have magic, self-cleaning cum..."

"Don't," Roman said. "Don't joke. Just for now."

"All right. I do want to clean up and get dressed, though."

"Yeah. I wish I could."

Xavier tipped one of the kitchen chairs sideways, and slid it so the seat was in front of Roman, screening his crotch from view. "Is that okay? Better?"

"Yeah. Just don't block the damned laser."

"Crud!" He grabbed for the range-finder, forgotten on the table, steadying its beam on Roman's chest. "Want the second one for safety back-up? Although, my outside laser is staying on. You still look touched with the blue, so that should be enough, right?"

"I don't know. I guess," Roman said. "I'm tired. Just sick of all of this. Except you. Not sick of you, but this crazy, crazy... craziness."

"Better than being dead."

"Unless I am dead. Maybe I died, down there, and I just don't know it."

He managed a light tone, to say, "For a dead man, you come pretty damn hard."

"There is that."

He went to the sink for his own clean up, mopping off and dressing in silence. When he glanced at Roman, he was sitting apparently dozing with his head tipped back. His dark hair merged into the wall. Xavier winced, and said, "What do you think happens if you fall asleep here?"

"I don't know." Roman didn't open his eyes. "I'm tired, but I don't think I'll sleep. You should though. I bet you haven't lately."

"I'm fine. I'll have some coffee." He bustled around the kitchen, getting out some cookies, taking comfort from asking the pot for his favorite caramel-flavored brew, since Tam wasn't there to razz him for it. It was oddly comforting too, to see Roman out of the corner of his eye. Every time, there was a jolt of recognition, as if something inside him said, "*Yeah, he's supposed to be here.*" Until he caught sight again of the blurs around the edges and his cautious side would add, "*But not like that.*"

His cell-com asked if he wanted to take a call from the hospital. It was his hired nurse, reporting that Tam had woken, drunk a little water, and gone back to sleep. All was well. "Good," he said. "Tell her I'm fine and have a friend staying over. She'll know who I mean."

When he clicked off, Roman was eyeing him. "So if they do find my, um, physical body, you think they'll let you know about it?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"If I'm not able to tell them you're my friend, there's nothing in real life to connect us. No reason you should be an exception to my MedPrivacy rules."

"Crud." Xavier realized he hadn't thought of that. He should have. That kind of paperwork detail was his job. "Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"No. But I mean, I should have thought of it. I could've fixed that before now. If you give me your passwords, I can hack in, get myself listed."

"You can do that?"

"Hell, yeah. Even without the codes, but easier with. Easiest with a retina scan, but I'm betting the camera won't pick yours up. It didn't before."

"You're a man of many talents. Let's try."

It gave them something concrete to do, and by the time Xavier had hacked a few databases and put himself into Roman's records, he felt his usual optimism rising. They chatted as he worked, about searches and what the FBI might be doing, and how fast they would notify next of kin if they found something. Roman was one hell of a cynic. Xavier had to believe this would work out.

As they talked, something began niggling at him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Roman said, "You look like you have a stomach ache. You haven't eaten, I bet."

"No. Well, the cookies. But it's not that. Anyway, I feel weird eating in front of you."

"I like watching you do stuff. Passes the time."

"Okay." He went to the freezer for a ready-meal. No way was he going to prep and cook and eat a real meal with Roman sitting there watching. With both of them knowing that somewhere, lost, underground, Roman's body was wasting away from lack of care. From lack of the goddamned nurses who walked away from a little kid and... and... and...

"Crud! That might work!" He dropped the pack of frozen soup and whirled to look at Roman.

“What?”

“That nurse. The one at the facility that you saw. Ginny, you said. Local accent, or near enough. Not too old, so she has to have graduated within the last, what, ten years?”

“Probably,” Roman said slowly. “If she’s an actual nurse.”

“Worth looking, right?” He pulled his tablet toward him, ignoring the soup. “We’ll start with the assumption that’s her real first name. Ginny, Virginia, Gineva, something like that with a G-I-N in it.” He began entering search parameters. “Nursing program or aide program. The last twenty years, to be safe in case she was a prodigy or had a face-lift. Not a visible minority. That’ll narrow it down. Let’s do the whole country, in case she went away for school.”

Roman stood. “She might not have finished her training.”

He ignored that, on a wave of rising hope. “I’ll pull in pictures, selfies, graduation shots for you to look at. Let’s see how many hits.” He scrolled. “Crap, there’s a vintage Ginny nurse doll. Spams the search.” He adjusted the exclusions, and set some of his favorite bots roaming. The number of hits began climbing.

When he hit three hundred, he could feel his optimism seeping away. And yet, it was worth a try. He set the search to background, and brought the tablet to where Roman could see it. “We’ll do ten per page. You can scan them, eliminate the clearly wrong ones.”

He sat on the floor, and after a moment, Roman sank down beside him. He called up the first page, some formal shots, some candid, and hovered his finger over the first one. “Tell me *No* or *Maybe*.” *Or Yes; please at some point tell me yes.*

Roman hesitated, then bent to look closer. “No. No. No. Um, maybe although I don’t think so. If she dyed her hair or something... Maybe. No. No.”

They worked through page after page. On the plus side, the maybes were rare, so Roman really did have some picture in mind. Less than a dozen had been set for a recheck, when he flipped to the next page, and Roman jolted. “Shit!”

“What?”

“Her.” Roman pointed, his finger hovering over a picture of a blond young woman. “I think. Very close, anyway.”

“How close? Do we stop here?”

“I’m not certain. Crap.”

He pulled the tablet back to switch things up. “We’ll keep her. Do a face recognition match—the twenty closest to her. Scramble them up.” He set it up, his fingers *not* trembling as he tapped his custom icons. “Okay, look again. Just scan through them for the best one.”

He held it out—a four by five array of pictures. Roman stared carefully at each one, then pointed, firmly enough that he dipped his fingertip into the electronics, before jerking back. “Sorry. That one. I’m sure.” It was the same woman.

“You’d better not have scrambled anything inside there with your ninja touch,” Xavier joked, already canceling runs and changing to a focused search. “I love this tablet almost as much as...” He broke off, flushing, and bent to his work. “Here she is. Virginia Suzanne Dorton. Thirty years old, graduated nine years ago, list of employment...” He scanned it. “Nothing listed for the last three years.”

“Unemployed?”

“Or working under the table.” He sent a few extra probes out. “Unless she’s in a government black box I should be able to dig up something.”

“What are you looking for?”

“You don’t want to know.” He lined up some more illegal tracers.

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“Okay. Her address. Credit. Cell-com code and tracking, if I can find it.”

“You can do that? I thought...”

“What? That only law enforcement could follow us around by our electronics? Please.” He adjusted a bot. “Unless you pay through the nose or do your own security, the data is all there, just waiting to be ferreted out.” He grinned.

“Why the smile?”

“My favorite ferret is doing its job.” He set the data to copy to his home system and linked his cell-com. “Come to Papa, little bits and bytes.” He turned the tablet so Roman could see it again. “There she is. Her address, where she shops, her boyfriends, her mother, her two aunts, aaaaand where she is right

now.” He pointed at the trace he had set on her com signal. “Unless she was smart enough to ditch her com or give it to someone else to carry around to confuse things, she’s driving between the local mall and one of her boyfriends’ places.”

“Still here in the state? Is she nuts?”

“Either dumb or certain she’s safe, or taking her time about leaving.” He stood, and reached for the range-finder. “Come on.”

“Should we call the cops?”

“And tell them what?”

“Anonymous tip again?”

Xavier hesitated. “If they believe me, then they have to prove it legally. Bring her in. Convince her to talk. And if she really left a child down there to die of starvation, well, what are the odds she’ll tell them where?”

“So what will you do?” Roman opened and closed his fists. “I’m not going to be any help taking her on.”

“You never know.” He frowned. “Anyway, what kind of a wimp do you think I am?”

“I hope you have a better plan than beating the information out of her with your fists. Sorry, Xav, but there’s no guarantee you’re tougher than this woman. I met some nurses in the army who could wipe the floor with both of us.”

Xavier curled his lip. “I’m not planning on punching out anyone.” No matter how tempting it was. “Wait here.” He ran upstairs to Tam’s room, foraged, and came back down. “Tam’s the one who taught me to always have a back-up plan. And preferably a back-up for your back-up.”

“You haven’t even told me the front-up plan.”

“We find her. We ask her. If she refuses to help at first then,”—he held up his left hand—“I have a carrot,”—Tam’s bracelet sparkled with diamonds. “Or a stick.” He showed Roman the compact gun in his right hand. “Tam had her personal Taser with her when she was snatched but this was in her room. And the real thing carries a lot more, um, authority.”

“And if Ginny won’t sell, and doesn’t believe you’ll shoot?”

He met Roman’s eyes. “Then we threaten to haunt her for the rest of her life with the ghost of a gay man who hates her, and will never change his mind or go away.”

Roman said carefully, "That sounds pretty bleak to me too."

"Oh, Roman, it's a threat. Like the gun. If the worst happens..." Well, would the worst be Roman dying and vanishing forever? Or not vanishing? He didn't want to think about either one. "If you hang around as a ghost, you had damned well better haunt me and jack off in my bedroom, not waste your time on her."

Roman nodded slowly. "I'd really rather neither. How valuable is the jewelry?"

"Only about thirty thou. But I'll tell her half a mil. If she knows how her bosses' business works, who the customers are, she might believe it's worth that much. I'm probably not close to the richest of their clients, and rich folk love their diamonds."

Roman blew out a breath. "Okay. Hell, let's give it a try."

Chapter 12

Roman watched the world go by through the smoked windows of Xavier's less-valuable but more anonymous sedan. It was morning now, with the sun slanting low on the horizon. Another day dawning. He wondered how his body was doing, back wherever. How the kid was doing. Despite knowing that he would be trapped, and useless, and worse off than ever, there was a strong pull to go back.

He turned to look at Xavier instead. Xavier drove manually, paying attention to both the road and an inaudible commentary from his cell-com. Dressed in slick-jeans and a dress shirt, he didn't look remarkable, certainly not wealthy. If anything, he looked more like a university professor than Roman ever had. Even back when Roman got to actually wear any damn clothes. He shifted uneasily on the seat.

"Ten minutes," Xavier said. "Have you thought any more about going in visible or not?"

"Not." He shuddered at the thought of walking visible and naked up to a building in this increasingly lower-class neighborhood. If he'd ever had any inclination to become a nudist, the last few days of walking around with his junk hanging out had cured him of it. Besides which, an ace in the hole was worth a lot more if it came as a surprise.

Xavier nodded. "You're sure you can reappear if we need you to, though, right? If I turn the laser back on?"

He wasn't sure of anything. He felt more tired and draggy with every passing hour. He didn't know if that was just emotional, or if his real body was weakening. Or it might just be how much time he'd spent out of the flesh. But he didn't want to worry Xavier, so he said, "I did it before."

"Right."

A few minutes later, Xavier slowed, turned a corner, slowed some more. The streets were narrower, parked up with the cheap fiberglass hulks of Detroit's last gasp, most of which probably hadn't moved since gas hit thirty bucks a gallon. The houses were smaller, still single-family with deeply shaded front porches, but marred by sagging roof-lines, and debris-cluttered front yards. "Not dating a tycoon, is she?"

“Nope. Four more blocks.”

Roman sat straighter, his muscles tense and his breathing getting faster as they approached their goal. Xavier pulled over between a Chevy Creekside with no tires, and a really antique VW, switched off the engine and turned to him. “So. Here we are.”

Roman had an abrupt rush of anxiety. This really wasn't Xavier's thing; it was a crazy risk. “You're sure you don't want to call some kind of back-up? Maybe a friend of Tam's? Someone?”

Xavier took the gun out of the armrest compartment, checked it, and then leaned forward to fit it into a small holster at the back of his jeans. He tugged his shirt out to cover it, and gave Roman a long look. “No. Tam's friends tend to be law-and-order types, anyway.”

“You're not going make me watch you get beat up or killed, right?”

“I sure as hell hope not.” Xavier blew out a breath, and rubbed his palms dry on his thighs. It was pretty obvious he wasn't as calm as he wanted to seem. But he squared his shoulders and pulled out the polarized lenses. “Ready?”

Hell, no. “Yeah.”

They were both silent, as Xavier attenuated the laser beam down. Roman only recognized the moment when he faded from view by the subtle widening of Xavier's eyes, and the way he hesitated a second before finishing the lens rotation.

Roman waved a hand. “Hey, Xav, can you still hear me?”

Xavier said nothing, just slowly switched open the passenger door. Roman slid out, and moved away. Xavier slowly counted out loud down from ten, closed the passenger door and stepped out into the quiet street. He came around to the sidewalk, looking past and through Roman. “Okay,” he muttered, mostly under his breath. “Time to do this. Just like in the vids.”

Roman followed him up a short front walk to a low house, its dilapidated porch fronted by three worn wooden steps. Xavier stopped, consulted his cell-com, and then went up to the door. Roman climbed the steps too, but stood off to the side where he was less likely to get run over, or run through, if Xavier had to retreat.

Xavier knocked, holding his hand over the peephole lens. The door speaker crackled with an irritable, “What?”

Xavier whined nasally, "Stewart. I'm a friend of Bruce's. I left my pass-card in there. I need it."

"Go away, Stew."

"No chance. I need it."

"You can wait till Bruce gets back."

Xavier aimed a wide-eyed look in Roman's general direction, then said, "Come on, you uptight bitch. Lemme in! Or I'll stand here and make noise until you do."

There was a pause, then the door opened a crack. "Listen, you scumbucket..."

