

Hour of Darkness

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At age ten, Clarice Stuart is rescued from a potentially traumatizing experience by a mysterious stranger who seems to appear out of nowhere and then disappear just as suddenly. Twenty years later, on a cold November night on an icy mountain highway as Clarice is on her way to her parents' home for the holidays, a black clad rider on a black motorcycle deliberately strands her on the highway. While Clarice waits for help to arrive, miles away her parents and brother are brutally murdered in their home. At the funeral, a man approaches her and offers his condolences, claiming to be a friend of her brother's. Clarice has a sense of recognition but can't place where she might know him from. But the mere touch of his hand engulfs her with emotions and desires she can't explain. Staying at her deceased brother's home under the watchful eyes of three officers, Clarice soon learns that even police protection can't save her from the evil that took her family. When her family's attacker appears and kills the three deputies who were meant to guard her, Clarice is certain she will die as violently as her parents and brother. But standing face to face with the killer, she is shocked to be staring into the face of her recently dead and buried brother. Before he can take her life as well, the black rider appears and saves her from the fate of her family. It is then that she realizes that the black rider is the man from the cemetery and her guardian from the past. Suddenly she finds herself caught up in a passionate, terrifying game of survival with her mysterious and desirable guardian, fleeing a killer who won't stay dead.



Published on
Booksie

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Hour of Darkness : Chapter 1

...Before...

CLARICE

"It's my turn." Ten-year-old Clarice tried to grab the dice from her twin brother's hand. Aaron jerked his hand back.

"No it isn't." Aaron insisted. "You rolled, then mom, now it's my turn."

"Huh uh." Clarice twisted on her knees where she was positioned at the coffee table. "Mom. It's my turn, right?"

Dana Stuart smiled apologetically and shook her head. "Aaron's right, honey. It's his turn."

"Told ya." Aaron sneered and shook the dice in his hand as Clarice made a face at him. Aaron made a face back and dropped the dice on the Monopoly board. He picked up the tiny cowboy boot and moved it six spaces, landing on Community Chest. He took his card and read it silently to himself. "Awesome." He moved his game piece past GO then snapped his fingers at his dad. "Two hundred dollars, please."

Grant Stuart shook his head and handed over the money. "You sure you're not cheating?"

"Check the card, dad." Clarice suggested. "It probably didn't even say to pass go."

"Shut up, it did too." Aaron insisted.

"Hey." Dana shot a warning look at her son. "Don't tell people to shut up. It's rude."

"Sorry."

The doorbell rang.

"Play nice, guys." Grant said as he stood up and headed for the front door. "Remember - you're the only siblings you got."

Clarice and Aaron looked at each other and rolled their eyes, then grinned.

The young white man was dressed nicely and looked like a college student, possibly from the community college. Grant stepped back from the peep hole in the door and opened the door half way. The young man smiled. He had a nice smile, the kind a father likes to see on the boy whose hand his daughter is holding and introducing as her boyfriend. It was friendly, even charming, though not in that smart ass 'I'm the shit' sort of way. Just genuinely friendly and charming.

Grant smiled back. "Can I help you?"

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The muzzle of the pistol appeared out of nowhere and pressed against his temple. "You can invite us in, pops." A Hispanic guy around the same age as the white kid stepped in front of Grant, gripping the handgun.

Grant's hands raised slowly. "Listen, guys. I don't want any trouble. If it's money you want, I got some in a safe, but it's not much, a couple thousand. You can have it."

The Hispanic guy grinned. "Show us the money." It was as charming a smile as his white friend. If it wasn't for the gun pressed against his head, Grant wouldn't have guessed that these two young men were of criminal stock.

Anxiety and start fear knotted Grant's guts. Dana and the kids were in the next room. These guys seemed to only want the money, but what frightened Grant the most was that they hadn't bothered to hide their faces. Thieves who only wanted to grab the money and run...hid their identity with some form of mask. Intruders who intended on eliminating witnesses didn't see the need to cover their faces. But the weapon pressed to his head put him and his family at the mercy of these two men. And that wasn't a place he wanted to be.

The muzzle of the gun shoved against Grant's lower back as the Hispanic guy walked him back to the living room. The white kid stepped in and closed the door, locking it behind him. When Grant entered the living room, Aaron twisted around. "Who was it, dad-"

The boy faltered when he saw the two young men standing behind his dad, and the tense, scared look in his dad's eyes.

Aaron started to get up. "Dad?"

"Aaron, sit down." Grant ordered quickly.

"That's right." The Hispanic man said as he revealed the handgun. "Everyone just stay where they are."

Clarice whimpered and inched closer to her mom.

The two men scoped out the room. "You got some nice shit." The Hispanic guy said as he nudged Grant forward.

"Look." Grant said. "Just take what you want. Just don't hurt my family."

"Hurt your family?" The Hispanic guy hissed as he shoved the gun in Grant's face. "Do I, Jorge Rodriguez, and my buddy Sean here look like the kind of guys who would hurt your family?"

Grant said nothing as he stared at the gun only inches from his face. The fear grinding his guts turned to terror. They had revealed their names as well as their faces.

Jorge glared into Grant's face then grinned and withdrew the weapon. "Show us the cash and everyone will come out of this just fine."

Grant hesitated. Once they had the money, would they kill his family?

The white guy, Sean, raised his own handgun and pointed it at Clarice.

"You really want to play this game, daddy?" Jorge asked in a low, dangerous voice.

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Grant swallowed thickly. "No."

"You." Sean waved the gun at Dana. "Show me where you keep the money."

Dana hesitated, glancing fearfully at Grant.

"I'll show you." Grant said.

The Hispanic guy shook his head. "Nah. You and I will stay right here and watch the kiddies. My boy here will take wifey to get the money." He leaned closer to Grant and whispered, "Besides, I think my boy digs her. She's one sexy bitch."

Grant started to lunge forward but got the gun shoved against his throat. "Don't." Jorge hissed quietly.

Grant's face twisted with rage and fear. "If that little fucker touches her, I swear to God I'll-"

"What?" The gunman pressed. "You'll do what? You give me any trouble and I'll blow away your whole family."

Sean moved to Dana and grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"No! Mom!" Clarice jumped to her feet and hugged her mom's waist.

Dana untangled Clarice's arms. "It's okay, honey." She assured her daughter with a trembling voice. "I'll be all right."

"Yeah, don't worry, sweetheart." Sean flashed his deceitfully charming grin. "I'll treat your mama real good."

Tears streaked Dana's cheeks as the young man tugged her towards the hallway. She cast a frightened look back at Grant.

"I'll kill you both if he touches her." Grant swore quietly.

Jorge raised the gun and hit Grant in the back of the head with the handle. Grant dropped to the floor, barely conscious.

"Dad!" Aaron cried and rushed to Grant.

The gunman shoved him away and knelt down, leaning his face close to Grant's. "You'll do nothing, asshole." He turned his eyes to Clarice who was now huddling with her brother. "In fact, that's one cute little girl you got there. Maybe after my boy is through with wifey...I'll take a turn at this one."

"You sick bastard!" Grant tried to shove himself up. The gunman smashed the butt of the gun down on his head again, this time knocking him out cold.

Clarice screamed and ran for the hall. The Hispanic laughed and stood up. Aaron lunged at him and began punching him in the gut. The man laughed and grabbed Aaron by the hair and threw him down, hitting his head on the coffee table. Aaron dropped to the floor, unmoving.

The gunman headed for the hallway. "Come on back, little senorita. I ain't gonna hurt you."

"The cash, baby." Sean shoved Dana into the bedroom and closed the door behind him. She stumbled then caught her footing. His eyes crawled all over her like vile insects. She shuddered. He was a good looking guy and even with the gun in his hand he still somehow maintained a charming persona, like he was just an actor playing a role and not really as dangerous as the circumstances attested he was.

The picture frame in front of the wall safe was cliché but Dana had thought it classically old fashioned. She popped the frame loose from its latch and it opened like a door, revealing the door of the small safe. Her hands shook as she slowly twisted the dial - three clicks to the right, two to the left, then five back to the right - and the lock disengaged. She opened the door and took out a small blue file envelope held closed by a black band. She handed it to the gunman the other guy had called Sean.

Sean took the envelope and opened it, thumbing quickly through the bills. "Anymore in there?"

Fear tightened Dana's throat as she shook her head. "That's all we have in the house." She tried to hold her voice steady and failed miserably. She had noticed the same discrepancies in the situation as her husband. These men took no precautions to hide who they were. She thought about Grant, Aaron and Clarice out in the other room. Clarice was only ten but the lovely woman she would soon become was already showing through. And that worried her. It worried her a lot. And Grant, and even Aaron, would fight to the death to protect Clarice.

To the death. The words ricocheted through her head and down into her heart. How was it possible that such a typical, normal evening at home...transformed so suddenly into a living nightmare? Where had these men come from? And why had they chosen her home? Her family? She raised her eyes to Sean's face again. He was watching her silently. It gave her the chills. Looking at him more closely, she realized he wasn't quite as young as she'd first thought. It was his clothes and hair style that gave him the college kid appearance. Was that intentional? A ruse to gain trust?

"What's wrong, honey?" Sean spoke low, dropping some of his 'kid' demeanor and allowing some of the 'man' in him to emerge. Sean tossed the envelope of money aside as if it were of little importance to him. He moved towards Dana. She stepped back and bumped up against the wall. Sean came in close and caressed her cheek and throat with the muzzle of the gun. His body was only inches from hers as he leaned his face close and began breathing in her scent. She gasped and flinched when she felt his other hand slip beneath her shirt and caress the curve of her waist.

"No." She whimpered and turned her face away from him. "Don't."

"You'll like it, baby." He murmured close to her ear. The muzzle of the gun continued to caress up and down the side of her neck as his other hand moved up, his fingertips tracing over her ribcage then just below her breast. "I promise."

"I gave you the money." Her quiet voice shook badly. "Please...leave me alone."

"It isn't about the money, honey." He smiled at the rhyme. His breath was hot against her ear. "Not really. I mean, the money is nice but..." His fingertips danced over skin. "This is even nicer."

"Why...are you doing this?" She was shaking. She wanted to shove his hand away, shove him away, but the gun was right there, caressing her like a dominant lover she couldn't resist.

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"Why ask why, baby?" He whispered and tugged at her earlobe with his lips. "It is what it is." His hand slipped up over the swell of her breast and squeezed firmly. He released a slow sigh and moaned softly. "I so enjoy this part...I do it so well." He squeezed her breast again. "Every time."

Dana closed her eyes and tried to turn her face away from his hot breath and probing lips. "Are you...going to kill me?" She trembled.

"Afraid so." He admitted bluntly. He nuzzled the curve of her jaw. "Such a waste, too. But witnesses just muck everything up."

Tears squeezed out through Dana's closed eyes. "And my family?"

"Sorry, honey." He said. "Got to make a clean sweep."

The sobs gripped her instantly and she shook beneath them. "Please...don't touch my daughter. She's just...a baby."

"Don't know that I can promise you that." He dropped a light kiss on the side of her neck. "My buddy, Jorge...you see, he has an affinity for pretty young girls and your girl is quite lovely."