Xavier didn't wait. He slammed himself into the crack, driving the door open and shoving the woman behind it back against the hallway wall. Two fast steps inside, and he slammed the door, forcing Roman to walk through it behind him. To Roman's surprise, Xavier managed to get his gun out of the holster and aimed, before the woman could draw breath to scream.

"Be quiet, or die," Xavier snarled. "Freeze."

The nurse looked up and down, from his face to the gun and back, and swallowed any sound. Xavier reached over fast, unhooked her cell-com from behind her ear, and slid it into his pocket.

"Smart," Xavier said. "I knew you had to be smart."

The nurse recoiled back against the wall, crossing her arms over her body. "What do you want?"

"Answers. And for no one to end up dead."

"My boyfriend is a big, strong guy and he'll be walking in that door any minute."

"Bruce is a hundred and sixty-two pounds, and he's at work at Cuso's Packing till six tonight."

Her eyes widened. "Who *are* you?"

Roman could almost see Xavier channeling Masque, from the early episodes when he was more bad-guy than good. "I could be your worst nightmare, or I might be the person to get you out of this fracking dump."

"I don't want out."

“You worked illegal hidden burn-before-reading medical shit because you *didn't* want to get away from the rats and the brown-outs?”

“How do you know what I did? If I did?”

Xavier took up a sinister sing-song tone. “You’re Virginia Suzanne Dorton. Born August twelve, two thousand nine. Class of 2027 at GWB High. Graduated with an RN from Gausprey Nursing Academy...” Fact after fact, which had to be coming from his cell-com but came out as smooth as if memorized. He got to, “...and agreed to provide nursing services for kidnap victims...”

“I don’t! I didn’t.”

He paused in the litany to eye her with very nice disdain. “Don’t waste my time by telling me you thought that was a legit job?”

Her gaze dropped, and a flush rose on her cheeks.

“Right.”

She whispered, “What do you want?”

“One victim. A small child.”

She looked up fast, going from flushed to pale. “No. There isn’t anyone.”

“Don’t bullshit me. I know there is. I know she’s being housed in the facility. And I know you all packed and ran, and left her to rot.”

The nurse took a short breath. “She’s dead.”

“More bullshit.”

“Brain dead. Really.”

“That’s fine.” Xavier raised the gun from her chest to point at her face. “The recipient isn’t. Yet.”

“What?”

“I don’t care what you did to that kid. I don’t care what was legal or wasn’t. There’s another kid I *do* care about who needs her to live.”

“Another?” The nurse slowly regained her color.

“You can help me find the donor, before she really does rot. If you do, I’ll let you go, with a head-start and this.” He dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out the bracelet, twisting it in the cheap flickering hallway light. “Half a million in diamonds. Enough to get away clean, if you’re smart.”

“Bruce will...”

“He’s an addict. He’ll drag you down. You didn’t leave when you should have, when it all went belly-up. Bad for you. Good for me, but you get one more chance now. Show me the place, and I’ll turn you loose. Or... don’t.” Xavier put the bracelet back in his pocket, and gave her Masque’s narrow-eyed stare. “And find out just how much my employer *hates* to lose something he wants.”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. You went there every day.”

She looked crafty. “You need my help. That’s worth more than some flashy fake jewelry. And I need some guarantees.”

“I could back-track, get a satellite trace for your car. See where you went last week, or last month. But it’d be slow and tedious and it might happen too late. That would be a pity. It would definitely be too bad for you.”

“Too bad for you, too.”

“But I would survive my boss’s, um, displeasure. You wouldn’t.”

Roman wondered if Xavier was laying it on too thick, but the nurse appeared to have watched the same vids, because she shivered in recognition of the threat.

“I can’t show you. They’ll kill me.”

“*They* aren’t here. I am.”

“Crud, crud, fucking crud.” She dug her hands into her hair, tugging on it. “I don’t know!”

“It’s simple. Help me find the kid and walk away with enough money to get lost permanently. Away from them and me. Or force me to find a different way to *persuade* you. But then you might be too damaged to run, afterward.”

“Fuck.” As if the word gave her a thought, she widened her eyes and licked her lips.

“Forget it.” Xavier gestured toward the door. “You’re out of time.”

“Let me get my bag.” She reached for a purse on a wall hook.

“Ah-ah.” Xavier scooped it away from her. “So now we’re going to walk all friendly to my car. My gun will be right here.” He lowered his hand behind the

purse. "I would really hate to shoot you and have to drag you there, because it would be *so* inconvenient."

"Fuck you."

"Walking. Or bleeding?"

Her glare could have melted steel. Roman was more impressed by Xavier every minute, even knowing where his dialogue was coming from. It still took nerve to follow through, in the face of a hundred and thirty pounds of really pissed off woman. For a moment, everything hung in the balance. Then there was a small, soft pop, and a cloud of dust rose from the wall a few inches from the woman's shoulder.

"You don't need two arms to talk," Xavier said, moving the gun back behind the purse.

"Christ!"

"I'm going to open the door. Keep your hands visible, and don't touch anything or say a word on your way out. Whatever security Bruce has on this dump wouldn't be fast enough to save you anyway."

She glared again, but when he opened the door, she walked out as directed. Xavier shut it, and Roman stepped right through it to follow them down the walk. Xavier popped the passenger door and motioned Ginny to get in. She looked around wildly, clearly hoping for help, but the neighborhood was silent. She lowered herself stiffly into the car. Xavier bent over her, and Roman heard the click of Tam's spare handcuffs being deployed.

Xavier locked her door and released the back door. He leaned in, dumping half the contents of Ginny's purse on the floor back there, giving Roman time to brush past him. When he was settled, Roman made brief deliberate contact, passing his hand across Xavier's wrist to assure him they were good to go. Xavier nodded, and went around to his own seat.

By the time they were on the road, with Roman formless in the back of the car, Ginny had recovered some of her poise. She said, "What if I don't help you?"

Xavier shook his head sadly. "Ginny, really. You're in my car, without your com. You have no tracker. Your boyfriend won't be home for hours, and may be too stoned by then to even notice you're gone. What choice do you think you have?"

"I can simply keep my mouth shut." She pressed her lips together.

"Yeah. But then I can hardly let you go, can I? I'd be guilty of kidnapping." Roman saw a look of nausea cross Xavier's face, and noticed the way his eyes flicked up to the rear-view mirror, glancing past Roman's. Roman saw the pulse beating fast in Xavier's neck, and realized that the full implications of what they were doing had only just now hit Xavier.

And he's doing this for me. It hit Roman too, how far Xavier was willing to go, on nothing more than Roman's crazy, invisible, unsupported word. *We're kidnapping a stranger.* The unreality of the whole situation made him feel light-headed.

Xavier swallowed visibly, but soldiered on. "If you help me, each of us will have something on the other. We can go our separate ways. If not, well, jobless women with crudbucket boyfriends do disappear. It happens all the time."

She sighed. "Fuck. I knew it, right? Knew it was too good to last. Easy money, easy work, keep your mouth shut, and don't declare it. And then they said to clean up and get out. We all did, even if no one wanted to, well, finish things. We just left. And Reynolds, he said to not even go home. He told me to stay with someone else, get out of town fast, but I picked Bruce to stay with and the fucker stole my travel money."

Roman wondered if by snatching Ginny they'd beaten someone else to the punch. Would whoever was behind the whole scheme have cleaned her up as a loose end? They'd had time already to do it, but maybe they hadn't been as good as Xavier at finding her.

Xavier's thoughts must have paralleled his, because he said, "You'd be smart to get very lost, as soon as we're done. My boss isn't the only one who likes things clean and tidy."

"You'll really let me go?"

"Ginny, I want an address. I don't need complications. Yeah, you help me and I'll forget you exist."

"Hm." After a long pause she said, "You need to get onto the tollway, going north, about twenty minutes."

The wave of relief that washed through Roman hit him so hard it made him dizzy. Or maybe something else did, because his vision blurred. Xavier became a fuzzy shape in the seat in front of him. Ginny's voice buzzed in three-part dissonance. The words got lost in the jumble of sound.

He leaned forward, reaching for Xavier. They didn't connect, of course. Couldn't touch. Would never touch. There was a trace of lingering warmth on his fingertips, just a hint that maybe he'd come close. His vision cleared enough to watch his hand trail through Xavier's jaw, down his neck. The sensation quickly faded, cooled, thinned. His vision clouded more. The last thing he heard was Xavier saying, "Roman? Is that you?" Then the world went dark.

He slowly came back to awareness in his hospital bed, still on his side, in the stale-smelling room. Breathing was difficult. His chest felt tight. All around him the weight of silence and emptiness pressed down. He struggled to open his eyes, and failed. Struggled to move a hand, a finger, his tongue, something. His body was a trap, a useless lump of unresponsive flesh.

He felt worse than ever before, disoriented and nauseous. The smell of human waste and sweat surrounded him, and each breath burned thinly in his chest. He remembered what Xavier had said about CO2 pooling around his face. Maybe he didn't have a week before he choked on his own waste. Maybe he had a day, or an hour.

He tried to breathe differently. He held his breath, then forced it out hard. Did it again. He had some small success, slight movements of his mouth and lips and chest. He pushed harder, trying to blow the hovering air. Maybe he could create currents, stir up some oxygen.

Xavier was coming. He clung to that, as he puffed in dizzying futility. If he could hold on, Xavier would find him. But the darkness was coming back, different than ever before. He wasn't moving into it; it was falling on him, thick and heavy and smothering. His last conscious thought was that he didn't want Xavier to find him this way, dead in his own filth. *I'm sorry, Xav.* But it was out of his control, and no matter how he raged and fought against the dark, eventually his breathing became all that mattered, all he knew, and he was lost.

Xavier stared at the little metal barn on the hillside below them. "That?"

"Yeah."

"So the complex is underneath it?"

"Well, yeah." Ginny twisted her wrists against the cuffs that held her hands down in the seatbelt. "Let me go now."

"Not so fast." He pulled his tablet out of the back, got into a surveillance program, and spent a shit-ton of his money for immediate live-feed sat images

of the area. There was his car, parked on the hill above the building. No one else seemed to be around. Half a mile away, cars moved on a main road, but this backwater was deserted. He spent more bucks on a couple of look-back spot-checks. There were images available from an hour ago and eighteen hours ago. Neither showed anything but a white metal roof, a deserted gravel road, and acres of scrubby woods.

He turned to Ginny. "So how do you get inside?"

She pursed her lips and was silent, but he waited her out. He wanted to smack her, maybe even stick the gun under her chin and threaten to blow her brains out if she didn't get him down there *now!* Every instinct said that they were running out of time.

Halfway through the drive on the tollway, he'd felt a touch on his face, and somehow known it was Roman saying good-bye. The car seemed suddenly emptier without that silent and invisible presence in the back seat. He shouldn't have noticed, or been able to tell, but he was certain Roman had gone.

At some point, he'd clearly also lost some of his menace in Ginny's eyes. Maybe it happened when he'd tried to talk to apparently thin air, or maybe when he'd stopped trying, and had to clench his teeth to keep his breathing from shaking. She'd cast little sideways glances at him, and started asking awkward questions he didn't bother to answer. And he'd felt her quit shrinking and sit taller. There was a little curl to her lip that wasn't reassuring.

So instead of making wild threats he sat there, like he had all the time in the world, until finally she said, "Fuck it. I can get you in. It takes a bio for the door, and key codes at the top end, and down below."

"All right." He got out, went around and unbuckled her. But instead of taking off the cuffs completely, he locked her right wrist to his left.

"What the fuck?" She jerked on their joined wrists.

"If you mess with me, if you set off an alarm code, what happens to me will happen to you."

"Paranoid crapsucker."

"Let's go."

He let her set the pace, down the hill from where he'd parked. As they got close to the building, he could imagine being watched. Surely there were cameras mounted here, to monitor the approach. Maybe even weapons to cover

the door? Only Roman's story about the place being deserted allowed him to walk boldly forward. And without Roman's reassuring presence, part of him began frantically wondering what he was doing playing ghosts and robbers at his age. He stuffed his doubts down behind an aura of calm. "So where's the entrance?"

"Here." Ginny flipped up a section of the cheap-looking aluminum siding to reveal a high-quality palm-lock. She put her hand on it. Xavier had a moment's panic that without power it would be stuck shut, but the green light came on, and the garage-sized door rolled silently upward.

"We usually parked inside," she said.

He had to move fast to follow her in, as the door began rolling back down into place. As it sealed shut, the interior became nearly pitch black.

"Crap," she said. "No lights. They should be automatic."

"Is there a power breaker box?"

"I guess."

This time he was the one to jerk her forward, as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. A faint light came from a back corner, and sure enough it was the safety on the switch box. He opened it, mostly by feel, fumbled around, trying not to think about the voltages he was sticking his hands into, and found a good-sized switch. When he pulled it down, nothing happened. "Frack." He found another, and repeated the maneuver. This time there was a hum and buzz, and overhead lights came on. Quickly he ran through the switches in the box, turning on everything. Better to trip an alarm than to miss the chance to restart the ventilation below. Various hums and rumbles came to life as he closed the breakers.

The space they were in was an almost-empty garage, insulated and clean, with steel shelving on the walls. There were a few tools, some boxes and bins, and no visible elevator. "Now how do we get down?" he asked.

"Hey, there's no 'we' about this. You can do the rest yourself. I'll point you the right direction, give you the codes and then I'm out of here."

"Not yet. We'll go down together. I'll make sure all the codes work on both levels, and *then* you can go."

He was caught by surprise as she swung a clumsy fist at his face. He ducked fast enough that the blow barely brushed his cheek.

"I'm not going down there!"

"What the crap? Ten minutes. A couple of codes. I swear, I won't stop you after that."

She glared at him, breathing hard, leaning toward the door. He braced his shoulder against the pull on his wrist, and stared back as hard as he could. After a long stand-off, she sighed and slumped. "Okay. But I'm not going into the rooms."

"Because...?" He saw the look in her eyes—fear and shame. "Because you don't want to see your victims?"

"Not mine. I took care of them. They came to me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like donors. What do you care?"

He caught himself back from saying too much. "I don't, as long as they're still live donors. Lead on."

Ginny entered her passcode in a control pad, and a set of fake shelving moved aside quietly, revealing the elevator. They got in and turned to face the doors as they closed silently, cutting off sight of the outside world. The elevator sank smoothly, almost imperceptibly.

"Just one level." Ginny's voice sounded thin and fast, details tumbling out. "Two wards, and support areas. Kitchen, bathrooms. Nursing station. Eight beds. We never had more than four people here at once though. Sometimes only one or two."

"Sounds like a cushy job." He stared at the doors, willing them to open. How slow could this crudsucking thing be?

"I guess. They needed a fair bit of care though. No higher brain functions, so they had to be hydrated, fed, turned, cleaned." She fell silent, perhaps remembering she'd left patients down here without that care. He hoped savagely that she was feeling every ounce of the guilt. He almost said so, but reminded himself that he needed her help a little longer, and kept silent.

The doors swooshed open. The air beyond smelled stale, but there was plenty of oxygen, judging by how easy it was to breathe.

"There," Ginny said. "The kid is that way. Last room. Now let's go up." She took a step backward, deeper into the elevator and set her heels. "Let me go!"

“Is there a passcode down here for the elevator?”

“Yeah. Shit.” She told him, and he manhandled her out long enough for the doors to close, so he could verify that they reopened.

“See? I told you. Now let me out! Right the fuck now!”

“Scared of ghosts?” Her growing panic was clear enough that he reluctantly let her yank them back into the elevator. Roman was down here, maybe yards away. He could knock this bitch out, take off the cuffs and go find him right now. Or maybe shoot her, if he didn’t want to leave her alone down here. No one would care. She’d been part of this vicious mess. He got as far as putting his hand to his holster, but stopped short and let the elevator doors close and carry them up, slowly, *away from Roman*.

At the top, he checked that the code was still valid after being used once, then walked her to the door and undid the cuffs. She rubbed her wrist, as she backed away from him. He waved over the control to open the main door.

“The bracelet is in your purse, on the ground beside the car.” He pointed. “Your cell-com stays with me. I’ll be bringing in help, as quick as they can get here, so I’d suggest you start walking fast. Maybe running. I won’t tell them about you yet, but I can’t promise that won’t change. Go.”

She edged out the door, still staring at him. “You’re really letting me go?”

“Really.” He tapped his own cell-com, dialing Tam’s FBI contact. “You won’t like the guys who’re coming, though.”

“Fuck. No.” She whirled and ran up the hill. He thought she might just keep going, but at the car, she paused, scooped up her purse, and looked back at him. He wondered if she might try something— sabotage perhaps—although he’d tried to strip her purse of anything more dangerous than lipstick. But in the end, she raised her hand in an odd, abortive gesture, before slinging her purse over her shoulder and scurrying off over the hill.

His com clicked. A voice said, “Special Agent Ibrahim. You are Xavier Faulkner?”

“Yes.”

“Why are you making contact?”

“Happy birthday, Special Agent,” Xavier said, “I have a present for you.” He jammed the rolling door open with a big box blocking the safety beam, and

turned to hurry back to the elevator. He gave the man as much information as he had time for, and made sure they had a lock on his location. Then he entered Ginny's code, and let the closing elevator doors cut him off. It wasn't a surprise when the com signal died, unable to make it through. He didn't need Roman to tell him the place was fortress-built. He'd seen the Greenberg shelter plans.

Roman was down there, somewhere, alive or dead. Another minute, two minutes, however long this elevator took. A hallway. A few doors. He would find Roman, and then he would know... know... He took a breath and waved his hand over the down key.

Chapter 13

The ride down seemed even slower than before, the elevator more lumbering and silent. Xavier fought a growing panic. *Trapped. I can't get out.* It was stupid. He had all the codes. It had to be an echo of Roman's fear, the way Xavier had seen him arrive back in the kitchen, shaken, crying. *I can't get out.*

We will, though, he vowed. Soon. Really soon.

He had the layout in his head. As soon as he could, he squeezed between the sliding doors, and hurried down the corridor. Through the swing doors, first room, open that one. The smell hit him, stale and rank but not putrid. Piss and shit and sweat, but live smells, dirty-body smells. Not rot, not decay. Only one bed was occupied by an unmoving figure. He ran over, put out his hand, and hesitated an inch from touching skin.

For the barest moment, he froze. If this was a fairy tale his touch might wake the sleeper, or shatter him in a thousand shards, or make him disappear. He'd always loved fantasy, but he'd never believed it before. For an instant, all the possibilities hovered under his hand. Then his fingers closed on dry, living flesh. He tugged on Roman's shoulder, rolling him onto his back, and looked down at the limp figure on the dirty, reeking bed.

It was Roman, but not quite. He looked older, thinner, less tanned. He was stubbled with days of beard his ghost-shadow had never had. His face was white and blank, and he breathed in short shallow pants that made his chest jerk and the tendons on his neck stand out.

Suddenly afraid, Xavier bent over him, tugging and pushing on the bed, fighting the wheel locks. He wrestled it over closer to the door, where the air smelled cleaner. Through all of it, Roman didn't wake, but gradually he became less pale and his breathing slowed and eased. Xavier bent over him, ignoring everything but that still-harsh ebb and flow of breath.

"Come on," he muttered. "I fracking kidnapped a nurse for you. I'm probably going to hell. You have to wake up to make it worth my while."

Roman slept on, the tightness of his neck and face slowly easing. Xavier touched his cheek, gently brushed a loose strand of hair into place, then bent and barely touched his mouth to Roman's, closing his eyes to isolate the

sensation of lips on lips. This was real. Or else he was so far into crazy he was never coming out. He had to believe. This man he was touching for the first time was already the dearest friend he'd ever had. If only they could have the chance to actually meet.

Roman's lips under his were chapped almost to cracking. Xavier eased back quickly and looked him over. Roman's eyes were sunken, the lids dark and bruised, little crusts mattering at the inner corners. His pulse beat fast in his throat; his veins were a faint blue tracery under dry skin. Xavier wished he'd taken that advanced first aid course Tam had suggested. He'd done the basics, and then convinced her that emergencies were hard to come by behind a computer desk. If he'd been less lazy, maybe he could do something helpful here. Roman was surely dehydrated, starving, short of breath, and an IV would be a hell of a lot more use to him than a kiss. But Xavier had nothing to give him.

There was a sink in the corner of the room. He couldn't find any towels, and didn't want to leave Roman to search, so he soaked the hem of his shirt and came back, wiping Roman's lips with the dampness. Roman didn't open his eyes or speak, but after a long pause his lips moved slightly, and his tongue touched the cloth. Xavier got more water and did it again. And again.

He was jerked out of his focus by the sound of doors and footsteps. He had time for a second of panic about the bad guys coming back for them before the room filled with dark suits. And yes, thank all the powers, a paramedic team and their stretcher. He turned to them gladly. "He's alive. But he won't wake up."

He was moved aside, gently but firmly. "We'll take over now."

"There's the kid, too." He flushed in sudden shame. Roman had worried about her, and he hadn't even gone to look. "So I was told. A second room and a little girl."

"You told us. We brought a second med team. We're on it."

He watched as they did a fast assessment exam, attaching half a dozen monitors to Roman's still body. Then Roman was lifted off the soiled bed, bundled onto a padded gurney, and hooked up to a drip. He followed as they rolled the stretcher out into the hall, dodging an attempt from one of the suits to grab his arm. "Where will you take him?"

"Regional Healthcare is closest," one of the paramedics said.

"I want to ride along."

"Oh, no, you don't." The older Feeb got hold of him and pulled him back. "You have one hell of a lot of questions to answer first."

They both paused as a second stretcher was hurried past, one of the paramedics guiding it while the other bent over a tiny, inert form.

Xavier's throat closed up, and he couldn't ask if she was all right. Paramedics and stretchers disappeared through the double doors toward the elevator. It took a second agent locking his fingers on Xavier's other elbow to keep him from following along. "I need..."

"The only thing you're going to do is come with us." The older man glared at him. "Do I have to arrest you?"

"For what?"

"I'll think of something."

Xavier glanced back and forth, from the double doors to the implacable man with a steel grip on his arm. He didn't doubt the agent would do exactly that. He *needed* to follow Roman, but being arrested would slow him down even more. He tried to relax and put a friendly look on his face. "What do you need from me?"

What they needed turned out to be hours spent sitting in a small room in their regional headquarters, going over and over his story. He stuck to the truth as much as possible, except for telling them that Ginny had contacted *him*. He suggested she might have been the anonymous tipster all along. He couldn't keep her out of it. Between her fingerprints and DNA all over the facility and his car, they would have her as soon as the first lab reports came back. But this way she was closer to the right side of the law, if they caught up with her.

In this awkward mix of truth and fiction, Roman became an old friend, someone whom he'd known back when. Someone he'd known well enough to still be Roman's emergency contact. When they rattled his cage about the coincidence of both his sister and his old friend being involved, he simply shrugged. He didn't know. He couldn't guess why. The world was a strange place. *Now that was a statement he could put a whole ton of conviction into.*

He was pretty sure they hadn't caught up with Ginny yet, but they were confident they would soon. He really hoped that just this once a criminal would be good enough to evade the FBI. Not that she didn't deserve to get caught, no matter what help she'd given him when he had a gun to her head, but their

stories weren't going to match. Maybe he could hire a lawyer for her in advance, and have them standing ready to tell her to keep her mouth shut.

In the end, they let him go. He had no idea where his car was, but that's what cab services were for. It was late afternoon by the time he made it to Regional Healthcare Hospital. He had to show ID twice to get to the Critical Care floor, and then he was stopped anyway by an FBI agent stationed in the hallway.

"Look," he said, with exaggerated patience he was far from feeling. "I just want to see him for a minute. I'm listed as his next of kin."

The agent handed back his ID with a shrug. "I have my orders. No visitors, no way, no how. Not until my boss okays it."

Xavier gritted through clenched teeth, "Then call your boss and get the okay."

"Hah. She's off duty and I'm not going to call her for something minor."

"What would you consider major? Because I'm sure it could be arranged."

The agent drew himself up taller. "Is that a threat, sir?"

Xavier wanted to channel Masque once more, to purr, "*It's a promise, little man.*" Unfortunately, he couldn't carry off either the words or the tone. Besides, he was getting past the point of being cool, clever and urbane, and well into wanting to punch someone. He'd spent hours with the FBI, and the flow of information went only one way. They hadn't told him *squat*, not even if Roman was still alive. At least now he had that much, but it was driving him crazy to be this close, and yet know nothing.

The agent's hand slid under his dark jacket toward the small of his back, and Xavier realized he'd clenched his own fists. Not smart. He opened his hands carefully and tried for one more friendly smile. "Can you at least tell me how he's doing?"

"He's alive." The agent sighed. "Look, if you're really next of kin, then the doctors should be willing to talk to you. Doctor Sanchez seems to be in charge. You could ask her."

Xavier stared over the agent's shoulder at the door. He was getting woozy with fatigue. It was good that Roman was being protected, and he should just accept that and go find a doctor or someone and talk to them, and then visit Tam at her hospital, and find his car...

No, find the car first. Unless they'd impounded it for forensics, which was likely, and he wondered if a spirit walker could leave DNA behind... He only realized he'd begun listing sideways when the agent grabbed his arm.

"You should go sit down somewhere." The agent's voice was reserved, but a bit less cold.

"Yes. Right. Thanks." Xavier rubbed his face. "Someone will let me know if anything changes, right?"

"I'm sure they will, sir. And when I do hear from my superior I'll ask about visiting."

He turned away, went down to the lobby, and managed to get directions on where to find Dr. Sanchez. The doctor wasn't in her office—of course—but there was a little lobby on the office floor. He sat down, pulled out his minitab to link her picture, so he would recognize her, and then tipped his head back to relax while waiting.

He woke to someone's hand on his shoulder. For a moment, it merged with a dream of Tam being dragged off down a corridor, and he surged to his feet, swinging blindly. Luckily, as his eyes cleared, he found he hadn't assaulted a doctor, and he was pinned, very efficiently, by Special Agent McGregor.

"Easy there," McGregor said. "Are you awake now?"

Xavier eased out of that hard grip and tugged his shirt straight. "Yes. Sorry."

"I shouldn't have shaken you, but you didn't answer when I said your name. Long day?"

"Long week." He quickly added, "With Tam and all."

"Yes." McGregor eyed him dubiously. "And now I'm told you're related to one of our donor victims as well."

"Not related. A good friend."

"And designated next of kin."

"Well, yeah." He held that skeptical gaze and didn't flinch. *Coincidence happened, or there wouldn't be a word for it.*

"You did provide proof of that?"

He knew McGregor had to have seen his faked-up documents, and believed them, or he wouldn't be just standing there. "Sure. We've known each other a

long time.” It felt like the most truthful lie he’d ever told. *Minutes on the clock aren’t the only measure of time.*

After a studied pause, McGregor sighed. “Well, as far as I can tell we’re on the same side, when it comes to Mr. Janz. So you might as well come on along. I’m going to talk to his doc, and I assume that’s why you’re here too.”

“I can wait my turn.” He’d see the doctor later, rather than talk now but in front of McGregor, with his penetrating skepticism and law-and-order focus.