Dana cried softly, her body shaking. The idea of that man out there violating her innocent little girl filled her with nausea and rage. In a burst of courage, she shoved the man back. Not expecting her act of bravery, he stumbled back a few steps but not enough for Dana to make a run for the door. The moment she stepped forward to go, she was staring down the muzzle of the gun.

"I get your need to protect your family." He whispered. "I really do. But it's time you faced reality. You're going to die here tonight. Your family is going to die. You should take comfort in the fact that regardless of how they die or what was done to them before they die...isn't gonna matter in the next life. They probably won't even remember it."

"Take comfort in it?" Dana cried. "That pervert out there is gonna rape my little girl...and I'm supposed to take comfort in your little after life theory? Fuck you."

"Just what I had in mind." He smiled and motioned towards the bed with the gun.

She shook her head slowly, tears wetting her cheeks. "No." She trembled. "You're going to kill me anyway...I'm not gonna just lay down and give it to you."

"So you want me to rape you like an animal?" He raised one eyebrow. "It isn't really my style, but whatever the lady of the house wants."

The hand holding the gun hit her hard in the face, no warning. An excruciating pain shot through her entire head as blackness pressed in around her vision and she went down. He grabbed her and threw her on the bed, straddled her body and began tearing her blouse off with one hand while he gripped the gun with the other. From a great distance away, she heard Clarice scream and she was crippled with the reality that she could do nothing to save her baby girl.

Clarice gasped with sobs as she ran down the hall and turned the corner fast. She collided with a solid object and thought she'd accidentally ran into the wall when she suddenly realized it was a human body. The man

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quickly grabbed her. She started to scream when a strong hand covered her mouth.

"Shhh." The man held her tight, his mouth close to her ear. "It's gonna be okay."

Clarice's chest heaved with hard gasps as her wide frightened eyes turned to the side. She didn't recognize this man. He wasn't one of the intruders. He turned his face and looked at her for a moment. He had black hair and dark blue eyes with glowing gold specs - like the fireflies on the lake where they camped in the summer.

Down the hall, the Hispanic man's heavy footsteps grew louder. Clarice began to tremble harder in the man's arms.

"Listen to me." He whispered close to her ear. "You have to trust me. I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you, but you have to stay quiet. Can you do that for me?"

Clarice nodded. The man slowly removed his hand from her mouth and set her aside, into a corner crook of the hallway. He held up his hand for her to 'stay'. She nodded again.

The man pressed his back against the wall of the hallway and withdrew a handgun. He looked back at Clarice. "Cover your ears, honey." He said. "And don't look."

Clarice covered her ears with her hands and squeezed her eyes shut then jumped when the gun fired loud. Just once. Followed by a grunt and a heavy thump as the Hispanic intruder hit the floor.

Dana's blouse was torn open. Her breasts heaved beneath her thin bra as the man dug into his pocket and withdrew a pocketknife. He snapped it open and slid the blade beneath the band of her bra and sliced it in half. He dropped the knife on the bed and rubbed her bra off her breasts. The gun was nestled against her ribs. Panic surged her pulse and she began to gasp for air.

"Nice." Sean murmured as he rubbed his hand over her full breasts. She could feel the hardness between his legs pressing against her stomach as he straddled her. She shuddered and tried to close her mind to what he was doing. He leaned down and covered a nipple with his mouth. She squeezed her eyes shut as his hand gripped her breast and massaged it as he suckled her warm flesh.

When he drew back, he licked his lips. "Tasty." His voice was thick with sexual hunger. He tugged at his belt, loosening it then unfastening his pants. He grabbed at the snap on the waist of her slacks and she cried out softly, turning her face into the pillow. He slid down the zipper of her slacks then began working his hand beneath the waistband of her panties.

"No..." She whimpered, panic tightening her chest and making it hard for her to breathe.

The gunshot rang out, snapping through her head as surely as if she'd been shot. But it came from the hallway. Dana began to shake as the image of Grant or one of her children being shot filled her head. Sean twisted away and jumped off the bed. She instantly rolled on to her side and curled up, crying uncontrollably.

"What the hell was that!" Sean went out the bedroom door at a rush. He only had a moment to register the situation. The little girl was huddled into a corner of the hall, her hands over her ears and next to her - a man

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he didn't recognize was down on one knee. He spun around, a Glock 10mm gripped in his fist and aimed right at Sean.

The little girl looked up, hands still over her ears, eyes wide and frightened.

The man hollered at the girl. "Don't look!" She quickly squeezed her eyes shut. Two shots were fired in rapid succession. Sean's body snapped back before he even felt the bullets rip through him. He hit the wall hard and fell to the floor. Dead instantly.

Clarice sat in the corner, shaking, tears squeezing out of her tightly closed eyes. Hands pressed hard to her ears. The man touched her shoulder. "You're safe now, Clarice." His lips pressed against her forehead. "You're safe."

Clarice opened her eyes slowly in time to see the man disappear into thin air.

Dana's body jerked hard with each shot that rang out. She laid huddled in a ball on the bed. She could still feel the wetness from the gunman's mouth on her breasts. Her hands shook as she tried to cover her chest with the torn blouse. She waited for Sean to return, to finish his job. But he never came back.

Silence filled the house. She wanted to move, to check on her family, but her body felt paralyzed. Her eyes were still closed tightly, seeping tears, when she felt hands touch her. She cried out and jerked away on reflex, but then the hands were grabbing at her again. Small hands.

"Mom?" Clarice's frightened voice forced her eyes open. "Mom...are-are you okay?"

Clarice stood next to the bed. Untouched and unharmed. Dana's arms shot out and grabbed her, pulling her into her embrace. She held her so tight she was afraid she might hurt her, but she couldn't let go. "Baby." She cried, shaking hard. She drew back and rubbed her hands over Clarice's face. "Honey? Oh my god, honey, are you okay?"

Clarice nodded but she looked somewhat dazed and confused.

"Honey...what happened?" Dana whispered. "Clarice...where are the men?"

Clarice looked at her mom, frowning. "Huh?"

"The men with the guns, baby...where are they?"

Clarice took her hand slowly and tugged her towards the door. Dana crawled off the bed, covering her chest as best she could. Clarice led her to the hallway. The moment they stepped through the bedroom doorway, Dana saw Sean's dead body, slumped down against the wall. Two bullet holes in his chest. Her eyes widened as she absently squeezed Clarice's hand. "Where is...the other man, honey?" She whispered, confused. "The Mexican guy?"

Clarice led her around the corner and looked towards the living room. She raised her hand and pointed. Dana's eyes followed to where she was pointing.

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Jorge Rodriguez lay crumpled on the floor, dead.

"What happened, baby?" Dana asked in a dull, disconnected voice.

"He shot them." Clarice whispered.

Dana frowned. "Who shot them?"

Clarice looked around. "I don't know." She said quietly. "He...disappeared."

1...The Rider...

"Hey, big brother, I'm gonna be a little late."

Clarice Stuart controlled the Jeep's steering wheel with one hand while she pressed a cell phone to her ear with the other. "Got a late start."

Snowflakes hit the windshield as the wipers systematically swished them away. The Jeep's tires spit dirty slush as it sped down the rural highway. Towering evergreens, heavily burdened with snow, lined the highway, the tips swaying in a light wind.

"Well hurry it up." Aaron spoke through the phone. "Or all the pies will be gone when you get here. Besides, mom's about to go into panic mode. You know how she gets."

Clarice smiled. "Yeah, I know." She said. "And hey, what're you doing, dipping into the desserts again? Mom'll kill you."

She could hear the grin in her brother's voice as he replied, "Only if she catches me." A brief pause, then, "So what made you late?"

Clarice stared at the slushy highway before her. Thicker snowflakes began to splatter on the windshield. "Bad dreams." She said softly.

"Thee bad dreams?"

"Yeah."

"Have you talked to anyone about them?" Aaron asked gently.

Clarice released a slow sigh. "You mean a shrink?" There was an edge to her voice that she knew wasn't warranted. "I'm not crazy, Aaron. I know what I saw."

A black street bike approached the Jeep from the rear, guided skillfully by a rider dressed in black, his face concealed behind a black helmet with a dark tinted face covering.

"You were traumatized, Clarice." Aaron said. "There wasn't anyone else there that night."

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"Then explain to me what happened?" Clarice insisted. "How did both those guys end up dead? You and dad were out cold, and mom..." Clarice faltered at the memory of what had almost happened to her mother. Something her mother never quite got over.

"I don't know, sis." Aaron admitted. "But people don't just disappear into thin air."

The street bike whipped into the opposite lane and sped around the Jeep.

"I wasn't hallucinating." Clarice spoke low. "I saw him. He was there. He knew my name, Aaron."

A pause, then, "I don't know what to tell you, sis."

"I still see his face." She whispered. "And his eyes..." *Like fireflies on a lake.* She remembered thinking that. Even twenty years later, she still remembered thinking that.

Slushy snow spit onto the Jeep's windshield as the bike whipped back into the lane in front of Clarice and zipped away, disappearing around a sharp bend. The windshield wipers smeared the slush, distorting her view of the road. Clarice pressed the washer button, squirting fluid onto the windshield.

"Listen, Aaron." Clarice said softly. "I'm sorry for bringing this all up now. Lets just forget about it and-" The phone crackled with static. "Aaron?" Clarice frowned. "Aaron, can you hear me? I'm breaking up." She could barely hear Aaron's voice through the static. "I'll talk to you when I get there. I love you."

Static was all that answered her. She clicked the phone off and dropped it on the passenger seat.

She guided the Jeep around the sharp bend in the road and reached for the radio as the Jeep came out of the bend, taking her eyes off the road briefly. When she looked up, she screamed and clutched the steering wheel with both hands and instinctively stomped on the brakes, realizing her mistake too late.

The Jeep whipped back and forth on the slushy pavement and finally slid to a stop, angled on the shoulder of the road.

Clarice was still clutching the steering wheel in a death grip, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She stared wide-eyed at the black street bike parked sideways in the road a few yards away. The black clad rider was straddling the bike, looking in her direction.

Clarice drew in deep breaths to calm her racing pulse. Good God, she almost hit him. What the hell was he doing parked in the middle of the road? Her intense fear at nearly dying instigated her rage.

"Are you crazy!" She screamed at the rider from inside the Jeep. "You idiot!"

The biker didn't move. He remained on his bike, watching her through his dark face plate. Clarice stared back at him, her heart still shuddering in her chest. Fear and uncertainty seeped through her bones. What was going on? Why was he just sitting there watching her? The tiny hairs at the nape of her neck prickled and sent shivers through her, giving her goose flesh arms.

Suddenly, the rider dismounted and began walking towards the Jeep. Fear and panic snapped Clarice into action. She cranked on the ignition key, again and again. "Start dammit!" She screamed at the vehicle. The Jeep ignored her demands and refused to turn over. "Come on!"

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The rider was approaching in long strides, quickly closing the distance between them. Clarice's eyes jumped to the driver door. It was unlocked. She swiped quickly at the lock, but not quickly enough as the rider grabbed the handle and yanked open the door.

Clarice turned away from him defensively, expecting the worst. "No!" God, what did he want? Was she going to die here, her body later found laying in a ditch full of dirty slush?

The rider reached towards her.

"No!" Clarice screamed. "Don't touch me!" She swung her fists as best she could in the confined space, hitting his chest and helmet, trying to fight him off. But it barely phased him as he shoved her against the back of the seat and held her there with one forearm then reached past her with his other hand and grabbed the cell phone off the passenger seat.