But McGregor shook his head. “Come on. She’s a busy lady and she wants to go home. Let’s not waste her time.”

He followed along down the hall to Sanchez’s office. She was in, and pushed aside a tablet as they entered, waving them to a pair of seats in front of her desk. They got ID confirmations out of the way, plus some FBI warrants, and then McGregor said, “I need to know whether either of the new victims will survive to testify.”

Xavier felt the blood drain from his face. His vision sparkled. A moment later, McGregor’s hard hand pushed his head down on his knees. “Sorry, Faulkner. Breathe, okay?”

“I’m fine.” He shoved McGregor’s hand off and sat up. “Just short of sleep.”

Dr. Sanchez said, “That was unnecessarily blunt, Special Agent.”

“Sorry. Thoughtless of me.”

Xavier realized that McGregor was watching him intently, and thought the harshness might have been intentional, despite the apology. *Yes, I really do know the man. Yes, I really do care, you scumfucker.*

Dr. Sanchez said, “In any case, I can only talk about Mr. Janz in front of Mr. Faulkner. The other patient will have to wait until we have privacy.”

“Of course. Janz, then. How is he?”

Dr. Sanchez turned to Xavier instead, her tone gentle. “So far, Mr. Janz is still unconscious. We’re administering the antidote, but it’s a wait-and-see situation.”

“Antidote?” he managed.

“Yes.” She raised an eyebrow at McGregor, who nodded. “Mr. Janz was, um, poisoned is perhaps the best term. With a drug that makes victims

unconscious and cognitively suppressed, able to pass a brain-death scan for legal donorship.”

“What drug?”

“Diethyltri... Well, the street name is cognoburn.”

He subvocalized a search into his cell-com, and got an immediate flood of tags back. Not good ones. His bots whispered, “...*permanent coma, legal murder, experimental, kidnap becomes murder, vivisection...*” He winced. “That sounds... bad.”

“It’s not good.” She spoke clearly, softly. “The drug was designed to make vivisection more humane. Animal experiments could be carried out on drugged animals without the subject being aware of anything. But it got loose from the labs, of course, and was illegally used on people, with disastrous results.”

“Define disastrous.” He could search, but why bother when he had an expert right here.

After a moment she said, “It can be irreversible.”

“Damn.” He had no words for this. He took a deep breath. “Can be? How does that happen?”

“The drug blocks some brain receptors. Like putting a fake key in a lock, it keeps real neurotransmitters, the real keys, from getting into the keyholes. Without transmitters, the patient is unconscious, like being in a coma.”

His mouth was dry. He swallowed twice before asking, “But you can treat it? You said *antidote*.”

“Sometimes we can. If a patient got just a little of the drug, the antidote can float those false keys out and bind them up, so the neuron keyholes are open again. The brain wakes up.”

“And at a high dose?”

Her expression was bleak. “If there’s enough extra drug floating around in the CSF, the brain fluid, it starts fusing into clumps, complexes, like arc-welding the handles of the keys together. The antidote can’t get them loose from that locked-up structure. The effect is... um... permanent.”

“What about Roman? Can you tell?” *Please, can you tell? He talked to me. He was brave and smart and sexy and thinking, talking, functioning. Surely it must be all right!*

"He has a chance. Sometimes a patient's spinal fluid is full of the locked-up complexes, and we already know that the dose was irreversibly high."

She hesitated and gave McGregor a meaningful glance, and Xavier had a sudden flash of worry for the little kid. But that concern couldn't last, against his overwhelming panic for Roman. "Roman didn't, though? Have those?"

"No. None. That doesn't mean he doesn't have complexing, but he clearly got a lower dose of cognoburn than... Anyway, we're pouring the antidote into him, as fast as is safe. His fMRI had more activity too, not just baseline. He had some frontal lobe activation. And a little more at the three-hour recheck. So there's hope."

"Hope."

"Yes. It can take from twelve to forty-eight hours for the antidote to do its job. There may be a little improvement even longer than that, but the first two days are what count. If the cognoburn wasn't complexed, it will gradually be displaced. We'll do fMRIs every three hours. That lets us see how his brain is recovering."

"And he'll wake up?"

"If the dose wasn't too high, yes. At some point, he should wake up."

"Normal? I mean, he won't have, like, brain damage?"

The doctor pressed her lips together. "I can't make promises. It all depends on how much of the drug we're able to clear from his system."

"Can I be there? With him?" Xavier locked his hands on the edge of the desk. "I need to be there."

"There's nothing you can do to speed the process."

"I don't care."

Dr. Sanchez glanced at McGregor. "I understand you've got Mr. Janz in protective isolation?"

McGregor said, "If he does wake up, he'll be a critical witness. We're not taking any chances with his safety. But... I think we can put Xavier here on the short list."

Xavier bristled at the patronizing tone. *What, did almost passing out convince you I'm not going to assassinate him?* But keeping Roman safe was

good, and he could hardly complain. "I want to visit my sister, and then come back and sit with Roman."

Dr. Sanchez said, "I think sleep might be a better idea for you right now. You look like crap. And that's a professional opinion."

"I need to see Tam. She had surgery. I haven't visited her." Some swirling confusion of responsibilities made him close his eyes, then open them wide before sleep could claim him right there in that uncomfortable chair. "Wait. The drug. The one they used on the donors. It wasn't in the kidney she got?" He had a sudden rush of panic.

"Kidney?" Dr. Sanchez frowned.

"My sister. Um, got a transplant from another poisoned donor." He wasn't making much sense.

But apparently enough for Dr. Sanchez to understand. "I'd think not, not with cognoburn, anyway. Any organ prep includes a blood-replacer flush. It would clear that drug from anything that wasn't brain tissue. Kidneys should be fine."

He took a breath, nodded his gratitude, made a subvocal note on his com to check with Tam's doctor to be sure. "Okay. Okay. Tam, and then back here, and Roman..." He rubbed his eyes wider open. "Got it."

The doctor sighed. "I'll tell them to put a recliner in Janz's room."

McGregor said, "I'll have an agent drive you to Unity Hospital and back here."

He blinked. "That's surprisingly nice of you."

"Better than having you wreck when the auto drive switches off."

"Still."

"Go sit in the waiting area. I need to talk to the doc about some other things. I'll have someone fetch you."

He wanted to argue, but he couldn't come up with anything. "Okay. Thank you."

The agent showed up blessedly quickly. Xavier slept through most of the drive to Unity, and only really blinked back the fatigue enough to function when he pulled on the isolation suit and finally sat down at Tam's bedside.

She stared at him. "Did you get the code of the truck that hit you?"

"Hah. I still look better than you."

"I had major surgery. What's your excuse?"

"That you had major surgery?" *And kidnapping?*

"Wuss." She reached over and took his gloved hand. "How are you really? How's... *he?*"

"I'm okay. And... we did it. We found the donors. We're waiting to see what the, um, damage is."

"Oh. Well done!"

"He's not awake. At all. Yet." It had to be a matter of '*yet*'.

She squeezed his fingers harder. "That's tough."

"I hate waiting."

"I know. I think you got into computers as a kid so you wouldn't have to wait for other people to answer your questions."

"Maybe. Doesn't help me now." He'd done a little searching on cognoburn, but had fallen asleep in the middle of hearing the answers. It all seemed to come down to waiting, anyway. "I *suck* at waiting."

"You look like you also suck at sleeping."

"Says the woman whose eyes look like she stopped a couple of punches."

"Hah. No one ever lays a glove on me."

"Then I'd say you need sleep worse than I do."

She licked a finger and ticked the air to give him the point. "So. Will they let you see him?"

"Sure. I *am* his emergency contact, after all." He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Of course you are." Her eyebrow mimicked his.

He sighed and let go of her hand. "What do your doctors say?"

Tam's expression brightened. "They're pretty optimistic. Apparently, the scumbags actually could read a gene chart. I might not even need any more anti-rejection drugs, and if that's the case, I might even get my job back."

"Wow." His tone was unintentionally flat, and she chuckled.

"Ouch. God, don't make me laugh. You sound so pleased."

"No, really I am. If you are. I know you loved your job."

"I did. And do. But there's some recovery time yet before we cross that bridge."

He tried to smile. "I *am* pleased it went well. I'm thrilled. Just... don't go off and be a cop again until I get over this round of freaking out like a scared kid about you, all right?"

"Deal."

"So. Was it bad, being kidnapped?" He snorted. "What am I saying? Of course it was."

"Not really." She lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. "I feel like an idiot, but they darted me, right in public. Pretty ballsy, and damned hard to prevent. After that, I was drugged most of the time. So I might have the occasional freak out about it, but it's not like I feel traumatized. I made it through safely."

Xavier sat quietly for a while, but there was one more thing he wanted to put out on the table, right now. Since Tam wasn't doped up much, and seemed at least as alert as he was. "The kidnappers were going to do both kidneys. If we hadn't stopped them. You could have been almost back to normal, with no more cancer risk, if we hadn't called the Feebs in so fast. That was my doing. And a part of me is kind of sorry."

"I'm not!" Her tone was strong and sure. "Don't even think it, Xavier. If it had happened unavoidably, I'd have lived with it. But only if I knew we'd done everything we could to stop them. Everything. If you'd deliberately held back, and let an unknown woman die for me, it would have seriously wrecked me. No matter what we found out down the road about the donor being brain dead."

"Okay."

"Tell me you believe that."

"I do. Yeah. Okay, then I don't have to second-guess myself."

"Not ever. No matter what happens." She forced a grin. "Listen to us being all serious. Not my thing. Why don't you go find your guy and hover over him for a while?"

"I don't know if he's my guy." He stopped. Anyone could be listening. "You know how long I've known him," and it's not what his records now say. "But still, we haven't spent that much actual time together. Maybe we're just supposed to be friends."

"Maybe you won't know unless you get the hell out of here and talk to him."

"He's not talking yet."

Her expression softened. "Then go hold *his* damned hand until he does. And get some sleep in there somewhere too. Come back when you look less like the walking dead. And give him my best, when he wakes up."

When. Yes. "I will. Thanks, big sister."

"Go away now and let me rest, annoying little brother."

He went. The ride back to Regional Healthcare was even more of a blur. The agent escorted him up and past the guard on duty, into Roman's room.

And there Roman was, asleep, pale but peaceful, his hair dark against the pristine white pillow. Someone had put a plastic-upholstered chair at the bedside, and Xavier sank down into it. He didn't hear the door close behind the agent, but when he looked up they were alone.

"Hey there," he said softly. "Roman?"

There was no response, not a hitch of breath or a flutter of the black eyelashes that lay above his sharp cheekbones. He looked better, his skin less like parchment, his lips less chapped and coated with moisturizer. But he was still thin and unmoving and empty-looking. That pose, perfectly symmetrical, arms by his sides and palms up, was unnatural. The silence of the room, with nothing but a tiny whirl of a fluid pump, was unnerving rather than soothing.

He reached out and took one of Roman's hands, turning it in his own. That disturbed the symmetry. *Better.* Roman's hands were wider than his but not longer. His skin was one shade more tan, but smooth and mostly hairless. Xavier found a couple of odd calluses, and he wondered what they were a legacy from. He knew Roman biked, and paddled a canoe. But he'd barely scratched the surface of who this man was.

Maybe he really had no right to be here, doing this. He set Roman's hand down again, but at least now it was bent naturally at the elbow with his palm turned down. At least that.

What if Roman woke, and didn't remember anything? Infinitely better than not waking, but what if he didn't know Xavier at all? Would they have anything in common then?

He reached out, almost involuntarily, to run a finger down Roman's cheek. The days of stubble had been shaved, and his skin was silky smooth. The

starvation hollows in his cheeks only served to emphasize the very determined shape of his jaw. What if Roman just wanted to go back to his job and his plant-collecting trips and not see Xavier again? What if he didn't believe anything else had happened?

Xavier's hand shook, and he pulled it back and wiped his damp palm on the sheet. Stupid to speculate. Stupid to worry over something that might never happen. And he had all of Roman's pass-codes. He had hours and hours of conversation, of stories, of silences. *There's something lurking inside you, about when you served in the desert, something about a sniper, that still makes you go quiet and cold.* He could probably prove it. Or he could let Roman go.

He'd planned to tilt the chair back, to recline and nap, but instead he leaned forward onto the bed and laid his head down near Roman's flaccid hand.

Wake up and remember me. Please. But most of all, wake up.

Chapter 14

Someone was snoring.

It was damned annoying.

Roman wanted to tell them to quit, but moving his lips would take more energy than he could muster. He felt muzzy and dizzy, disoriented to the point where even gravity didn't seem to apply. He must be lying on something, but couldn't feel it. Nothing touched him, and his eyes were lead-weighted.

That snoring truly sucked though.

He gathered a breath, and hissed some kind of "Shhh" through closed teeth.

Instantly, the snoring stopped. There was a rustle, and a voice he didn't recognize said, "Hey? Roman?"

Then blessed silence. He could rest. Sleep was good. He slept.

The next time he surfaced, the room was quiet. He felt far more aware. He lay on his left side, with a surface under him, resilient but yielding. The bed linens near his face had that bland paperclean smell of recyclables. He wasn't sure why he was braced for a reek of odors, but the cleanness reassured him.

He lay quiet, counting breaths. One in, one out. Two in, two out. Three. It was grounding, feeling his chest move, knowing the numbers came in sequence, one after the other, none missed, none lost. He took a bigger breath, and heard the sheet move with a faint rustle; held his breath for a count of three, then let it out. Control was important. Count of five.

He moved a finger. Just a fraction, a small enough gesture that if it failed, he could pretend he hadn't tried. He thought it moved. It was a small enough gesture he couldn't be sure of that either. When had he become a coward? He opened his eyes.

Blank, yellow walls. Hospital yellow, cold yellow, caged yellow. Again! He tried to get up, couldn't move, couldn't turn. He'd never get through those walls. There was rock behind them, miles and miles of rock and it would hold him until he turned to dust and blew away!

He breathed harder, faster, trying to find alpha state. Alpha led to dark. Dark led to light. If he could get out of himself, maybe he'd survive. Something. Somewhere. Faster!

An alarm went off, a thin buzzing. Medical alarm. Hospital bed. Why had that seemed like a good thing? He would never get out! He fought his own paralysis, panting as sparkling blackness narrowed his vision. Trapped!

A voice said, "What? What's wrong? Is he having a seizure?"

He gasped, managed to force out words. "Yellow. Never get through! Trapped! No, no, no, no." The sparkling dark closed in and he remembered the dark was his friend. The dark would lead him home. He let the darkness have him.

The next time he woke, there was space, and movement and sounds of life all around him. He froze, listening to the familiar noises of the Brazilian rainforest. It had been a while since he'd heard the leaves rustling, the hum of a hundred insects, the croak of an occasional frog. Somewhere water trickled thinly, the liquid sound varying as it made its way over rocks. It soothed him.

A light breeze stirred across his skin, explaining the lack of dripping heat. One of the rainforest's nicer days, then. In the distance a macaw screamed, and was answered by another even further away. A guttural growl that might have been a howler monkey sounded, and he opened his eyes.

Ahead, and above him, he saw tall trees climbing to a bright sky. Down here among the trunks, screened by thick undergrowth, everything was shadowy and dim. The leafy canopy swayed in a faint breeze, making what light there was flicker and waver. He tracked his gaze upward through the leaves, looking for the telltale movements of the monkey. Although, given how far howler calls carried, it might be well out of sight. A flash of color was clearly a bird, not a mammal, but he followed its path with his eyes.

This had to be a dream, however real it seemed. He hadn't been south in almost a year, and somehow knew, without wanting to understand why, that he wasn't there now. It was a nice dream though. He could stay here for a while. He put out a hand, slowly and carefully, to prop himself up. Instead of the rough fabric of his bedroll, or the crumbly loam of the forest floor, he felt smooth, soft cushioning under his palm.

He froze, squinching his eyes shut. Panic hovered, just outside this living, breathing space. He took a gasp of air, and smelled both the damp moss and mud he hoped for, and an underlying dry chemical scent that he hated. He lay there, waiting for the insect sounds to fade and his cage to come back. But it didn't happen.

Instead, a very soft touch rubbed up his arm to his shoulder and down. And again. Real touch. The macaws called more loudly, a distinctive sound. He reopened his eyes. The Amazon valley still rose around him, although when he lowered his gaze to the darkness of the forest floor, he could make out a few square feet of dark tile, leading to where the roots and stems and ferns began.

Without turning or moving, he said, very, very softly, "What the everlasting fuck?"

"You like it? It's not your special place, of course, but as close as I could come."

That voice was familiar, even if the slow, steady touch wasn't. He didn't want to look yet, though. "Am I dreaming?"

"Nope. Those are very high-res vid screens. Five sides of the room, if you count the ceiling. Better?"

"Than what?" He felt hidden panic battle to be recognized and added quickly, "No, don't answer that. It's nice. Very nice."

It was. Just the sight of those trees, the way they rose to the sky, pulled his eyes up to wide open space. Or at least the illusion of it. "Where am I?"

"We're in a vid room. A new one. If you want a different view you can say so. I have access to a few hundred live cams and thousands of recordings." The voice became teasing. "There's a stage camera set-up from the last Thunderclap live concert, if you like."

"Hell, no! Hate them." He turned then, slowly and carefully, getting his elbow under him. "Xavier."

"Hi." Xavier's teeth flashed briefly in the dim light. "I wondered if you'd remember me."

"Some. Not all. Not yet." He didn't want to remember all of it yet. But this man, yes, that he did want. "You're my best friend."

"Oh." Xavier sounded stunned. "Yeah. I hope so."

"Hope so?" Confusing visions filled his head and he pushed them back to concentrate on easy stuff—lounging beside Xavier watching movies, talking easily. Sitting together looking something up on the Net, their heads side by side, almost close enough to kiss. Beating off together, and the way Xavier looked, all flushed and flustered and ready to come. "I don't think I'm crazy." Not that he was taking bets, yet.

"No, you're not!" Xavier said quickly. "It's been a crazy couple of weeks though."

He still didn't want to go there. He looked around. "So, did you set this up?"

"Yeah. A VR room. Like virtual reality goggles, but more complete, and less awkward. Although the scent part of it is screwed up, don't you think? Moss with *eau de* chlorine."

"To be fair, that might be the room. Are we still..." He schooled his voice to steadiness. "In a hospital?"

"They wanted to keep you safe until the docs release you, so yeah, I brought the jungle to you instead of you to the jungle."

"Rainforest," he corrected, because it kept him from getting emotional. "It's impressive technology."

"Only the best for the people I'm, um, friends with."

"Good to know. Thank you."

They sat a while looking at each other, as clouds passed overhead. Xavier said, "Kaleidoscope-city. Lighting up ten percent." The clouds thinned and the room brightened.

"Kaleidoscope-what?"

Xavier raised a hand, waited, then said, "City. Command word combo. You have ten seconds after it to give VR commands. I put it together to be pretty responsive, but you really don't want some guy with PTSD to accidentally program the crap he *doesn't* want to see."

"So it's for PTSD therapy?"

"When we're done with it, yeah. A donation to the, um, place."

"Hospital."

"Yes." Xavier tilted his head. "You seem better."

"Than what? No, don't tell me. This is nice. Can we just hang out for a while?"

"Sure. Do you want to sit up more?"

He pushed with his arm, but didn't get much effect. "Not sure I can. I feel like an overcooked noodle."

“Kaleidoscope-city. Bed head up forty degrees.”

The flat mattress under his shoulders rose, lifting him more comfortably. The artificial breeze cooled his skin. He could see Xavier, sitting cross-legged on a floor cushion beside him. He shifted his weight, carefully at first and then more easily when he didn't collapse, until his back felt securely supported. “This is nifty. A floor bed?”

“Used for folks who might fall out of a high one. I thought it might feel less, um, institutional.”

“Good thought.” He took a deeper breath. “I'm surprised I'm not being mobbed by official type people.” *Doctors. FBI.* He controlled a shudder. *Not yet.*

“You will be.” Xavier rubbed his shoulder harder. “You scared them off.”

“How?”

“Passing out. Hyperventilating. Screaming.”

“How butch of me.”

“They thought it was pain. From the treatment. But then we figured out it was the yellow walls and hospital stuff, and, um, stuff.”

Roman breathed through his nose, leaning harder against Xavier's hand on his shoulder. “I used to like that color.”

“Sorry. Hush.” Xavier knelt up, digging massaging fingers into both of his shoulders now. “Forget I said anything. You're fine. You're safe now. You're out.”

“In the rainforest.” He stared up at the sky for a while, then let his gaze drift down to Xavier's worried face. “I'm okay.”

“You will be. You seemed calmer when I was nearby, even when you were drugged out of your skull. But they didn't want you out of medical supervision, so I did this.”

“It's quite a gift.”

“Not just for you. The hospital deserves something. They've been amazing. You were a tough case.” Xavier's voice shook. “The regular treatment didn't seem to be enough, so they gave you more, directly through a spinal port.”

That connected with a dull pain in his lower back. He slid a hand behind himself, but Xavier grabbed his wrist. “No touching. Not till the bandage comes

off. Anyway, then they did some kind of pheresis thing to clear you out. And then when you started to wake up, you started screaming. Crud.” He stopped.

Roman turned his hand over, so his fingertips touched Xavier’s wrist and then fell away. “Sorry.”

“None of it’s your fault.”

“Not easy on you.”

“Well, this is good, anyway.”

“I do have questions,” Roman said carefully. “Are we being recorded?” *Is someone listening to us?*

Xavier’s grin was sharp. “Nope. We can be. I set it up with all kinds of surveillance. But I also set it up so I control that crap. As soon as you started stirring, I fritzed it.”

“I remember all kinds of weird stuff. Or maybe imagined it?”

“If you imagined it, I did too.”

“Like, blue lights and walking through doors and, well, um, that can’t be right.”

“And sitting an inch *into* the floor, telling me about jerking off with Joe Chu, when we couldn’t touch each other?”

His breath caught. “I never told anyone about that.”

“You remember some of it, though?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“My car.”

“You have a fucking Excalibra. With gasoline boost.”

Roman thought he’d never get tired of that smile on Xavier’s face. “Yep. Favorite toy. Other than my comp-array.”

“It all happened?”

“We’ll compare notes, but yeah. It did.”

He tried to reach for Xavier, but his arm felt heavy as lead. “Crap, I’m useless right now.”

“You lost some mass, for sure.” Xavier gave him a wicked look. “That spirit body of yours was kind of false advertising, wasn’t it? If you don’t get a little

muscle back I might have to consider one of the other fifty body-builders constantly knocking on my door.”

He managed to say, “Sorry.”

Xavier leaned in closer. “It was a joke. Tam’s fault. She taught me to always insult the ones I love.”

“Um.” He wasn’t sure if that was better.

“My turn to say sorry. Too much, too soon. You’re supposed to be resting. I should let you sleep and go tell the docs you’re making sense.”

“No. Don’t.” He fumbled for Xavier’s wrist, found it, hung on. “Tam. How is she? Talk to me.”

“You need to take it easy, get better.”

He closed his eyes but didn’t open his hand. “You talk. I’ll rest.”

“Well, Tam.” Xavier’s soft laugh echoed in the darkness behind his eyes. “You know her. She’s tough...”

Xavier let his voice get slower and quieter. Roman’s thin face was relaxed and quiet, but more alive than he’d seen it in a long time. Well, ever. Relief was making Xavier dizzy, like he was floating a foot off the floor. His wrist ached from the strength of Roman’s grip and he treasured it. After days of fear, unable to sleep, choking down food to keep up his strength when it all tasted like sawdust, now suddenly he’d stepped out into the sunlight.

It was enough for now, just to know Roman was himself again. Anything more complicated could wait. Even the fact that the top criminal behind all this hadn’t yet been found, that Ginny had turned up murdered, that only half the guilty parties might come to justice, couldn’t dim his happiness. They’d struck a blow for the victims of this scheme, made it that much harder to repeat it the next time, and out of it all they’d saved Roman. *They’d saved Roman*. He could almost drift in the sweetness of that...

He pinched his leg hard, to keep himself from joining Roman in sleep, and muttered, “Are you okay now? I should head out.”

Instead of letting go, Roman pulled him closer. It was a feeble tug. He could have resisted. But he bent over Roman instead. “Yeah?”

Roman’s eyes opened. “We never really *touched*, did we?”

“No. Almost. Near misses.”

“And words.”

“Yeah.”

Roman's voice was a low whisper. “You wanted to, though?”

“Still do.” He leaned closer, and said, “Now we'll have the chance to work things out.”

Roman stared into his eyes, pupils dark and mysterious in the flickering light, and licked his lips. Parted them. “Make it real. Please?”

Xavier bent more, tilted his head, and brought their mouths together. It didn't feel electric, or stunning. Just the press of one set of lips on another, both a little stale, a little dry. Both tired and slow. But it was a moment of grace, to do this with Roman awake and aware, sharing it.

He finally eased back, not looking away. Roman's eyelids drooped again, but his mouth curved in a tiny smile. “Nice. Yeah.”

“We'll get better.”

“I'm looking forward to that.”

He eased Roman's slacking grip off his wrist, and set his lax hand down on the covers at his side. “Kaleidoscope-city. Bed head down twenty degrees.” The bed silently eased him down lower.

“You're leaving?”

“Not if you want me here.”

“I alw's want you.” Roman's voice was so slurred Xavier almost doubted what he was hearing. “But if you leave the trees and the birds, I'll try not to freak all over any'ne.”

“I'll keep it running. Can the doctor come in for a bit?”

“Sure. 'F she doesn't mind 'm sleep'n.”

“Should be fine.”

“Tell Tam t' stop tsng you.”

“Whatever. Sleep. I'll be back soon.”

His only answer was a slow soft sigh. He smiled. “Kaleidoscope-city. Stop surveillance loop. Restart live feed.” He gave it a moment to switch over, then stood, wincing at the ache in his knees.

He waited, standing, until he was sure Roman was fully asleep, then whispered, "Kaleidoscope-city. Door." The panel appeared in the left corner, carving a chunk out of a moss-covered tree. He stepped out, and restored the image.

An agent sat at the desk outside the room. She glanced up. "Anything?"

"He woke a little. I think it won't be long. I'll have the doc check on him."

The agent nodded. "Poor bastard."

"He'll be fine." He laughed suddenly, unable to hold it back. "It's all going to be fine now. We have time."

The agent gave him a dubious look, but didn't argue. Xavier didn't bother to explain. A hundred words, and one kiss, and he felt like he could walk on air. Concentrating, placing one foot firmly on the floor ahead of the other, he went to find the doctor. And a real bed.

Chapter 15

Xavier knocked on Roman's door the next morning with a bit of anxiety. Okay, a whole boatload of nerves.

Until now, he'd been running on necessity, or at least very-usefulness. He didn't think Roman could object to his efforts to get him the best possible care. And yesterday, seeing Roman awake and calm in the VR room had made the mad, spare-no-expense scramble to get it set up seem justified. He'd been Roman's go-to person, however surreptitiously he'd managed to arrange that.