Clarice breathed deep and heavy, fear etched on her face. "Wh-what do you want?" she cried thickly.

"Your brother." The rider spoke from behind the helmet as he thrust the phone at her. His voice was deep with a rough edge. Under other circumstances she might have found it appealing.

"Please." Clarice whispered. "Leave me alone."

"Call your brother!" The rider ordered harshly. "Now!"

Clarice stared at him, confused, frantic. "What? I-I can't! I'm out of cell range!"

The rider thrust his hand inside his jacket and produced a handgun. He pointed it at Clarice's head. "Call him now!"

Her eyes wide and glued to the gun only inches from her head, Clarice's hands shook as she took the phone from the man's hand and turned it on. No service. Tears spilled down Clarice's face. "I-I told you, it doesn't work! Why-"

The man snatched the phone from her hand and looked at it. "Dammit!" He raged and tossed the phone back inside the car. He headed back towards the bike with a fast, urgent stride. As he passed the front of the Jeep, he turned suddenly and brought up the gun.

Clarice screamed and ducked.

The rider squeezed off a shot, blowing out the right front tire of the Jeep. Another shot took out the left tire. He looked at Clarice through the windshield as she slowly raised up, eyes wide, cheeks wet with fresh tears.

"Stay here." He said and stuffed the gun back inside his jacket. He mounted the bike, started it, then spun the rear tire of the bike in a half circle, sending up a small rooster tail of slushy snow and sped away.

Clarice sat trembling behind the steering wheel, watching the rider disappear down the highway. She gripped the steering wheel and tried to ward off a fit of shakes that threatened to overwhelm her. "What the hell?" She whispered unsteadily then reached for the cell phone, her hand shaking badly. She turned the phone on again. Still no service. She broke down crying. "No..."

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The black street bike cruised slowly down a residential street past a neighborhood home with police cars lining the driveway and street, red and blue flashers strobing the night shadows. Cops patrolled the yard as onlookers crowded at the perimeter. The rider turned his head and surveyed the scene as the bike rolled past. The flashing squad car lights reflected and glinted off the shiny black helmet and face plate, vaguely illuminating the rider's face underneath. His face was hard, troubled.

The bike rolled on past, picked up speed and disappeared down the dark street.

2...The Funeral...

"May our loved ones rest in peace in the arms of the Lord."

The preacher's words came to Clarice from a great distance away, though the man stood just a few feet from her, forcing her out of her deadened state of mind and back to a reality she didn't want to face. The numbing sensation had begun deep inside her the moment she'd arrived at her parents' home in time to see the coroner wheeling a body bag from inside the house. A sensation that had steadily spread outward until her whole body had lost all feeling. Any minute now, she was certain, her knees would buckle and she would crumple in a heap right there on the crisp frost laden grass that covered the cemetery grounds.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Clarice opened her eyes, unaware they had been closed. She stared blankly at the three bone white caskets, each hovering above a dark hole that would seal her family's deaths as final. Hanging tensely at her sides, her gloveless hands ached from the bitter November air. She thought about putting them in the pockets of her coat, but the numbness of her mind had robbed her of the ability to command her limbs.

What was she going to do without her parents? Without Aaron? Her twin brother, her other half. Since they were born, he had always been there. He was a part of her. When life got too rough, he'd always been the one she ran to. He was her refuge. Her family was her refuge. And now it was gone. All of it. How was she supposed to get through this alone? She had no one now.

Clarice's eyes were vacant as they slowly swept over the crowd of mourners. Her family was well loved, but she didn't know these people. She hadn't lived here for years. Her gaze came to rest momentarily on a uniformed officer standing idle at the perimeter of the crowd of mourners. He watched the procession for a moment then met Clarice's gaze briefly before scanning the cemetery grounds as if searching for something, or someone. Apparently satisfied by what he didn't find, his attention returned to Clarice.

Clarice looked away.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." The preacher spoke with sincere emotion. This didn't seem to be just a job to him, and for that Clarice was thankful. Her family deserved sincerity. "Now, a moment of silence."

Clarice watched the mourners as their heads slowly bowed and their eyes closed. Some were crying openly, others simply stood there with distraught looks on their faces as if they hadn't yet come to terms with this atrocity that had taken the lives of three amazing people. Clarice could sympathize. She wondered if she would ever come to terms with it.

Her eyes came to rest on a man standing apart from the other mourners near a large headstone. Early thirties, six foot or thereabouts, he wore a black suit and white shirt but no tie, and sunglasses. His short cropped black hair barely responded to the light breeze.

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The man's head wasn't bowed and he seemed to be watching Clarice. She stared back at him for a long moment as she sensed a twinge of recognition. Was he someone she used to know when she had lived here in her early youth? Before she really knew what she was doing, she took a step forward in his direction, a sudden urge to get closer, see him better. She didn't understand the need to know just who he was, but it controlled her, pulling her in his direction. She knew him, she was sure of it. Why that mattered, she didn't know. There were surely others here that she had known when she was younger. So what made this man different?

"Miss Stuart?" The preacher was suddenly at her side, speaking gently. Clarice blinked and aborted her mission to discover the stranger's identity, then shifted her attention to the preacher. He nodded towards the caskets. Her hands had gone numb so that she had forgotten she was holding three red roses. She stepped forward, walking slowly to the caskets. Her knees felt weak but she somehow maintained a steady forward movement.

She laid a red rose on each of the caskets, her hands resting momentarily on Aaron's. *I'm gonna miss you, big brother*, she whispered silently. If she spoke the words aloud, she would break down and perhaps never recover. She looked at the other two caskets. *Goodbye, momma...daddy*.

Her eyes blurred as a tightness squeezed her chest till she thought she might pass out. She turned from the caskets and cast one final glance over the crowd of mourners. There was no sign of the man in the sunglasses and suit.

She walked away without speaking to anyone. She didn't know what to say, and she was uncomfortable with the thought of all the pleas of sympathy that would be thrust at her. She just needed to be away from here. Her walk was urgent, hurried, as she moved towards the cemetery driveway where her Jeep was parked.

The key shook in her unsteady hands as she tried to unlock the driver door. An ache spread through her face as her jaw clenched tight, fighting the tears she was barely holding at bay.

A hand touched her shoulder and Clarice gasped, dropping the keys. She spun around and came face to face with the man in the sunglasses and suit.

"I'm sorry." He said quickly, gently. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Clarice stared at him for a silent moment. He still wore his sunglasses and she couldn't see his eyes, but she could feel them studying her. That sense of recognition came back full force, but her grief prevented her from probing into it more thoroughly, her previous compulsion to know who he was, gone.

She scooped her keys off the ground "It's ...okay." She whispered, unsettled.

"I just wanted to offer my condolences." His voice was low, soft, and sincere. She had heard his voice somewhere before, she was certain. But her head was spinning and she couldn't think.

Clarice looked at him again then inserted the key in the Jeep door, unlocking it. "Do I know you?"

He seemed to hesitate as she opened the door. "Uh...no. I was a friend of your brother's." He went silent for a moment, then added in a low, saddened voice, "He was a good man."

Tears burned Clarice's eyes. She blinked them back. She was almost away from here, she didn't want to lose it now and in front of a stranger. Although the nagging feeling she knew this man from somewhere made her wonder if he truly was a stranger.

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"Yes." Clarice whispered. "He was."

Another brief silence as the man just looked at her. "I never had the chance to meet your parents." He said. "But I'm sure they were wonderful people."

Clarice swallowed hard and nodded without looking at him. She slipped off her jacket and tossed it inside the Jeep. "The best." she managed thickly, her throat tight with emotion. Clarice glanced at the man who was just standing there like he had more to say, but she couldn't be here anymore. "I have to go. It was nice meeting you, Mr..."

"Oh. Lancaster." The man offered quick. He held out his hand. "Jonathon Lancaster."

Clarice accepted his hand. "It was nice to meet you, Mr. Lancaster."

"Jonathon. Please."

Clarice nodded. "Jonathon."

Jonathon Lancaster held onto her hand an extra moment as he stared at her. Even the feel of his hand brought on a sense of recognition, but Clarice was certain that if this man had ever touched her before...she would have never forgot it.

The sudden, unexpected thought caught Clarice off guard and she glanced at her hand, still encased in Jonathon's grip. Jonathon's hand squeezed hers just a fraction before letting go.

Clarice climbed into the Jeep, a storm of emotions reeling through her...and not all of them due to grief. A sudden sexual heat spread through her like wildfire, materializing in a fierce ache between her thighs unlike anything she had felt in a very long time. What the hell was wrong with her?

Jonathon stepped forward and gripped the edge of the driver door. He glanced towards the officer who was now watching them with interest. "Are you going to be all right?" he asked, his voice heavily laced with concern and...something else she couldn't quite finger.

She glanced at the cemetery grounds where the three white caskets hovered over their graves. Her jaw tightened and she swallowed hard. Her whole life was about to be lowered into the ground, gone forever. "Yeah." She lied as the tears rose behind her eyes once more. "I'll be fine." She reached for the door to close it, then looked at Jonathon's hand still gripping the edge.

He released it quickly. "Sorry."

"Goodbye, Mr-" she started, then added thickly, "Jonathon."

He stepped back as she closed the door and started the Jeep.

Clarice glanced at the caskets one last time as tears began to slide down her face. She couldn't hold them back any longer.

Jonathon watched Clarice through the driver window of the Jeep as she pulled away and drove down the cemetery driveway, the Jeep's tires crunching on the frosted gravel.

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The moment she'd touched his hand, he'd nearly lost it. It had taken every every ounce of will not to grab hold of her and insist she go with him now. His body raged with emotions he hadn't even known he could experience. He burned with desire and need for her physically, sexually. But at the same time...a cold fear gripped him and wrapped around him like a deadly snake, and slowly began to squeeze.

Chapter 2

3...The Encounter...

The large two-story secluded home sat shrouded in darkness. A tall wood plank fence encircled the back yard and lush shrubbery complimented the front of the house. The gravel drive disappeared into the trees, hiding the house from the main road.

Clarice's black Jeep sat silently in the driveway.

Curled up on the sofa, wrapped in a fleece throw, Clarice clutched a bottle of wine in her hand and stared at the flames in the fireplace. Except for the firelight dancing up the walls, the room was dark.

The light of the fire glistened on Clarice's wet face. She took a long drink from the wine bottle, sniffed, then wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. She continued to stare into the fire as unbidden images snapped through her head like someone taking pictures.

Flashing squad car lights drenching the neighborhood in red and blue. Clarice running onto the front lawn in a panic. An officer catching her, preventing her from entering her parent's home. A body bag being wheeled out on a stretcher. Clarice struggling in the officer's arms, screaming for her parents and brother.

Clarice sniffed again as fresh tears swelled and burst. She took another drink from the wine bottle then sat forward on the sofa. She pulled the throw around her shoulders and stood up, the wine bottle still clutched in her hand. She swayed a little on her feet as she walked to the window and drew back a small portion of the heavy drapes.

A police cruiser was parked in the deep shadows of a tall fir tree, barely visible. As she watched, a tiny red spark glowed in the darkness then dimmed, followed by a wisp of smoke. She let the drapes fall back into place. The cops had been assigned to protect her in case the psycho who attacked her family came after her as well. But she wondered if they could protect her if it came to it. She wasn't sure if she even cared. If the madman who had killed her family really wanted to kill her too...he would do it, regardless of who was protecting her.

Down the curve of the driveway, out of view of the squad car and concealed in the night shadows, the black street bike rolled to a slow stop. The engine turned off. A black boot touched the ground, crunched softly in the fine gravel that covered the driveway.

A black gloved hand reached down and withdrew a sawed off shotgun from a holster fastened to the bike.

Wade Jenkins sat in the darkness of the squad car. His arm rested in the open window of the driver door, a cigarette held loosely in his fingers. He withdrew his arm and the tiny red cherry of the cigarette glowed brightly, briefly illuminating his face as he took a long drag, then dimmed as his arm returned to the window.

Wade stared at the large house, eyes alert but bored. Just his luck, stuck here babysitting when he could be home in bed with his hot new girlfriend, putting in some real quality time. An ache spread through his groin as his mind wandered for a moment.

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He sighed, took one last drag off the cigarette, ground it out on the outside of the driver door then flicked it away. He reached inside his jacket and took out a cell phone. Dialed and pressed the phone to his ear.

The phone at the other end rang twice before a sexy female voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hey sexy." Wade drawled as he reached down and adjusted his crotch. Just hearing her voice was already making him horny.

"Hey baby." Her voice turned instantly sultry as soon as she heard Wade's voice. "What happened? I thought you were coming over tonight."

"Sorry." Wade offered. "Got stuck babysitting."

"Too bad." She cooed. "I had something real special for you. Guess you'll just have to come get it tomorrow."

Wade groaned. "I'd rather come get it tonight." He adjusted his crotch again as things began to grow hard. "Why don't you describe to me what was waiting for me. You know I love it when you describe it to me, baby."

"Does it get you hot?" She whispered.

"Oh baby, you know it." Wade groaned again. "Come on, sexy, give your man something sweet to hold him over."

Wade leaned his head back and closed his eyes as a grin slowly spread across his lips as she began to describe in extreme detail every little thing she wanted to do to him, with him, and what she wanted him to do to her.

"Oh god, girl." He gasped as beads of sweat broke out across his forehead. He massaged his swollen crotch. "I'm gonna lose it if you're not careful."

"I should stop." She said. "You are on duty, after all."

"I ain't doing anything right now, baby." Wade said thickly, wanting more of what she'd been giving.

"Who're you babysitting?" She asked, getting off the subject he wanted to be on.

He groaned. "Some woman."

"Is she pretty?"

Wade grinned. "Not like you, sweetness."

"Well, why do you have to babysit her?" She asked in a pouty voice.

Wade straightened up a little in his seat. Fun time was over for now. "Some psycho murdered her family." He said. "McCormick thinks he might come after her too."

"What?" Alarm darkened her voice. "Are...are you in danger, being there?"

"No, baby. Don't worry." Wade assured her. "It's just routine precaution. The guy is probably in Mexico by now. No need to worry about me-"

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Two hands thrust inside the driver door window and quickly snapped Wade's neck. His head lolled to the side loosely as his dead eyes stared blankly at nothing. The cell phone slipped from his dead hand and landed on the seat.

"Baby, you there?" The woman asked quietly, uncertain. "Wade?"

Outside the squad car, the killer stared through the open window at the dead cop, then turned away and looked at the house.

"I'm telling you, Rick. It was the most god awful thing I ever saw."

The two cops sat at the small table at the far side of the spacious kitchen. Sergeant Tames, forty-two, dealt out a hand of cards as he spoke to the other officer. "Scared the piss out of me, seeing them like that. No way I was gonna let that girl in there and see all that."

Officer Rick Benton was five years Tames' junior and built like a linebacker with a face to match. He gathered up his cards. "Does McCormick really think he's comin' after her too?"

"He don't know. He's clueless." Tames said as he situated his cards in his hand. "I mean, damn - there was no rhyme or reason to what he did to those people. None at all-"

Tames abruptly shut up as he stared at the kitchen doorway. Rick looked at Tames then turned to find Clarice Stuart standing there watching them. Tames cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably.

"Everything okay, Miss Stuart?" he asked.

Clarice looked at him like he was out of his mind. Of course everything wasn't *okay*. He felt like a fool even asking such a question.

"I'm...I'm going to bed." Clarice said with a thickness to her voice.

Tames nodded. "Okay. We'll be here all night. Don't worry about a thing." The sight of her made him wish he had the words to comfort her, but there were no such words at a time like this. "Just...try and get some rest."

Clarice nodded and stepped away from the doorway.

"She looks like hell." Benton said. "She gonna be okay?"

Tames sighed and shook his head. "Who's to say? After what she's been through these last couple days. I don't know how things could get any worse for her."

"I heard she lost it at the morgue when she saw the condition of her family's bodies."

"Wouldn't you?"

Benton nodded as he shifted the cards in his hand. Tames glanced at his watch then picked up the portable police radio off the table.

"Jenkins." Tames spoke into the radio. "What's your status? How's it lookin' out there?"

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No response. Benton looked at Tames.

"Probably turned it off." Tames muttered and stood up.

"Probably having phone sex with his girlfriend." Benton chuckled. "That boy never turns off."

Tames nodded and grinned, but he was anything but amused. Jenkins knew they were on high risk detail. "I'll go check on him." Tames said. "Be back in a minute."

Clarice stood in the doorway to the master bedroom. Aaron's room. Maybe she should have opted to stay at a hotel instead of her dead brother's house. But she needed to feel close to him. She didn't want to be in a strange place right now.

She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her, then went to the large bed and crawled beneath the thick comforter. She breathed in her brother's scent and closed her eyes as fresh tears formed. She hugged the wine bottle to her chest and laid her head on the thick pillows. She stared blankly at the dark ceiling.

"I should've been there." She whispered aloud, her voice dull, empty. "I should've died with you."

What was she going to do? How was she supposed to keep getting up each morning and going on with her life when she had nothing left to live for? Everything she did, she did to make her family proud of her. Every time something good happened, her first thought was that she couldn't wait to tell Aaron and her parents. And when bad things happened, she knew she could count on them being there for her, every step of the way. Even living in L.A., with all the commotion of the city surrounding her, she could still feel the love of her family embracing her. And with Aaron, she'd felt a real, live connection. She always had. They were truly like two halves of one whole.

She stared up at the ceiling as hot tears drained from her eyes and wet her ears. Now half of her was gone, and yet she could still feel him. But instead of the warmth that feeling had always given her...now it made her feel cold, like something awful was happening to him, tormenting him with pain and rage unlike anything she'd ever felt in him before. Her chest tightened as the sensation intensified. She sat forward, gasping.

Oh God, I can't breathe!

She gasped for air as panic swelled inside her. She sucked in deep long breaths and slowly began to calm. A panic attack, that's all it was. Nothing more. Aaron wasn't somewhere in spiritual torment. He was in Heaven with God, with their parents. She had to believe that. She had to. Yet the awful sensations remained.

Clarice huddled deeper into the blankets. She covered her mouth with her hand and cried openly.

Tames walked towards the squad car. His boots crunched on the gravel drive as he glanced around at the darkness. There were a lot of places someone could hide out here. He didn't know if the Stuart murders were personal or some random act of violence, but he wasn't about to assume it was the latter and let down his guard.

"Jenkins!" He called as he approached the cruiser. "What the hell? Did you turn off your radio?"

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Tames neared the cruiser and peered through the front windshield. He shook his head. "Asleep? Are you kidding me? I don't believe this." He reached through the driver window and shook Jenkins. "Jenkins! Wake up! What the hell are you-"

Jenkins head lolled towards Tames and his dead eyes stared through the senior officer. Tames stumbled back. "Shit!" He looked quickly at the house. "Oh god..."

He turned from the car in a hurry, unfastening his holster strap. He tugged his revolver loose as he sprinted back to the house.

Rick Benton shuffled the cards repeatedly as he waited for Tames to return. He didn't feel entirely secure having Jenkins watch the front of the house for them, but better Jenkins than him. Whether or not the killer would actually come after the Stuart woman was debatable, but he just felt better being inside the house.

The cards slapped together loudly as he shuffled them again. He sensed a presence behind him and grinned. "So, was Jenkins-" The tip of the butcher knife protruded from his chest before he could even register he'd been stabbed. "What..." Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth as everything went black. He slumped forward on the table as the knife slowly withdrew from between his shoulder blades.

Tames came through the front door in a hurry, his revolver pointed safely at the floor. He came out of the entry hall into the doorway of the kitchen, adrenaline pumping.

"Benton!" Tames called. "He's here!"

Tames came to an abrupt halt, shock and horror overtaking him as he stared at his partner slumped dead in his chair, blood pooling on the floor at his feet.

"Son of a bitch!" Tames gripped his revolver tightly. He looked around cautiously, on full alert. He backed out of the kitchen doorway. A creaking in the upstairs hallway snapped his eyes to the second floor.

She opened her eyes. She was laying in her brother's bed, in his bedroom. The room had been better lit when she'd cried herself to sleep. Now just a single bedside lamp glowed, trying to push back the shadows and failing.

Clarice swallowed tightly and stared up at the dark ceiling. Everything felt out of sync, like when one hovers between wakefulness and sleep. She recognized her surroundings, knew why she was here, remembered all the horrifying details of what had brought her here...but still it all felt surreal, like she wasn't really a part of it at this precise moment. The panic from before started to rise again. She didn't like this feeling, this sense of detachment. It made her feel as if she was in danger of just floating away into oblivion.

She hugged the blankets around her. Tears slid down her cheeks. "I don't want to be alone." Her voice felt thick, like honey filling up her throat. "I don't want to be here by myself."

A sudden shift in the bed next to her startled her. She gasped and started to retreat when strong arms encircled her and pulled her against a thick, strong chest. The faint light of the lamp wasn't enough to reveal the identity

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of the person sharing her bed. Her pulse raced, heart thundering fiercely as he turned her and held her with her back against his chest. Her first impulse was to struggle, but then warm lips were brushing her ear, whispering to her.

"Don't be afraid. I won't let anyone hurt you."

The voice was powerfully male and resonated through her body and mind, and into her memories. She knew this voice. Knew those *words*.

"You're safe with me, Clarice."

Hot tears cascaded down her cheeks as she began to tremble. She'd had dreams of him before, sporadically for the last twenty years...but nothing like this, never this vivid. She wanted to stay here, in his arms, and never go back to the cold world that had robbed her of everything she loved and needed in this life.

She didn't ask who he was, what his name was, how he knew her name...she didn't care. The only words that trembled off her lips was the tiny plea, "Hold me tighter."

His arms tightened, drawing her body back snug against his. Only then did she realize they were both naked. His strong hands began to gently caress her skin, inflaming her body and mind. When he cupped her breasts and gently pinched her nipples, she moaned and pressed her breasts more firmly into his palms. Her hands covered his. She pressed her back side against his groin. His hunger for her was hard and thick. He gently lifted her upper leg and curled it back over his hip then pressed the swollen head of his erection tentatively against the soft, moist door to her inner vaginal canal. He hesitated, going no further.

Clarice trembled as more tears slid down her face. "Please." She whimpered softly, desperately.