But now Roman was awake. He'd talked to his doctors, and had eaten a little, according to his nurse. He was neither the helpless patient, nor the insubstantial spirit with no other options. He was a real, solid, live guy who might look at the real Xavier and not want him as more than just a friend.

Nothing wrong with friendships. If that's what Roman wanted, he'd take it. But Xavier really was hoping for more.

He realized that if Roman had answered his knock, he'd missed it, in the frantic scrabbling of his thoughts. He knocked again.

"Come in." The door slid open under his hand.

When he stepped inside the jungle scene was gone. *Rainforest* scene, sorry. But now the vids showed a country night, an open meadow with a dark hint of trees and fences, and an arch of stars. The room was near-black, lit only by the simulated moon overhead.

Roman said, "Kaleidoscope-city. Dawn light, fifty percent, slowly two minutes."

They were both silent, as dawn gradually broke over the rolling fields. A pale gold and rose-colored radiance washed over the sky, starting from one corner, gradually fading out the stars to a few pale hints in the navy rim of the opposite sky. Shadowy trees became silhouettes, and then as the light grew, the green of leaves and pale pink of blossoms developed color and form.

A little breeze picked up, cooling Xavier's damp forehead. Off somewhere to his left, a bird called sweetly. Then a flock of crows lifted from one of the trees, their raucous cries muted by distance, as they spiraled in a ragged black cloud up into the sky.

"I love that," Roman said. "I've made the sun rise six times already this morning. Only seen the crows twice though. It's a good program."

"There are a lot of recordings. Plus it uses live cam links, when they fit the request." Xavier was impressed by the steadiness of his own voice.

The light was bright enough for him to see Roman turn toward him. "Thank you."

Xavier waved that away. "It'll get used for patients a lot more,"—he managed not to say "*messed up*"—"distressed than you, over time. I wanted it to be good."

"It is."

The lighting had stabilized, bright enough to see easily, but with the sun just below the simulated horizon. Xavier was glad not to have his face in full view. He walked to Roman's bed, and sat on the flat cushion beside it without looking at him. The birdsong swelled for a while, then died down to desultory chirping.

Roman said, "This is weird. Between us."

"Yeah. It is."

"You saved my life."

"We saved your life, and you saved Tam, sort of. It was both of us together." He pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them.

"And now we have to figure out what to do with that." Roman's voice was deep, quiet.

Different somehow from his spirit-form's voice? Deeper? Xavier distracted himself for a moment, wondering about that. Then realized he'd been quiet too long when Roman said thinly, "Unless you don't want to do anything with it. I'd understand if you wanted to get away from all this. From me."

"No!" He turned, reached out instinctively. This time his hand closed on a solid wrist, Roman's skin dry and smooth under his fingers, the tendons strong ridges against his thumb.

Before he could let go, Roman put his other hand over the top. "Keep it there. Just for a minute. God, you have no idea how good it is to be touched."

Before he could think better of it, Xavier said, "I have all kinds of touching I hope you'll like."

Roman huffed a laugh. "I bet I will. Although I might need a little more time and calories before I'm up to anything athletic."

"Don't need athletic." This was the moment for taking a kiss, but something held Xavier back. That one time, with Roman dizzy and desperate for touch, didn't count. The next one would be their real first kiss.

Roman eased his grip, running his fingers over the back of Xavier's hand, tracing the shapes of the knuckles where they curved around. "We short-circuited some stuff. I know more truth about you than I've ever known about anyone. And you know a lot about me. Things I never told a living soul."

"Nothing really wrong with that," Xavier said resolutely.

"No. But it's odd. I've fucked a lot of guys, but I haven't really talked to very many."

"It's like a long-distance relationship. A lot of people meet online or wherever. In a VR game, or via phone-cam play. They don't get to touch until later, after they know each other and have spent time talking or gaming. And sometimes it clicks, when they finally get together physically, sometimes it doesn't. That's pretty much what we're doing, right?"

"With a bit more drama. Yeah. I guess. Good thought."

"So." Xavier had never been the bold one in a relationship, but he lifted Roman's hand, turned it over, and pressed his lips to the pulse-point in his wrist.

Roman said, "Click."

Xavier looked up to meet his eyes. Roman said, "I have other parts that are more fun to kiss."

"I like this." He returned his gaze to Roman's hand and arm, trailed his mouth up the strong ridges, licked, nibbled, and then sucked the tip of Roman's thumb between his lips.

Roman sighed, and shifted in his bed. "Hello, there."

Xavier had to let go and laugh. "Pretty cheesy, huh?"

"I liked it." Roman's smile was warm. "So I'm gathering that you want to have a... whatever we have."

"The R-word. Yeah. Friends with lots more. I want to see where we can go."

“Out of here. Hopefully soon.”

“You don’t like the room?” Xavier put a hand to his heart. “I’m hurt.”

“I love the damned room. I can’t believe you put it in like this for me, or even mostly for me. But as good as it is, it’s a room. I want to get out and go somewhere real.”

“As soon as the doctors clear you, I’ll give you a ride home.” Xavier hesitated. “Or, you know, anywhere you want. Your call.”

Roman said slowly, “I don’t know yet. I’m still a bit confused, and I don’t even know if it’s still the cognoburn, or the anxiety med, or the dehydration, or what.”

“The doctors told me they managed to get your system pretty much cleared of the drug by now.”

“Pretty much. That’s what they told me too. There might be some lurking. Not enough to be a big problem, but maybe some lasting effects. They don’t really know.”

“You sound pretty lucid to me.”

Roman shrugged. “How do I know whether or not something is missing, if I can’t remember what was there before? Not that I should complain because, yeah, I feel okay. Considering.” He leaned toward Xavier. “They won’t tell me about Lola though.”

“Lola?”

Roman dropped his gaze, looking uncomfortable. “I know that’s not her name. The girl. The little kid who was there with me. Is she going to be okay? No one will tell me anything.”

Xavier didn’t want to either. He could claim it was privileged information, and that no one but family knew, but it would be a lie. Her fate was a big news item.

His hesitation was enough to make Roman tense up, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t *you* tell me it’s none of my business. I was the one there, watching her, waiting with her.”

“No. I wasn’t going to say that.” He sighed and just said it. “They cleared her as a donor. Yesterday. The cognoburn the bastards used did a complete number on her. Her parents were located, and they signed the consent.”

“Shit!” Roman pounded his own thigh hard with his fist. “Shit! No. Fuck, no! Not her.”

Xavier hesitated, then grabbed his wrist, stopping him. “Don’t. Please? Don’t hurt yourself.”

“I want to feel it.” Roman twisted his hand free, but didn’t hit himself again. “I want... fuck. Why her? And that woman? Why are they brain dead and I’m still here?”

“I don’t know.” Xavier wanted to pull him close, to hold more than one sinewy wrist, but didn’t know if he had that right. “The doctors say it’s all about the dose. You got a lower dose. Whether someone screwed up the calculation, or the injection didn’t work or what, I don’t know. But yours was low enough to be reversible.”

Roman stared at his fists, clenched on his thighs. “I think... I fought them. I remember kicking. No, I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you fought them off enough you didn’t get the full dose. Maybe you saved yourself. And the others didn’t.”

“Well, what chance would they have had?” Roman met his gaze, eyes dark and wet. “She was a baby, so little. How could she have fought them?”

“She couldn’t.” Xavier’s throat was tight. He thought about offering that platitude about other lives saved, but it was ashes in his mouth. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“We couldn’t have saved her. From the minute they gave her the fucking drug, she was dead. Figuring it out faster, getting there sooner, wouldn’t have saved her.”

“Don’t.”

“What?”

“Just, don’t.” Roman sighed, like all the air was going out of him. “Can you at least tell me we did something good? Did they catch the guy behind this?”

Xavier said carefully, “They arrested several people. They used the DNA traces in the bomb-shelter facility to locate other people who were involved, and at least one of them is talking. They won’t give me details.”

“But we don’t have the big number-one sick bastard who’s responsible?”

"I don't think so. Not yet. But the investigation is complicated. They may get him yet." Xavier groped for scraps of hope. "The story is out on the airwaves too, in bits and pieces. They're making a big stink about rich people cannibalizing the poor. There's talk about DNA-typing every missing person and matching them up to rich folk who might be in need of a donor. Like, preemptively."

"Yeah? Would that work?"

Xavier shrugged. "The problem is massive amounts of data, and compatibility isn't as simple as a pure match. You'd need some major computing resources. The scumsucker who runs this probably has a massive computing array set up for it, to do his searches. But just saying that they plan to do it might be a deterrent, if recipients think they might get spotted that way."

"I guess." Roman frowned. "Did you ever figure out who I was, um, supposed to be dissected for?"

"Not yet. Do you still want me to try?"

Roman hesitated, then shook his head. "It doesn't matter. They might not even have been in on the plan yet."

Xavier made a mental note to see if he could put some more comp power to work on it anyway. If he did find a candidate for Roman's recipient, he might keep an eye on their health. Just in case. "So what comes next?" He wanted to get them away from this, to ease that bleak look in Roman's eyes. "If you wanted to, you could come stay with us for a while. With me and Tam. No strings. Just, we have room and we'd be happy to, um, see you."

"How is Tam?"

"Doing fine. Recovering. About to rip her doctors a new one if they don't let her go home soon. She asked me to say hi and tell you she'd be willing to share house space, if you want to."

"Tell her hi from me too." Roman reached out and touched Xavier, fingertips on the back of his hand. "What about you?"

"I want you around," Xavier said, as clearly as he could. "I want to get to know you better. If we're just going to be friends, okay. But I want the chance for more. I'll understand if you don't like the idea of being back in our old house, though."

"Hm." Roman hesitated, eyes blank as if looking inward. "It doesn't feel like a problem right now. I liked that house. It was my escape."

"We could program the VR room to duplicate it, and see how you feel. I could put cameras..."

Roman curved a hand behind Xavier's head and pulled him forward. "Don't overthink it." He leaned toward Xavier, hesitated a moment, then kissed him.

It started slow and soft, but pretty soon Xavier opened his mouth and made pathetic little sounds of want. *So long. He'd wanted this for so long.*

He embarrassed himself, but Roman just chuckled and kissed him harder and wetter, taking the invitation. Roman was strong and practiced, controlling his head with that easy grip, taking possession of his mouth, not roughly but with certainty. When they separated, Xavier leaned over without thinking, to press his forehead into the curve of Roman's neck. "Oh, yeah."

After a second, he realized he had half his weight on the sick guy, and tried to pull back. Roman just hugged him closer, wrapping an arm across his shoulders. "Don't go. I like this."

"Me leaning on you?"

"Yeah. Absolutely. In fact, c'mere." He tugged at Xavier, who let himself be maneuvered over onto the mattress, leaning against Roman's chest.

"I'm not squishing you?" Roman felt wonderfully solid at his back.

"Not even close. Let me be the strong guy for a bit. You got to do the heroic stuff with the..."—he made the shape of a gun with his hand against Xavier's thigh, but didn't say the word—"so now let me hold you up for a bit."

Xavier huffed a laugh. "I have *never* done anything like that. It was whacked. I was practically shaking. If you hadn't been there..." He shook his head. "Believe me, I'm not the hero. You make me rise to the occasion."

Roman tightened his grip. "And I plan to make you rise even more. Although not until we get out of, um, here." He rubbed his cheek against Xavier's hair, then his hug softened. "So, this VR thing of yours is great. Can we play with it?"

"Sure." Xavier relaxed as the talk turned to his tech toys. Much easier. "What would you like? Seashore?"

"Hell, why not. Haven't been to the ocean in decades."

He said, "Kaleidoscope-city, scene fade-out two minutes; fade in Pacific Ocean, Puget sound, Stanley Park beach, realtime."

As they watched, the country scene faded out into a misty view of wide water. A low, rolling surf surged and ebbed against a foreground of sandy beach and boulders. The backdrop behind them was a lush mossy green forest. A few long cargo ships could be seen on the horizon, out well beyond the breakers. There was a big driftwood log on the sand, draped with seaweed, and a gull pecked at it. The senso-box gave them an increased, although dry, breeze, and the tang of saltwater and vegetation. Overhead, in a grey overcast sky, more gulls wheeled and circled, their cries like sick cats or lost children.

Roman said, "Gorgeous, but too gloomy. Maybe indoors? Somewhere, um, large and bright, indoors."

"A stadium?"

"Not very restful, that."

Xavier tuned out the bird cries, thought, and then asked for the Sistine Chapel, center view, recorded.

Roman laughed as it came into view. "Oh yeah, that's large and indoors."

"Problem?"

"No, it's perfect." They both looked up at that marvelous ceiling, restored again to its full glory. Painted long ago when the church would have burned them at the stake for what they were to each other, and yet glorious in its expression of hope.

After a few minutes, feeling Roman's chest rise and fall evenly under him, Xavier said, "Not bothering you?"

"You'd have to be pretty damned claustrophobic for this to feel too small." Roman sniffed the air audibly. "Not that the smell of air pollution and unwashed tourists is appealing, but it's startlingly realistic. You have great tech."

"I did security work for VirtuPlay. They let me have one of their newest sensoround systems. Not available in stores."

"Hm. *Nice* toys."

Xavier said, "Are you doing better? I mean, the doctor wanted you to have some IVs, more fluids and plasma proteins and stuff. But last time you yanked the line out."

Roman stiffened, but didn't push him away. "I guess I'm still kind of fucked up. But yeah, I think it'd be okay."

"I could set up a holo-projector. Disguise the IV pole as a tree."

Roman's chuckle sounded almost real. "I think I can handle the real thing. If you stay. Let me feel like a friend, not just a patient. If you have time, that is."

Xavier sighed and relaxed, letting out all the tension of the past weeks, letting his weight really fall back onto Roman. "Having you hold me up sounds pretty damned good right now. I have all the time we need."