His lips touched her shoulder, kissing her softly and with more loving affection than any man had ever kissed her. "I love you, Clarice." His voice shuddered with emotion and she could hear the tears in it as well. "I've always loved you." He pushed his hips forward gently, slowly pressing into her. Clarice gasped. He paused, dropping more kisses on her shoulder and the back of her neck, then continued entering her, opening her to him emotionally as well as physically.

Clarice gasped again then released a deep moan as he touched bottom. He forced himself just a bit deeper, the firm head pushing against the door to her womb. Her fingers gripped his forearms fiercely. The texture of his skin felt slightly odd, rough, but she didn't care. She pressed herself back on him. His breath quickened and puffed out against her warm skin as he began to slowly stroke through her soft, tight canal, bumping bottom with each inward thrust.

"Yes..." Clarice moaned unsteadily, gripping his arms tighter.

His mouth was against her ear as low groans rose from deep inside him. His thrusts intensified a little as he stroked harder, faster. His arms tightened around her as if he were afraid she would suddenly rip away from him and flee his touch. She could feel the fear in him as his love making became urgent, desperate. She didn't understand his fear, or what he was so afraid of, but she longed to comfort him, assure him that...what? She didn't know.

Hot tears dropped onto her shoulder and slid down between her breasts. He was trembling and holding her so tight she could barely breathe, but she didn't ask him to let go. She didn't want him to let go.

Hour of Darkness

"Clarice..." He shuddered fiercely as he came at her with urgency, his heart trembling in his voice. She couldn't speak. Heavy moans and gasps flowed from deep inside her as she felt them both rising to climax together.

She cried out suddenly as her orgasm peaked and burst. He came with her, hard and forceful, releasing a deep shuddering cry. His hot seed flowed through her, warming her insides, seeking refuge deep in her womb.

Clarice trembled in his arms. He loosened his hold just enough to turn her around. She rolled over and pressed her bare breasts against his damp chest, then leaned up for a kiss as she gazed into his eyes through the darkness. Gold eyes stared back at her. *Glowed* in the shadows.

Non-human eyes.

Clarice sat forward with a start, coming out of her dream so suddenly she wasn't certain she was really awake. She looked at the bed beside her. Empty. A storm of emotions roiled inside her. A part of her terrified by the dream and another part aching to be back in her lover's arms.

She looked around the dark bedroom. Her heart was pounding like thunder in her head and chest. She went to leave the bed when she heard a creaking in the hall outside her door. She froze, her eyes wary, alert. She reached out slowly and turned on the bedside lamp. The dim light pushed the shadows to the corners of the bedroom.

"O-Officer Tames?" She called uncertainly, a weakness to her voice that disconcerted her.

No answer came back. Clarice left the bed. She gripped the wine bottle by the narrow neck to use as a weapon if necessary. She moved slowly towards the door. Oh god, what was she doing? This was crazy. If there was a madman on the other side of the door...what was a wine bottle gonna do to him?

Still, her feet moved forward. Her family had been viciously and brutally murdered. If their killer was here for her, she wanted to see the bastard's face before he took her life. She had to look in his eyes and see what it was her family saw before they died. Why should she deserve any better than them?

She moved slowly towards the door. "Who's there?"

When she still received no answer, she reached slowly for the door handle. Was she overreacting? Being overly paranoid as a result of her family's recent deaths? Before she could consider an answer, the door burst open. Clarice stumbled back and screamed. Her arm cocked instinctively and she was bare seconds from launching the wine bottle when a hand grabbed her wrist, stopping her.

Tames stood in the doorway.

"Officer Tames." Clarice said unsteadily, but with a measure of relief. "I-I'm sorry. I thought..."

"We have to go." Tames said tightly. "Now."

Clarice noticed the revolver for the first time clutched in Tames' hand. An intense fear gripped her. "What's wrong?"

"He's here." Tames said, alert and on edge. "In the house."

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Terror immobilized Clarice. "I-In the house?" She breathed. Her former intentions about facing her family's killer evaporated into thin air. She couldn't do this. She had no reason to want to live, and yet she was terrified of falling into the hands of the madman who murdered her family.

"Yes."

"Where are the others?" She asked in a bare whisper, afraid of the answer.

Tames' face tightened. "Dead." He said. His voice wavered in a way that Clarice found unnerving. He was scared, really scared. That was supposed to be her job. His job was to be fearless and know exactly what to do.

"Dead?" Clarice whispered. "Are-are you sure?"

"Yeah." Tames said emphatically. "Pretty damn sure. I know what dead looks like. And it's gonna look like us if we don't get the hell out-" Tames gasped suddenly as his body went rigid. He stared wide-eyed at Clarice. "Run..."

"What...?" Clarice looked down. The bloody tip of a large butcher knife protruded from Tames' chest. She gasped and looked up. The dark form of the killer stood behind Tames. Clarice screamed and stumbled back into the room.

The killer was still in shadow behind Tames. He jerked the knife from the cop's body as Tames' lifeless corpse fell to a heap at his feet.

"No!" Clarice screamed. "God...please..."

The killer stared at her from the shadowed doorway then stepped into the dim light of the bedroom.

Clarice's eyes widen in horror and confusion. The killer stood before her, the bloody butcher knife gripped in his fist. But it was his face that her disbelieving eyes were focused on. *It can't be*, she insisted to herself. But she couldn't deny what she was seeing. Though his eyes were empty, emotionless, like a flesh covered machine...she was clearly staring into the face of her recently deceased brother. Aaron.

"No..." Clarice whimpered, paralyzed by this image before her. Was she going crazy? Still, she heard herself whisper, "A-Aaron?"

The killer didn't speak as he moved towards Clarice with purpose. His movement broke Clarice from her paralysis. He had every intention of killing her. She backed up towards a pair of glass doors that opened out onto a small balcony. She could still feel the neck of the wine bottle gripped tightly in her fist. She stared at Aaron's face on the monster before her and hesitated. What the hell was going on?

She didn't have time to find the answer. She screamed and launched the wine bottle at the killer's head. The bottle shattered against his face, drenching him with wine and embedding his face with glass. He took an unsteady step back then came forward again.

Clarice turned and threw open one of the glass doors and ran onto the balcony. She looked over the edge. The pool was still filled, covered over with a dark blue tarp gathering leaves and debris. She gasped and looked behind her. The killer was coming through the doors. She cried out and climbed over the edge of the balcony, gripping the rail as she looked down at the pool.

Hour of Darkness

Oh God. She looked up. The killer was right there. She screamed and let go, falling away from the railing. As she felt her body tumble backwards into the air, she was suddenly caught by a strong hand clamping around her wrist. Her body jerked back and slammed against the bottom of the balcony, knocking the wind out of her.

She gasped for air and looked up into the face of her dead brother. Tears streaked her face. "Please." She gasped, barely able to breathe. Her chest throbbed from being smashed into the balcony. "Don't...hurt me."

He hauled her back up effortlessly and dropped her hard onto the floor of the balcony. She scooted away from him, crying and gasping, but he was too close for her to get to her feet and run. He reached for her and she screamed, trying to get away, but he caught her by the throat and lifted her off the floor with one hand. In the other hand he still gripped the butcher knife.

Oh Jesus. Jesus. Clarice tried to breathe beneath his crushing grip. "Please..." she gasped. "...don't..."

The killer stared into her eyes. The hand gripping the knife...faltered. For a fleeting moment, she swore she saw her brother in his eyes. Her real brother. Her beloved Aaron. But what she saw, or thought she saw, was gone in an instant and his hand was tightening around her throat.

Clarice coughed and choked, struggling and clawing at his hand, trying to pry it loose from her throat. Suddenly she was airborne as he launched her through the glass door that was still closed. The glass shattered as she was catapulted back into the bedroom.

She hit the bedroom floor hard, crashing into the nightstand. A heavy lamp toppled over and crashed down on her. Clarice gasped and tried to move, but her body wouldn't obey.

The killer stepped into the bedroom, his shoes crunching on the broken glass.

Clarice cried and tried to move away but a large shard of glass in her thigh impeded her mobility. She held up a hand defensively and turned her face away as the killer came towards her.

"Why...?" She choked out in a gasping sob.

The killer hesitated, but only a moment, then raised the butcher knife.

A sudden deafening blast made Clarice jump and scream. She covered her head with her arms as the killer was blown back out the broken doors onto the balcony. Another blast. Clarice cried out again and looked around in time to see the killer catapult off the balcony.

The killer's body hit the tarp covering of the pool and plunged into the depths, the tarp wrapped around him like a death shroud as he slowly sank to the bottom and laid motionless.

Clarice stared at the balcony. The killer was gone. She raised her head, her face smudged with blood and streaked with tears. What the hell happened? A hand touched her shoulder and she screamed, jerking away from the touch.

"Easy." A male voice said. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

Clarice looked up into the face of her rescuer...and the blue eyes she remembered so vividly from her past was staring back at her. She would have recognized them instantly back at the cemetery if it hadn't been for the sunglasses. Her head swam. Was she imagining this?

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"It's...you." she whispered as her head swam even more.

"Jonathon." He said as he glanced uneasily towards the balcony. He was wearing black leather riding gear and holding a sawed off shotgun as he knelt down next to her.

She stared at him as he swam in and out of focus. He was the rider on the highway who shot out her tires? She could feel consciousness steadily slipping away. *You're hallucinating*, she told herself.

Jonathon laid the shotgun on the floor beside him. "Stay with me, Clarice." he said. He looked at the large chunk of glass protruding from her thigh muscle. "This is gonna hurt."

"What-"

Clarice cried out suddenly as Jonathon yanked the glass from her thigh without warning.

"I'm sorry." he said. "It had to be done. You wouldn't have been able to walk."

"W-walk?" She gasped as pain seemed to spread through her entire body. The pain in her thigh was only part of it.

Jonathon looked around quickly then yanked the blankets off the bed and grabbed the sheet. He produced a pocket knife and ripped a strip out of it, wrapping the strip around the wound in her thigh. "We have to get out of here." He picked up his weapon and slid his arm around her back, hauling her to her feet. Clarice gasped as her face twisted in pain.

She leaned unsteadily against Jonathon's strong body. Who was this man? Where had he come from and why did he care if she lived or died? She clutched at him as her legs tried to give out beneath her. He held her on her feet and moved her towards the bedroom door.

"I-I don't...understand..." She whimpered. The pain in her body was excruciating and threatened to draw her into a pit of darkness.

"I know." Jonathon's voice was tight, on edge. "I'll explain everything. I promise. But right now, we have to move."

Clarice's head lolled slightly. The room grew hazy and began to spin.

"Stay with me." Jonathon insisted. "Stay with me!"

"I...don't..." Clarice mumbled incoherently then sagged in his arms, unconscious.

His face tense and hard, Jonathon quickly lifted Clarice into his arms.

4...The Escape...

Jonathon came out the front door with Clarice in his arms and the shotgun gripped in his right hand. He had to get her away from here, they didn't have much time.

The instant he stepped out on the porch, he was blinded by bright headlights and red and blue flashers. The sound of weapons being drawn echoed in the strange light. Jonathon halted at the first step. "Shit!" he hissed, tense and quiet.

Hour of Darkness

"Drop your weapon!"

Jonathon squinted against the blinding lights. A plain clothed cop slowly moved in his direction, weapon drawn and aimed at Jonathon's head.