Roman said, "Kaleidoscope-city, com channel to the nursing desk?"

The clear female voice Xavier had programmed in, (and he had no delusions about why he'd swapped out the tone-perfect male voice) said, "Hailing frequencies open, Captain."

Roman's laugh near his ear and the hug of his arm across Xavier's chest was more than enough reward.

Roman braced himself as Xavier turned the rented bubble-cab up the driveway. He was still so damned unsteady in his own skin. He hated not knowing what might bother him, or set him off. Not that he should complain. That little kid hadn't made it. He needed not to think of her as Lola. The kid. The one who'd been kidnapped. She was gone, and six lives for one wasn't much comfort.

But he'd gotten out. Even with the whole messy case still unfolding, and lots of court testimony in his future, he had his life back. He had no right to act like a victim over a little PTSD. Especially since he was getting better every day.

The Excalibra had turned out to be a problem, though. Not a heart-pounding vision-going-black problem, but he couldn't get comfortable in it. Couldn't take a real breath, no matter how much he reminded himself it was a great car and he was riding in it with Xavier, who loved it. No matter how he tried to be over all his stupid stressed-out shit.

Ten minutes out from the hospital, Xavier had pulled into a car rental, parked the sports car, and rented this sightseeing hulk. No amount of arguing from Roman had stopped him, and when he said Roman's silent freakout was too distracting for him to drive safely for another half hour, Roman had given in. There was no denying this big, unfamiliar, open cab was more comfortable.

Xavier stopped on the drive outside the front door. "So, the house. Problems?"

Roman looked at it. For a place he'd never seen in the flesh, it felt so familiar. Not in a bad way, though. "So far, so good."

"I told you, we could go to a hotel, or rent a place. Or even drive you all the way back to your place in Ohio."

He felt a flash of irritation. "I'm not that fragile. Anyway this feels like a good thing." He tapped the door open and got out.

Xavier followed him up the front walk. The closer they got to the house, the more comfortable it felt. The front door swung wide before he got up the steps, and Tam stood in the doorway. "Hey. Nice to see you solid, Roman." She quirked a smile. "And dressed."

"Tam." He knew she'd only been home a couple of days herself. "You look good."

"I got the transplant plus face-lift package deal," she said.

Behind him, Xavier said, "I hope they did better work with the transplant part."

"Don't sass your elders."

"Much, much elders."

"Brat." But she was grinning. "Roman, are you sure you want to hang around this guy?"

"I think so," he said.

He meant exactly that, but she said, "Good choice of words. Make him work for it."

He glanced at Xavier. "I should have just said yes, shouldn't I?"

"Nah." Xavier looked calm and unworried. "Make me work for it."

Tam stepped back. "Come on in, guys. I put coffee on."

Xavier said, "Thanks. I take back half of what I said about your surgery."

"Don't tell me which half." When Roman stepped past her into the hall she said, "Can I get a hug? Just for verification purposes?"

"Verifying what?" Xavier asked.

"Solidity in three dimensions?" She opened her arms.

Roman moved into the hug, which turned out to be gentler than he expected. Maybe they each could tell the other was a little fragile. Tam murmured in his ear, "Xav was going a bit crazy when you were unconscious. Cut him a little slack, if you can." She stepped back. "Okay. Solidity verified. Intelligence still in doubt."

Xavier said, "Lead us to the coffee, bitch."

"That's the thanks I get for having it ready." She headed down the hallway toward the kitchen.

Roman turned to follow her, but Xavier grabbed his arm. "She's right, you know. You always have choices. I don't want you to feel grateful or like you owe me."

He'd thought he'd put all that to rest, but Xavier was surprisingly unsure of himself sometimes. Roman set firm hands on Xavier's shoulders, pulled him in, and kissed him. When they eased apart, Xavier was quiet, and smiling. Roman said, "One day at a time, regardless of money and sisters and craziness. That's what we agreed on, right?"

"Yeah."

"We'll talk. I get to use the spare room. For now. And I'll pay rent."

Xavier wrinkled his nose, but said, "Yes."

"I get to kiss you. And vice versa."

"Definitely yes."

Roman took advantage of that rule again. Xavier's mouth was warm and welcoming, and Roman had to take a breath and a step back, to stop at only a kiss.

"It's still weird," Xavier said. "Knowing so much about each other in some ways, and nothing in others."

"We're just doing it backward, from my point of view," Roman pointed out. "Usually I meet 'em, fuck 'em, then decide if I want to get to know them."

"Is that how you like to operate?" Xavier's tone was serious, but his eyes danced with amusement.

"In theory," Roman said with dignity. "In practice, it's mostly been meet, fuck, decide I *didn't* want to get to know them."

"So maybe backward is a good thing."

"I think it could be." Good enough that it was overwhelming to think about sometimes. So instead he grinned, ran his gaze down Xavier, and back up. "You and me and backward could be excellent."

"You make me crazy." Xavier gestured down the hall. "Coffee?"

Roman glanced around. The hallway's cream-colored walls, the smooth floor, all resonated to his sense of *déjà vu*. "I'm the crazy one, you know. You might want to take back your invitation."

"You're doing a ton better. You walked out of the hospital without a problem."

"Without falling over and passing out in the yellow hallways, you mean. Yeah, I'm a lot better." His particular, idiosyncratic claustrophobia was fading, although he knew there was still therapy in his future.

"I want you here. However you choose to be." Xavier turned away. "Come on."

Roman followed him until they reached the kitchen. There he was suddenly overcome with a wash of memories—Xavier, Tam, secrets and fear and relief and belonging, enemies and friends. He swayed and put a hand on the wall.

"Are you okay?" Xavier asked.

"It's not blue." It was a dumb thing to say.

But Xavier nodded. "Yeah, not any more. You stepped in here out of the blue, and changed all of our lives. This feels strangely ordinary, doesn't it?"

"I like it." He looked around the kitchen. Without the glow of the refracted laser, it was warm and homey.

"I still have that Doppler out there, pointed at the window," Xavier said. "I may never take it down."

"I don't see it."

"You're not supposed to be able to. Something about you spirit-walking turned it to visible light."

"Right." He knew that. "You left it there?"

Xavier flushed. "Just in case. If you ever got lost."

"That's nice, I think." Not a vote of confidence, perhaps, but an open invitation. He wandered over to the window. There was a dark glass box set on

the counter in front of it. He only paid attention when a light inside it came on, shining through the mosaic panels, casting a multi-colored glow on the windowsill. "What's this?"

"Just something I bought," Xavier said quickly. "Tam, it's broad daylight. Turn that off."

"Wait." Roman reached for it, and turned it in his hands. Four sides of stained glass enclosed a little LED bulb, set to flicker. On each side, the colored glass formed a stylized candle, its flame shading from gold at the tip to a deep clear blue with a hint of green at the base. That color made his heart catch. "My candle."

"It's just a thing."

Tam said, "He commissioned them. A dozen. There's one in a window of every room, upstairs and down."

"I like supporting local artists. We can put them away now." Xavier reached for it, but Roman moved the lamp out of reach.

"It's great. But why a dozen? Isn't that kind of overkill?"

Xavier flushed and turned to stare off out the window. "Maybe you don't have a monopoly on crazy."

Roman set the light down, stepped closer, and laid the palm of his hand on Xavier's neck. Xav's skin was warm, his stubble just a hint of roughness. "Tell me?"

Xavier met his eyes. "That week, when you were lying there unconscious and I didn't know whether I'd see you again, or how, I, um, dreamed."

That shadow in his eyes was familiar. "Nightmares?"

"Yeah. I kept dreaming you were lost, wandering, hunting for me, for this house. And you couldn't find us. I kept waking thinking I hadn't left the light on. Over and over."

That cut a little close to home, but Roman managed to keep his voice steady. "Sounds familiar."

"I bet." Xavier reached up and laid his hand over Roman's, pressing him in more firmly against his face. He rubbed his cheek against Roman's palm.

Tam said, "I told him to do something to get some sleep. I meant EZ-doze, but he bought art instead."

"I happened to spot this local craftsman online who made stained-glass to order. I was going to use real candles inside. But they blow out, or burn down. LEDs last for decades. So I had him make these."

"For every window. For me?"

"Yeah." Xavier pulled Roman's hand away from his face, and captured it between his own. "In case. No matter where you went; no matter which way you turned. Spirit walking or solid flesh, I wanted to have a candle in the window for you, so you could always find your way home." He let go, color rising in his cheeks again. "Dumb, right? Presumptuous. It helped me sleep, but they could be sold or..."

"Don't you dare." Roman bent and kissed him, fast and light. "Yeah, it's a bit much. But I had those nightmares too. We'll keep them. Make them yours and mine. And whatever happens, wherever we both go, we'll leave a light burning in the window for each other." He kissed him again, longer, slower, learning the taste of his mouth, the feel of his tongue. Xavier's body was hard and lean against his. He savored the unfamiliar solidity of it.

"Aw, how sweet," Tam drawled. When they pulled apart, Xavier looking as dazed as Roman felt, she held out two mugs. "Coffee, and coffee. Take them. Get a room. Leave me to my lonely slavery, catering to the household needs of a pair of..."

Xavier silenced her with a hand over her mouth, which he yanked back just in time to avoid getting bitten. "There are more of these candles upstairs," he said. "What do you say, Roman? Want to come up and see my stained-glass etchings?"

Roman wrapped his hands around the mug. The coffee was hot, the smell fragrant, Tam's grin was friendly, Xavier's eyes promised so much more. He looked down. He was wearing soft slacks and a T-shirt. His sneakers didn't sink into the floor. Around him, the old house was a refuge, not a prison, and for the first time since that dart hit his neck, he felt real and present in his life. He looked back up, and saw the smile slowly fading from Xavier's face.

He leaned in quickly for one more kiss. "Absolutely," he said.

They climbed the stairs. The wood creaked under his weight, just as much as under Xavier's. In the master bedroom, he sipped the coffee, then set his mug on the stand beside the bed. Xavier stepped closer, and set his down too, eying him, clearly strung tight but patient, waiting for Roman to make the next move.

Roman looked over at the mirror. There were their clear reflections side by side. *Real. Together.* He met Xavier's eyes in the glass, and their gazes locked. God, it felt like he'd been waiting forever for this. He shifted his stance, turning slowly in front of the mirror, watching Xavier's reactions. From the tenting of Xavier's jeans and the way he swallowed hard, Roman wasn't the only want wanting more. Needing more. He moved closer, took the hem of his own T-shirt in his fist, and eased it upward, giving Xavier his best smile. "You know, I wasn't sure I'd ever say this again, but I have *way* too many clothes on."

Xavier took a short, fast breath and closed his fists until his fingernails bit into his palms. He was determined not to move too fast. Roman was clearly ready to get physical. That gorgeous heat in his eyes, and the naked chest appearing as he pulled off his T-shirt said so.

And Xavier really, really wanted to jump him and maul the crap out of him. But Roman was still getting over his ordeal, just a few days out from waking, traumatized and nervous and confused. Xavier was in this relationship for the long haul, and he wasn't about to let his little head overrule the big one. He would let Roman set the pace. He waited.

Roman dropped his T-shirt on the floor and opened his waistband, then looked at Xavier sideways. "I'm not getting naked alone again, am I?"

"Oh. God, no!" He hadn't intended Roman to feel like that. Xavier whipped off his own shirt and jeans, tugged his briefs down and kicked them aside. He looked back up, and then colored. Apparently, there was more than one way to get this wrong.

Roman still stood in slacks and sneakers, eyeing him quizzically. "Fast change artist in a past life?"

He choked. "I... no. I just wanted, well, for you to be the one with more clothes on. This time."

"Ah." Roman kicked off his sneakers and took a step closer. "That's a nice thought. Come here?"

Xavier moved in, slowly, until the bobbing head of his over-eager cock brushed Roman's pants. Roman reached for him, gripped his upper arms, and tugged him closer. They were almost the same height. Xavier tilted his head just a fraction, and opened his lips. Roman kissed him.

They'd done all kinds of kissing in the last few days. Desperate hellos and proof-of-life kisses, slow exploration and hot can't-wait. But this one was different, and not just because he was plastered against Roman's naked chest, with Roman's hands sliding down toward his bare ass.

This kiss was somehow recognition. Sweetly familiar. *Oh, yes, there you are, where you're supposed to be.* It wasn't as hungry as he'd have expected. Their lips met, rubbed, parted. Teeth nipped, gently tugged. Roman's tongue slowly slid in against his, retreated, glided over his lip. Breath mingled with breath. It felt like they finally had time for everything.

When they stopped, he stayed wrapped in Roman's arms, his hands locked around Roman's bare back. He tipped his head enough to meet those surprisingly blue eyes, and saw his own flushed face reflected in the shine, fun-mirror-close and curved. What did Roman see?

Roman kissed him again quickly, and then echoed his thoughts. "God, the little things. I love that I can see myself in your eyes. And I really like the way you look at me."

"Um." He had a hard time being eloquent, when Roman's hands were real and warm, cupping his ass, kneading it. "So. I'm pretty versatile. What do you want?"

Roman's fingers tightened, then eased away. "I wish, um, that I could feel you inside me, be filled with you. That's what I want most but, well, I've been eating crap lately and..." He looked down and shifted his weight uneasily.

"You're not up for it." Xavier slid a hand up behind Roman's head to steady him for another kiss. "We have lots of time to get there, eventually. No rush."

"I do want to see and taste you, and feel you. I want everything real that I can have."

Xavier wanted that too. "Come to bed, then."