"I said drop your weapon!" The cop ordered sharply.

Shit! Jonathon's face tightened and flexed as he clenched his jaw. He did not need this now. Fear squeezed at his mind and heart but he fought it off. He would get Clarice out of here...even if he had to kill every cop in his way. But he would play their game for the moment. *Only* for a moment, though. He couldn't afford to waste any more time than that.

Jonathon let the shotgun slip from his hand. It hit the wood planks of the porch with a loud clunk.

As soon as the weapon was out of Jonathon's hand, the cop waved in the other officers. Feet crunched across the gravel as the officers moved in quickly. One officer stepped up and took Clarice from Jonathon's arms. Jonathon's eyes were hard yet frightened as he watched the cop carry her a short distance away and lay her carefully on the ground. He checked her pulse.

"She's alive, Detective McCormick!" he called to the plain clothed cop.

"Put your hands on your head!" McCormick ordered Jonathon. "And get down on your knees!"

Jonathon stared hard at the detective but complied, lacing his fingers behind his head and sinking slowly to his knees. Another officer moved in quick and slapped a cuff on Jonathon's right wrist then twisted his arms down and cuffed the left wrist. He stood Jonathon to his feet.

"You have the right to remain silent." The cop informed him. "If you give up that right, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

Jonathon barely heard the cop's words as he continued to stare hard at McCormick, who's weapon remained aimed at Jonathon's forehead.

"You have the right to an attorney." the cop continued. "If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights?"

Jonathon didn't answer. He stared at McCormick. *Let me go.*

"Do you understand these rights?" The cop pressed.

McCormick's eyes narrowed somewhat as he cocked his head just a hair. His brow creased uncertainly.

"Answer me." The cop insisted. "Do you understand these rights?"

McCormick stared at Jonathon for a moment longer then slowly lowered his weapon. He spoke to the arresting officer. "Uncuff him."

The cop hesitated. "What?"

"He's not the one we're looking for." McCormick said.

Hour of Darkness

The arresting officer looked at the detective uncertainly then glanced at the other officers nearby. They were all looking at McCormick like he'd suddenly lost his mind.

Chapter 3

Sergeant James Kempt frowned. What the hell was McCormick doing? He stepped forward, his eyes narrowing with suspicion. He spoke quickly, harshly to the arresting officer.

"Do not remove those cuffs, Officer Brent!" Kempt looked at McCormick. "Sir, we have three dead officers of the premises. We cannot release him."

The cuffed man on the porch was ignoring everyone but McCormick. His eyes were locked on the detective. Suddenly McCormick brought his weapon up and aimed it at Officer Brent's head.

"I said release him!" McCormick shouted at Officer Brent.

Kempt quickly aimed his weapon at McCormick. "Sir! Do not do this!"

"I will shoot him!" McCormick warned with deadly sincerity.

Kempt looked at Officer Brent who was suddenly tense and frightened. Kempt's jaw clenched. He looked at McCormick as he spoke to Brent. "Release him."

Officer Brent's hands shook as he unlocked the cuffs and released their only suspect in the other officers' deaths. *Shit!* Kempt swore silently as the suspect picked up the shotgun. McCormick's weapon continued to hold on Brent as Kempt's weapon held on the detective.

"Sir!" Kempt shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

McCormick didn't answer. His eyes and his weapon remained trained on Officer Brent who was standing very still, his hands slightly raised.

What in the hell was going on? Kempt watched tensely as the suspect went to the unconscious woman. The officer with the woman looked uncertain. The suspect raised the shotgun just enough to make his point. The officer looked at Kempt.

Kempt's jaw tightened as he nodded slowly. "Stand down."

The officer backed off slowly. The suspect picked up the woman and moved quickly to a law enforcement bronco parked in the drive. He carefully placed the woman in the passenger seat then hurried around and slid in behind the wheel. Someone must have left the keys in the ignition because the rig started right up.

Kempt gripped his weapons tightly, keeping it trained on McCormick as he watched the suspect rev the bronco's engine then back the rig around and speed down the drive.

"Sir!" Kempt yelled sharply.

McCormick didn't respond. Kempt started to signal to the other officers to go after the suspect when the detective stopped him cold.

"Go after him and I will blow this man's brains out!" McCormick said harshly.

Hour of Darkness

Kempt immediately aborted his plan to pursue the suspect. He watched the bronco's taillights disappear down the driveway and listened as the rig hit the paved road and sped away. Kempt looked at McCormick. "What the fuck is going on?" He murmured.

McCormick blinked. His weapon wavered. He looked around at Kempt. His weapon was trained on him. "Sergeant Kempt." McCormick said cautiously. "What are you doing? Lower your weapon."

"I will, sir." Kempt said. "When you aim your weapon somewhere other than Officer Brent's head."

"What?" McCormick looked quickly towards the front porch. Officer Brent remained frightened and motionless, hands still slightly raised. McCormick quickly lowered his weapon. What in the hell? He glanced around. All the officers were staring at him. The suspect was nowhere in sight.

Kempt moved slowly in his direction, weapon slightly lowered but still ready. "Sir, if you'd just hand over your weapon...we'd all feel a lot more at ease."

"Sergeant Kempt." Confusion weighed down McCormick's voice. "What the hell is going on?"

"That's what we need to figure out, sir." Kempt said as he held out his hand. "But first...your weapon."

Uncertainty darkened McCormick's eyes. He frowned and touched his upper lip just below his left nostril. Blood smeared his fingertips.

The bronco's headlights stabbed into the darkness ahead as it raced down the two lane highway. Jonathon's face was tense and flexed as his foot slowly pressed down on the gas pedal and the bronco's speedometer steadily climbed.

He glanced anxiously at Clarice who was laying on the seat next to him, unconscious. Her bandage was soaked with blood. He'd almost lost her. He'd cut it too close, way too close. He should have just grabbed her on the highway and taken her then, even if he'd had to do it at gunpoint. It hadn't done him any good to try and get to her family. He was too late this time.

He looked at her again. It terrified him how close she came to dying. And it was his fault. He'd caused all this. If he'd just left well enough alone...

She would have suffered anyway. Her family would still be dead.

He knew it was true, but this nightmare that had suddenly become her life...*this* nightmare was his fault. And he was the only thing standing between her and the horror he'd unleashed.

"I will protect you, Clarice." He whispered tightly, his voice heavy with emotion. "I won't let him kill you." Jonathon trained his eyes on the road ahead, his face etched in fear. "I won't."

5...On The Run...

Clarice came to slowly and with great effort. The first thing she registered was the pain. It racked her body and settled more directly in her thigh. She tried to remember why she was in pain but her mind wouldn't work.

Hour of Darkness

Everything was out of focus. Where was she?

Movement next to her drew her attention. Her head swam and throbbed as she slowly turned and looked at the man sitting behind the steering wheel. The vehicle was dark and his face was barely visible as he went through his wallet.

She pushed herself up slowly in the seat, emitting a low cry as her whole body screamed at her not to move.

Her low cry drew the man's attention. He looked at her. Headlights suddenly cut through the darkness of the rig and illuminated the man's face as an SUV pulled in and parked next to them.

Jonathon Lancaster. The name snapped into her mind and she remembered. He was the man she'd met at the cemetery. And...

A flurry of disturbing images suddenly flashed through her head. She remembered the killer had come to the house and come after her. He...he had Aaron's face. Clarice shuddered and hugged herself tight. But how...

Could she have imagined it? Did he really look like her brother or had her tortured grief stricken mind just saw him that way? But why would she put Aaron's face on a killer? It didn't make sense.

"I want you to stay here." Jonathon's voice was strained as he closed his wallet and grabbed the door handle. "I need to get some things and I'll be right back."

Feeling weak and confused, Clarice watched him open the driver door. "Where..." But he was already out of the vehicle and closing the door. She watched him pass in front of the rig and disappear around the corner of a building. She stared at the spot where he'd disappeared then realized they were parked at the side of a mini-mart.

She looked around in a daze. Light from inside the mini-mart reached out into the main parking lot in front of the store but didn't touch where Clarice sat in the dark rig. There were two gas pumps out in front of the mini-mart. One car was parked next to a pump. The rest of the parking lot was deserted except for the SUV that had just pulled in moments ago.

Clarice's gaze moved over the interior of the rig. It was big and spacious, like a suburban or a bronco. Her eyes suddenly fell on a shotgun secured in a lock and fastened to the front of the dash. The low static of a radio filtered through the dark interior. She was in a police rig. How...

She remembered the cops at the house. Sergeant Tames...Clarice felt her stomach pinch and churn. Oh god, she was gonna puke. She squeezed her eyes shut and fought the urge to vomit. Tames was dead. Killed right in front of her. He'd said...the others were dead too.

Tears burned her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She trembled and hugged herself tighter. "God...what is happening?"

The driver of the SUV stood in front of Jonathon, paying for his items at the counter. Jonathon stared at the back of his head as he cradled a small armload of first aid supplies. He concentrated on the rear collar of the man's shirt. The man picked up his bag and walked out of the store. Jonathon watched him leave.

"Sir?"

Hour of Darkness

Jonathon turned and looked at the cashier. She was young, nineteen maybe, and moderately pretty with long straight dark hair and big dark doe eyes. Jonathon offered her a faint smile and set his items on the counter.

Clarice leaned against the passenger door, eyes heavy and tired. God, what kind of nightmare had she fallen into? It all felt so surreal. And yet the pain in her body insisted it was all too real.

And Jonathon Lancaster...who was he? When she'd looked into his eyes back at the house, she recognized him instantly. He was the man who had saved her and her family from the two intruders twenty years ago, and yet...he didn't look a day older now than he did then.

She closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the cool window. Was she losing her mind? No one had believed there was a third man in the house that night, and they certainly didn't believe her when she said he disappeared into thin air. Why would they believe a traumatized ten year old with such an outrageous story? *How* could they? Even she had begun to wonder if she hadn't imagined it all, even though there was no logical explanation as to how the intruders had ended up dead.

And if the man had been there...how could he be the same man, the same age, who had rescued her tonight? It wasn't possible. There had to be some other explanation.

She opened her eyes and raised her head slowly when someone came around the corner of the store. It was the man who had gotten out of the SUV. She started to look away when the man stopped at the edge of the curb walk that encircled the front of the store, and just stood there, unmoving.

Clarice sat up straighter and watched him. He didn't seem to be looking at anything, just standing immobile. She frowned. What was he doing?

As she watched, Jonathon came around the corner of the mini-mart and stopped next to the man. He held his bag of items in one arm and discreetly held out his other hand. The SUV driver dug into his pocket and tugged out his keys. He dropped them into Jonathon's palm.

Clarice's frown deepened. "What the hell?" She whispered.

Jonathon left the man standing there and approached the passenger side of the bronco, opening the door. "Come on," he said. "We're switching rigs."

Clarice hesitated as she glanced at the man still standing motionless on the curb. "He...he just gave you his keys?"

"We made a deal." Was all Jonathon offered. "Now come on. We've got to get moving."

He helped Clarice with his free hand as she slid carefully out of the bronco, wincing with every movement.

"But...how can you trade rigs?" She asked. "This is a cop car."

"Let me worry about the details," he said. He helped her around the SUV to the passenger door and up into the passenger seat. He handed her the bag from the store then shut the door. He returned to the bronco and grabbed his sawed off shotgun and a portable police radio, then returned and climbed in behind the wheel of the SUV.

Hour of Darkness

Jonathon started the rig and backed out of the parking lot.

Clarice watched the man on the curb. He shifted from his motionless state, reached up and wiped his fingertips across his upper lip. He stared at his fingertips for a moment then walked to the bronco and climbed inside as if he'd owned the truck all his life. Clarice's brow pinched. Who would make a trade for a police car? Something wasn't adding up. Not even close.

Fear and uncertainty tightened Clarice's face as she looked at Jonathon. "I need to know..." She started then faltered as her throat tightened. "I need to know what is happening."

The SUV left the mini-mart parking lot and pulled out onto the highway, instantly picking up speed. Jonathon didn't respond. His foot pressed down on the gas pedal as the SUV surged forward at what was becoming a dangerous speed.

"Why did that man give you his keys?" Clarice pressed. Her body ached and throbbed, and her head felt fuzzy, making her want to close her eyes and sleep. But that wasn't an option at the moment. Maybe never again. "And why were we in a cop car? Did you..." She hesitated, not sure she wanted an answer to her next question. "Did you kill a cop?"

Jonathon cleared his throat and kept his eyes trained on the road ahead. "No." His voice was low, stressed.

"Why did that man trade rigs with you?" She asked again. "Why would he do that?"

The muscles in Jonathon's face flexed with tension. He didn't answer her as he stared straight ahead. The SUV's headlights cut through the night like a knife, revealing a stretch of the two lane road a little at a time.

Clarice stared at him uncertainly then looked down at the bag on the seat between them. "What's...in the bag?" She asked quietly.

"First aid supplies." He said distantly. "We need to properly bandage your wound."

Clarice look at her thigh. Fresh blood was seeping through the strip of sheet he had wrapped around her leg. Her eyes slid from her thigh to the seat where the sawed off shotgun rested close to Jonathon's leg.

"Where are we going?" She asked softly, her eyes resting on the weapon.

Jonathon hesitated. "I don't know." he said quietly. "Right now...we just need to put distance between us."

"You mean between us..." Clarice shuddered. "And him."

Jonathon's face tightened even more as he turned to look at Clarice. "Yes-"

Clarice had the shotgun in her hands, aiming it at Jonathon's head. She'd grabbed it before she even knew what she was doing.

"Clarice?" Jonathon said slowly, cautiously. "What're you doing?"

The shotgun trembled in Clarice's hands. Oh god, what *was* she doing? "Stop the car."

Jonathon returned his eyes to the road but didn't lift his foot from the gas pedal. "I can't do that." he whispered.

Hour of Darkness

Clarice steadied the weapon. "I said stop the damn car!" She raged suddenly, all the stress and tension, grief and fear crashing down on her at once. "Do it!"

"Listen to me." Jonathon said slowly. "I know how terrifying all this is, but we have to keep moving."

Clarice refused to lower the weapon.

"I promise you, Clarice." He said. "I will answer all your questions when we stop."

"You'll answer them now." She insisted tightly.

Jonathon glanced at her then back to the road. "Okay." He conceded. "As long as I can keep driving."

"O-okay." Clarice eased up on her grip on the shotgun but didn't put it down. She looked out the front windshield at the dark highway stretched out in front of them, thinking. Now that she had him in a position to give her answers, she wasn't sure where to start. The question she really wanted to ask...she didn't think she was quite ready to hear the answer.

"I buried my brother today." She whispered thickly. "How is it possible..." Tears stung her eyes, drowning her words momentarily. She looked from the highway to Jonathon. "Was he...even in the casket I buried? Did he..." Tears spilled down her face. "Did he kill our parents?" She fought the sobs that threatened to consume her. "I don't understand. Why would Aaron want to hurt his family? It doesn't make..."

The sobs overtook her and she cried openly as rage suddenly gripped her. "I don't understand!" Her hold on the weapon tightened again as fear and confusion and rage ignited her. "Tell me what the fuck is going on! Why would Aaron-"

"It wasn't Aaron!" Jonathon shot back sharply, then immediately dropped the sharp edge and spoke slowly, calmly. "The man who attacked you...he wasn't Aaron." Pain tightened his voice as he whispered. "You did bury your brother today."

Her face wet with tears, Clarice stared at him for a long moment. What was he saying? She saw the killer's face. It was *Aaron's* face. "You were there." Clarice spoke low. "At the funeral. Why?" He didn't answer. "And on the highway...why did you tell me to call..." Understanding crept into her eyes as she looked at him through the darkness, the dash lights casting a green glow across his face. "You knew." She whispered unsteadily. "You knew he was going after my family."

Clarice's face hardened as fresh tears filled her eyes. She shoved the barrel of the shotgun towards him, threateningly. "You knew!" She cried. "How did you know? *How?*"

Jonathon glanced uneasily at the weapon. "Clarice...easy..."

"Tell me who killed my family or I swear to God..."

"Clarice." He said carefully. "I can't tell you everything right now. It isn't that easy."

"Tell me or I will kill you." Clarice threatened coldly. Her body trembled beneath her fear and rage and she felt fully capable of making good her threat.

Jonathon gripped the steering wheel tightly and stared tensely ahead as Clarice held him at gunpoint. "Look." He said sternly. "If you're gonna shoot me, then do it. Quit stalling."

Hour of Darkness

"What?" Clarice was caught off guard.

"Get the gun out of my face." He shot her a hard look. "Or pull the damn trigger."

Clarice faltered. "Maybe...maybe I will."

"Then do it."

Clarice held the gun steady for a moment longer then slowly lowered it and dropped it on the seat. "You're crazy." She whispered.

Jonathon released a slow breath and murmured, "No argument here."

Tank shoved open the heavy barroom door and swaggered outside with the busty chic in tow. He was a big man, well muscled. The women liked the muscles. Especially the white women. Nothing more exciting to a white woman than a big black man. Wasn't no white guy yet that could satisfy a woman quite the way a brother could.

The woman leaned against him as her feet staggered a bit. He grinned and squeezed her closer as her full chest threatened to burst out of the leather halter top. Her hand rubbed up his thick chest then lower to the waistband of his jeans where she played with the button teasingly.

He laughed and shoved her up against the wall of the bar, pressing his body snug against hers.

"Ooh." She laughed softly, her eyes heavy with the effects of alcohol. "Daddy likes it rough."

Tank growled and ravaged her neck with his mouth. She laughed loudly then went silent suddenly as she noticed a man lingering around the line of Harleys parked a few yards away.

"Baby..."

Tank's mouth was moving around in front of her.

She patted his shoulder. "Tank."

"Don't talk." He groaned.

"Tank!" She smacked his shoulder.

Tank emitted a loud, annoyed groan and straightened up. "What?"

"Who is that?"

"Who?"

She flattened her palm on his face and turned his head. "Him."

Tank's eyes narrowed as he frowned hard. "Hey!" He yelled. "Don't be touchin' a brotha's bike."

Hour of Darkness

The man by the bikes turned slowly and looked at Tank. The dude was messed up. His shirt was damp and ragged and torn, with what looked like blood all over it. "What the shit?" Tank muttered. He moved towards the man. "Get your ass away from the bikes, man."

The man ignored him and turned back to one of the bikes. He reached out to touch the shiny tank of the bike.

"Is that blood on his hands?" The woman asked.

"Hey asshole!" Tank shouted. "Keep your nasty ass hands off my bike."

The woman wavered on her feet and reached out to grab the wall of the bar to steady herself. "Kick his ass, Tank!"

"Shut up." Tank shot her an annoyed look. He started walking towards the other man. When he got close enough, he grabbed the man's shoulder. The man whipped around with inhuman speed and hit Tank in the face with enough force to crush bone and drive fragments into his brain. Tank dropped to his knees instantly, his eyes blank, dead. Blood gushed from his nose as he toppled over onto his back.

The woman screamed, stumbling back towards the barroom door. She was hysterical and in a panic as she fell down and half scooted, half crawled for the door, still screaming.

The man ignored her and searched Tank's pockets until he found the keys to the bike. He mounted the large bike and started it. It came to life with a smooth deep rumble.

The barroom door shoved open as a tide of bikers poured out at the sound of the woman screaming. The woman pointed a shaking hand towards the man on the bike, still screaming and crying hysterically. "He killed Tank!"

The bikers rushed towards Tank's killer but he was already moving, roaring away on the dead man's Harley.

Chapter 4

6...Into Hell...

Silver Falls Camp Ground was carved into the wood sign, the deep grooved letters painted white against a forest green background. Jonathon's foot let up off the gas pedal and touched the brake lightly as he guided the SUV onto the turnoff to the campground. The road was thick with slush and mud but the SUV's big tires bore through it without problem.

Evergreens shrouded the campground in a gray, early morning light, their bows heavy with snow. Patches of snow blotched the grounds.

The SUV pulled up close to the rest rooms and stopped. Jonathon turned off the engine and sat for a moment looking around. There were no sign of any campers. It was too late in the year for camping. This was a summer camping area. They shouldn't be bothered here.

He looked across the front seat at Clarice. She was leaning against the passenger door, asleep. He longed to close his eyes and enter her dreams. Be with her again in that place where questions weren't asked, bodies and hearts touched, and passion overrode his deepest fears. But time was of the essence, he had to keep them moving.

The bandage around her thigh was soiled and in need of redressing. Luckily the shard of glass had missed the main artery in her leg. Otherwise they would've been in serious trouble.

Watching her sleep, he wondered if, in the long run, he'd made the right decision. Interfering in her life seemed to be bringing about even greater repercussions. Maybe people had only one path in life, one direction. One destiny. And when it was altered...it spun everything out of control.

Jonathon's fingers tightened around the steering wheel as he stared at the sleeping woman. Despite his doubts concerning his choices, whether he had the right to do what he did, had he the chance to undo it...he knew he wouldn't. Images he wished he could eradicate flashed through his mind. She might feel like she's been to hell and back by the time this was all over, but how could anything be worse than the other? At any rate, it was too late to wonder if he'd done the right thing. What's done was done, and he could only go forward from where they were right now. If he tried to think too far ahead, it would cripple him, paralyze him with fear and doubt. He had to do this one step at a time, only thinking far enough ahead to keep them alive.

His eyes caressed her lovely face, now relaxed in sleep. He could feel her in her dreams, searching for him, longing for him to hold her again and make her feel safe. His chest tightened and he had force his mind to remain in the here and now. He couldn't keep her safe in her dreams. He had to be out here, alert, watchful. Always watchful.

As if feeling the weight of his eyes and his thoughts, Clarice slowly opened her eyes and straightened a little in the seat. She looked out the front windshield. "Where...are we?" She asked quietly, her voice thick with the residue of sleep.

"Camping grounds." Jonathon said.

"What're we doing here?"

Hour of Darkness

"We need to redress your wound." Jonathon opened the driver door and stepped out. He stood for a moment in the open door then walked around to the passenger side and opened Clarice's door. "Come on." He said, helping her out of the truck.

She winced with each movement as he walked her towards the rest room building.