It took just one step to come up against the big bed. He tossed back the covers quickly, because he didn't want to get lube and cum on some two-centuries-old lady's handiwork quilt. The exposed sheets were thousand-count bamboo, satin-soft and smooth. "Come, lie down."

Roman stepped out of his trousers and underwear, baring that ass that Xavier had memorized. Or perhaps not quite. He was thinner, not as curved and perfect, but real now, and still totally desirable. Xavier patted the mattress, watching Roman move with quiet appreciation. They eased onto the bed on

their sides, facing each other. Xavier ran his hand over Roman's shoulder, across his ribs, up to pinch one nipple lightly, then down to the groove of his hip.

Roman groaned softly. "Yeah. Touch me. Harder." He raised his knee, laying it on Xavier's thigh.

They moved closer, the space between them closing down to nothing. They kissed, nuzzled, pressed together at chest and groin and thighs. Xavier cupped Roman's head in one hand, and reached around to that amazing ass with the other. Roman smashed their mouths together, almost too hard, kissing and biting. Xavier tasted a hint of blood from Roman's lip, and pulled back. "Sorry, easy."

"No. Hard." Roman nipped his jaw, licked his neck, rutting against him until the iron length of his cock ground against Xavier's stomach. "I want to taste, feel. I want all of it."

"Not blood, though." Xavier gripped his head in both hands, gentling the kiss. "Plenty to taste without hurting yourself."

"Sorry!"

Xavier had to tighten that grip now to keep Roman from pulling back completely. "Hey, it's your blood. But just go easy. Let me..." He licked Roman's lips, then opened his own mouth, inviting Roman's tongue.

Gradually they found a rhythm, lips and tongues, hips and thighs moving together, rubbing, sticky-skin friction. Roman's cock bumped his, slid away, rasped past again, maddeningly elusive. "Wait," Xavier said, fumbling to the side toward his nightstand drawer.

Roman eased his arms from behind Xavier's back. "What?"

"Lube. Let me try this." He pulled out the bottle, his favorite self-warming kind, and poured out a handful. The slippery heat of it on his palm as he grasped Roman's shaft made them both moan. He moved over just enough to capture both their dicks together, his fingers too short to wrap all the way around both. "Your hand," he said. "Please."

Roman's fingers covered his. He jerked his hips in reflex, thrusting into the heated, ridged, tight tunnel they made. Roman gasped and mimicked him, sliding them together. They grunted in response, thrust in unison, did it again. Again.

Roman took a short, sharp breath. "This? Okay?"

"You're driving." Although really, they were both doing this, pressed close, rubbing, pumping against each other into their joined, hot, slick-greased hands.

"This is good. Perfect." Roman took a fast breath. "I want to come on you. You on me. I want spunk, slick, cum, all over. Ngh." Roman kissed him, licking into his mouth, capturing him, hips moving faster.

When Roman's teeth moved to his neck, Xavier said, "Sounds messy," and laughed, breathlessly, because he was in no mood to change anything. "Sounds great."

"Yeah." Roman's face flushed; his fingers tightened around them, jacking them together as they thrust, hard and demanding and almost too much. Perfect.

Xavier tried to match him. He wanted nothing more than the slip and squish, sound, pressure, warmth, two hard cocks between two men's hands in counterpoint now, finding just space, just heat, just touch enough, sliding, rubbing, building need and demand until he felt dizzy with it. He'd had other plans, and didn't care because this was enough, and more than enough, and he was going to come, just from this. "Roman!"

"Yeah. Come on!" Roman arched his neck, his mouth dropping open, breath coming in harsh gasps. Then he groaned, a drawn-out, deep sound. The smell and sticky slide of cum mixed with lube between their hands. Xavier felt Roman jerk and shudder, and then he came too, in a white-out rush, over their fingers and Roman's stomach, and his own.

They let go of each other as one, too. Xavier panted, reaching blindly for the sheet with his gloppy hand. Roman scooped a stray corner toward him, wrapped it round his fingers and wiped them both, then pulled Xavier in against him, tight to his front.

Xavier sighed. "Whew. Mmm." He nuzzled in blindly against Roman's neck. "We're still a mess, you know. We're going to glue together."

"I want that." Roman's whisper was soft and satisfied. "I want it to stick, and pull. Not disappear. This is so damned good."

"Because this is real?" Xavier tried to keep his voice sounding academic, curious.

Roman found his mouth with soft lips, and kissed him. "Because it's you. Real, yeah. Not a fantasy. But mainly, not a dream of you with only wishes

behind it. Not you and me with a sheet of glass between us. You and me with spunk and sweat and breath... and time."

"Oh. Okay." He liked the sound of that.

"I'm still not really back to who I was, before. I have stuff to figure out. But when I'm touching you, I don't have any regrets."

Xavier kissed him softly. "We'll have to do a lot of touching, then."

Roman tugged him onto his other side, rolling them into a tight spoon and draping himself over Xavier's back. He nuzzled in against Xavier's neck. Xavier savored just how good it felt to be held like that. He was hugged in tight against Roman's chest, his thighs pinned under Roman's leg, movement pretty much impossible. He lay there, pulled back against that solid bulk, and gently rubbed Roman's locked arms, as they breathed slower, and softer, and the cum dried on them.

Eventually he murmured, "Pretty soon, I'm gonna vote for a shower over feeling real, and sticky."

Roman said against his hair, "I'm not there yet."

"Okay." He wriggled in more comfortably. "So, we could plan to just store stuff in that spare room."

Roman snorted a laugh. "We'll talk about that."

"It's closer to Tam's room than mine, and she snores."

"So do you."

He bumped backward with his ass. "Do not."

"Do too."

"How would you know?" They both took a sharp breath. Xavier thought about when Roman might have discovered that. He had a sudden vision of Roman's insubstantial naked back, disappearing into the blue light. He tightened his fingers on the solid arm across his chest, but didn't say anything. Time would tell. Time would show them what this could be.

Roman kissed the angle of his jaw, with a soft mumble of lips. Xavier closed his eyes against the pale daylight filtering in past the blinds, and tried to sleep.

Roman pulled Xavier closer and breathed against his hair. He was sated and wrung out, and happier than he could remember feeling in a long, long time. He'd expected to fall asleep right away, but somehow he couldn't find that last inch of relaxation. Apparently, Xavier was in the same boat, because he squirmed, sighed, moved his arm higher, then lower. Roman eased his upper leg back to make more room.

"Sorry," Xavier murmured. "I should just get up and let you drop off."

"You should lie there and let me hold onto you." Roman rubbed his chin over Xavier's hair, feeling the little tug of his stubble against the fine strands. "Or tell me what's bothering you."

"Nothing. Well, nothing special." Xavier sighed. "Borrowing trouble. I should be just reveling in the moment, right? The win? You, me, together, bad guys vanquished?"

"Masque and Silverman win again," Roman agreed. "No?"

"Those guys don't get to rest on their laurels very long either. But yeah. Ending credits for this episode coming up, the swell of cheesy triumphal music."

"But?"

"What if?" Xavier wriggled out of his hold and rolled over so they could see each other, although he tangled their legs back together, and laid a hand on Roman's hip, keeping contact. "What if the top bad guy doesn't get caught? What if he's mad at you, or Tam, and comes after you?"

"Or you?" Roman didn't like that idea, but said it as evenly as he could.

"Sure. Or me? What if that crime boss who turned out to be your match goes into complete heart failure after all, and decides to send his own goons to harvest your heart?"

Roman shook his head against the satin smoothness of Xavier's pillowcase. "You made that impossible, as soon as you figured out the gene match. He's on notice that we know about him now."

"Yeah, like he cares that some obscure computer programmer will crash all his systems if he touches you."

Roman had to snort, because that did sound a bit silly. It was hardly their main deterrent though. "I think the fact that he knows you also gave his name to

the FBI is threat enough.” Xavier had found a list of ten people for whom Roman was a highly compatible donor. But by far the winning candidate was Joseph Domo, a known crime figure whose recent illness had damaged his heart, possibly beyond repair. Domo was in treatment, but if it failed, he might need a transplant at any time.

They’d guessed that Roman’s plans to get lost in the Brazilian rainforest for months had probably triggered his kidnapping. Domo’s health was rocky, and he wasn’t one to leave his own best interests up to chance. Whether it had been his direct order, or the organ-legger’s, they had no way of knowing, but someone had swept Roman up and put him in storage before he could leave the country.

“You think Domo’s worried about the FBI?”

“I think if I disappear and he suddenly shows up healthy, with appropriate surgical scars, a simple catheter biopsy could convict him of murder. Even Domo couldn’t buy his way out of that. I’m pretty sure I’m safe.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Xavier leaned closer and kissed up his neck, licking under his jaw.

He wiggled away. “That tickles.”

Xavier nipped him harder. “So, am I useful enough to keep?”

Roman deliberately slid his leg up Xavier’s, rubbing their thighs together. “You’re useful in many excellent ways.” From Xavier’s little frown that seemed to be the wrong answer. “What?”

Xavier sighed. “I don’t know. Don’t mind me. I keep swearing I’ll be patient, but I want...”

Roman waited.

“I want it all. I want us safe. Want the bad guys locked away forever. Want you to stay with me, to be with me. Now tell me I’m greedy.”

“I can’t give you most of those, but I’m with you. What do you think I’m doing here, otherwise?” He glided his hand over Xavier’s bare hip.

“Could be a lot of things. Co-hab with benefits. Gratitude. Mutual getting off. Sex doesn’t imply anything more.”

Roman hadn’t expected someone with all of Xavier’s advantages to be so insecure, especially now. He’d expected to be the one wondering, and doubting,

but the little unhappy twist to Xavier's mouth and the droop of his eyelids said otherwise. Roman wondered if there was a history to it, that he might want to hear someday. He put a hand under Xavier's chin and raised it, running his thumb along his soft lower lip. "Sex doesn't always imply more, no. But this? Lying in a bed together? Talking, planning, worrying and debunking the worrying? I think this does. If you want it to."

Xavier kissed Roman's thumb. "I want."

"Okay then." Roman tried to gather him in close. Xavier went along with it, but he still didn't feel soft and relaxed and sated. Roman tried a few slow, languid kisses. He savored them, enjoying the excellent buzzing satisfaction that was all his orgasmed-out nerves could manage, but when they both came up for air, Xavier still fidgeted. Roman gave his neck a nip, maybe a bit harder than he'd meant to. Xavier yelped. Roman asked, "What else?"

"I'm sorry. I worry. I think maybe it goes with the security consulting background. Always dreaming up problem scenarios, you know. I'll try to stop. I will."

Roman chuckled. "I'm guessing you can't just turn off that busy brain. All you can do is stop sharing it with me, and I don't want that. So tell me."

"The spirit walking."

"Ah." It was his turn to stiffen and look away.

"Do you think you could only do that because your physical body was trapped and drugged? Or do you think someday...?" Xavier's voice trailed off.

"I don't know. I don't want to explore it. I don't want to try." *He never wanted to feel that again, stepping out of himself, leaving his body empty and uninhabited on a bed.*

"Sorry. Of course not." Xavier sighed. "Just, if it ever happened again..."

"What?" He felt a momentary flash of anger. "Did you think it was fascinating? Exciting? Did you figure you'd like to learn how?"

"No!" Xavier shoved at his shoulder. "Well, yeah, maybe I thought that once or twice, but not at the expense of you going crazy over it."

"You think I'm crazy?"

"Hush." Suddenly Xavier was against him, over him, kissing, gentling him with voice and hands and weight. "No. You're not. You know that. That's not what I meant."

Roman would have preferred to stay mad, because it was easy and safe and he could let the subject drop. But it was hard to resist a snuggly, penitent Xavier. He grumbled, "Then what did you mean?"

"Just that we don't know if it might ever happen again, that's all. Just that the possibility is always going to be there."

"Like smoke in the air," Roman said, thinking of Grandfather, and dry, desert winds, and the traces of a campfire, rising. "Yeah. I don't want it, though."

"Okay." Xavier turned them. This time Roman was the small spoon, hugged in against Xavier's chest. Xavier's arm curved around his shoulders, Xavier's thigh lay over his legs, Xavier's mouth brushed his hair. "No more worries. Not right now. Just this. We'll savor this."

Roman sighed and pressed back. He reached for Xavier's hand and tugged it up to his mouth, until he could press his lips to the tip of one finger, feel the shape, taste skin and a hint of salt. There was the bulk of muscle at his back, a man's soft cock against his ass, puffs of breath in his hair, the smells of sex in his nose. "This is real," he said. "It's what I want. But you know what?" Certainty rose up, comfort deep as the mattress that cradled them. "If anything happens, if anything changes, there's one thing I know, for certain sure."

"Hm? What's that?"

"I know that if I'm ever gone again, you'll always keep a light on, to bring me home." That knowledge, and Xavier's solid presence at his back, eased him down into sweet sleep at last.

The End

Author Bio

Kaje Harper grew up in Montreal, and spent her teen years writing, filling binders with stories. But as life got busy, the stories began to just live in her head. The characters grew up, met, endured, and loved, in any quiet moment she had, but the stories rarely made it to paper. Her time was taken up by work in psychology, teaching, and a biomedical career, and the fun of raising children.

Eventually the kids became more independent and her husband gave her a computer she didn't have to share. She started putting words down in print again, just for fun. Hours of fun. Lots of hours of fun. The stories began piling up, and her husband suggested if she was going to spend that much time on the keyboard she ought to try to publish one. MLR Press accepted her first submission, Life Lessons, which was released in May 2011. Kaje now has several novels and short stories published, including Amazon bestseller The Rebuilding Year, and a selection of free short stories and novels available on Smashwords and elsewhere. She currently lives in Minnesota with a creative teenager, a crazy little omnivorous white dog, and a remarkably patient spouse.

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