The door to the rest room creaked loudly as Jonathon pushed it open and the two entered. It was even colder in here than outside. Jonathon flipped the light switch on the wall and a bare bulb overhead flickered, threatened to go out, then held, casting a dim light down on the two occupants. Clarice hugged herself as Jonathon released her and gave the rest room a quick once over. It was moderately clean but clearly hadn't been attended to in months. He tried the sink faucet and clean water spewed out. This would do.

"This feels like a Friday the thirteenth movie." Clarice whispered uneasily. She looked at Jonathon. "But it's much worse than that...isn't it?"

Jonathon held her eyes for a moment. He didn't answer. What could he say? Tell her she was the star of her own personal horror movie? Tell her that, yes, this was much worse? So much worse?

"Wait here." Jonathon told her. "I need to get the first aid stuff from the truck."

He left the rest room and walked back to the SUV, glancing around the grounds as he went. This place made him uneasy, perhaps because of the mention of the slasher movie. He would've waited to do this until they reached a motel, but her wound was bleeding and it needed attending.

Jonathon returned to the rest room moments later with the bag of supplies. Clarice was standing with her arms wrapped around herself as she stared at her reflection in the cracked, dirty mirror. Jonathon set the bag on the back of the sink and took out a roll of gauze, tape and a bottle of peroxide.

Without speaking, Jonathon sank to one knee before Clarice and carefully unwrapped the soiled bandage and dropped it in the sink. He looked at the cut then cleared his throat. "Take off your pants."

Clarice's eyes turned slowly from her reflection to look down at Jonathon. "Excuse me?"

Jonathon met her eyes briefly, then glanced away. "I need to clean the wound and dress it properly." he said. "I can't do that with your pants on."

Clarice hesitated then slowly unfastened her pants.

His hands suddenly unsteady, Jonathon carefully slid her pants down her legs to her knees. Her entire thigh was smeared with blood and the cut looked bad. He unrolled some of the gauze, wet it and carefully wiped the wound clean. Upon closer inspection, he saw that the cut wasn't as deep as he thought.

He focused on the wound, doing his best not to think about the half naked woman before him or the dream from the previous night. He felt her tense each time he touched her leg. She was as nervous about this as he was. Did she know he was the man in her dreams? Surely her subconscious knew it, but in a state of wakefulness, her conscious mind seemed to be blocking it out.

"Hand me the peroxide." He met her eyes briefly as she passed him the bottle. As scared as she was, he could see in her eyes that she believed he could save her, even if she didn't realize it consciously herself. He wanted to believe it too, but as much as he tried to deny it, the odds were stacked against them. Things were going to get a lot uglier before they got better. *If* they got better.

Hour of Darkness

"Do you believe in life after death?" Clarice's low, unsteady voice drew him out of his disturbing thoughts. He glanced up and she was looking at her reflection again, her eyes distant, troubled.

"Yeah." He answered quietly as he poured some peroxide on a clean wad of gauze. "This is gonna sting." He touched the gauze to the wound and Clarice gasped lightly as the peroxide drained into the cut. "Sorry." He said but continued to cleanse the wound.

"If there's a heaven." Clarice whispered. "Then there's a hell too."

Jonathon swallowed through a tight throat. "I suppose so."

"Why?"

"What?" Jonathon asked quietly as he began to wrap her wound with fresh gauze from the roll.

"Why did God create hell?" She whispered. "If he's supposed to love us so much?"

Jonathon used his pocket knife to cut the gauze from the roll then taped it securely. "I don't think he created it for people." he told her softly. "I think he created it for Lucifer and the other angels who rebelled with him."

Jonathon stood up and returned the peroxide, unused gauze and tape to the bag. "You can..." He nodded towards her jeans.

She pulled the jeans up carefully over the fresh bandage and fastened them. "Then why does he send people there?"

Jonathon scooped up the soiled bandages and dropped them in the trash can. "People send themselves to hell." He told her. "God doesn't do it. He made a way for people to get to heaven, but they have to be the ones to choose it. Everyone has the freedom of choice."

Clarice stared blankly at her own distraught image. "Aaron wouldn't choose to go to hell." She whispered.

"What?" Jonathon asked slowly. What was she getting at?

Clarice licked her lips as her eyes swam with tears. "Aaron's in hell."

Frowning, Jonathon spoke low, soft. "No. I don't believe that."

"I can feel him." Clarice whispered. The tears filled her eyes but somehow managed not to spill over.

"I don't understand." Jonathon ventured carefully. "What do you mean you can feel him?"

Clarice turned her head and looked at Jonathon through watery eyes. "Ever since we were little, we could feel each other's thoughts, feel what the other one was feeling. It was like...like we were two halves of one whole."

"You were twins." Jonathon said. "That's not unheard of, especially with twins."

"You don't understand." Clarice said thickly, her chin quivering. "I can *still* feel him. He's dead and I can still feel him. Except..." She faltered as the tears finally spilled over and ran down her cheeks. "Except now...I can feel his pain. He's in so much pain, and torment. And he's so angry." Clarice choked on her sobs as they rose in her throat. "I've never felt him this angry and in pain before."

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"Clarice." Jonathon stepped forward, sympathy in his eyes and intense fear twisting his guts.

"He's in hell." Clarice cried. "I can feel him in hell and I can't help him."

Jonathon grabbed her and pulled her into his arms as she broke down completely and sobbed uncontrollably against his shoulder. He held her tight, stroked her hair. "Aaron isn't in hell." He whispered against her hair. "What you're feeling is your own intense grief and pain from losing him and your parents. That's all it is, Clarice." He held her tighter as she continued to cry in his arms. He stared at his own reflection and was thankful that Clarice wasn't looking at him right now. The fear and horror of what was happening was too visible in his eyes.

Her brother *was* in hell. A hell Jonathon had unleashed.

"They're gone." Clarice's muffled sobs seemed to ricochet through Jonathon. "Everyone I love. There's nothing left." The strength went out of Clarice's legs and she and Jonathon sank slowly to the floor as he continued to hold her to him. "Nothing."

Jonathon pressed his lips to her hair and closed his eyes. "There will be more, Clarice." He whispered. "I promise."

"Why do you care?" Clarice choked out as she drew back a little. "I don't even know you." Her pain and grief was transforming into anger and despair. "I'm nothing to you."

She untangled herself from his arms and grabbed the edge of the sink, pulling herself to her feet. Her sobs increased and she covered her mouth with her hand as she limped to the door and exited the rest room.

Jonathon sat unmoving, staring blankly at the cold dirty floor. "You're wrong, Clarice." He whispered hollowly. "You are everything to me."

Dale turned off the engine, got out of the rig and walked up the concrete path to the front door of his home. He hated long trips away from home and was always glad to be back. Some men liked being away from home, like their marriage was a prison they were seeking escape from. Maybe some guys had cause to feel that way. Dale didn't.

The front door opened and Maggie stepped out. Though she was thirty-five and slightly plump, she was the prettiest sight in the world to Dale, especially after a long work trip.

"Hey beautiful." Dale held out his arms and she rushed into them, hugging him tightly.

"I missed you." She said as she drew back and kissed him softly on the lips. She had the sweetest, softest lips God ever created, Dale was sure of it.

"I missed you too." He said then frowned as Maggie looked past him, her brow furrowed. "Hon...you okay?"

Maggie's frown deepened. "Dale..." She asked slowly. "Why are you driving a cop car?"

"What?" Dale turned and followed her eyes to the driveway and the vehicle he'd just gotten out of. He stared at the Bronco sitting in his driveway, a large police department emblem on the side of the door. His heart raced. What the hell?

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"Maggie..." He said quietly. "I've never seen that rig before."

Maggie looked at him, confused. "Where is the SUV?"

Jonathon walked from the rest room to the SUV. Through the windshield he could see Clarice sitting in the passenger seat, staring out the passenger window. He opened the driver door and climbed in behind the wheel and started the rig. He glanced at Clarice. Her eyes and face were still damp from the tears but she had stopped crying.

"I'm sorry." She offered quietly without looking at him. "I didn't mean to..."

"Don't." Jonathon stopped her gently. "You don't need to apologize."

Clarice turned and looked at him. "I want to." She said. Her voice was still thick from her tears. "If it weren't for you...I would be dead."

Jonathon sat motionless behind the wheel, staring out the front windshield. The SUV idled low. She was apologizing to him? How ironic was that?

There's so much I need to tell you, Clarice. Where the hell do I start?

Releasing a slow sigh, Jonathon looked at her and started to speak when he suddenly flinched, hard, as a flurry of images flashed through his head.

The killer speeding along the highway on a Harley.

A quick image of a road sign - "Silver Falls Campground 1 mi."

Jonathon sucked in a deep breath and gripped the steering wheel as the images vanished.

"Are you okay?" Clarice asked slowly.

Jonathon gripped the steering wheel more tightly and closed his eyes.

"What's wrong?" There was alarm in Clarice's voice this time.

"Quiet." Jonathon whispered. His eyes remained closed as his face and body tensed.

The Harley sped along the two lane highway, the large bike wound out to its maximum speed. The rider's eyes were squinted against the wind and his short cropped blond hair pulled back from his forehead.

Along a flat, straight stretch of the highway, the rider suddenly whipped the bike sideways. The Harley went down, crashing hard against the pavement. The rider was propelled away and flip-flopped down the highway, his head cracking hard against the pavement multiple times before finally rolling to a stop.

The rider's face was bloody and gouged as he looked back. His eyes widened as the momentum of the bike bounced it off the highway and it sailed straight for him, smashing down on his chest and skidding him along

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the pavement until they both came to a rest in the middle of the road.

A trail of debris was scattered along the highway. The rider laid motionless, pinned beneath the heavy bike.

Clarice stared at Jonathon as he gripped the steering wheel, his eyes squeezed shut. What the hell was he doing? When he finally opened his eyes, he was clearly on edge. He didn't speak as he put the SUV into reverse and quickly backed around.

"What is it?" Clarice asked fearfully. A sudden knot twisted in her guts. "It's him...isn't it?"

Jonathon cast her a quick glance then jabbed the SUV into drive and spit slush and mud as he pressed down on the gas pedal and sped down the muddy road to the highway. He braked at the highway and looked back down the way they'd come.

"How do you know it's him?" Clarice shuddered. "How can it even *be* him? You shot him in the chest with the shotgun. Twice! How can he not be dead?"

Jonathon offered no answers as he pulled out on the highway and gunned the SUV in the opposite direction from which they'd come earlier.

The rider laid still beneath the crashed Harley. Debris from the bike scattered the highway. No cars drove by. All was silent.

The bike shifted as the rider suddenly moved. He shoved the heavy bike off himself with little effort and slowly stood up. His clothes were badly torn and blood smeared his face and body, but there were no signs of injury.

He looked back the way he'd come, then turned and walked away from the useless bike, continuing on the way he'd been headed.

"Why isn't he dead?" Clarice asked again.

Jonathon kept his eyes trained on the road ahead as he held the gas pedal to the floor. He couldn't avoid her questions much longer. If he didn't start giving her some answers, she would eventually run from him too. And when she did...she would be dead.

He cleared his throat as anxiety twisted a knot in his stomach. "Clarice..." God, what could he say? How could he explain this insanity to her so that she could understand it? He didn't even understand it and he was a part of it. "I need to find a place for us to stop and rest." He said, knowing he was still putting off the inevitable but unable to put everything together in his mind just yet. "Just for a couple hours." He looked at her. "Can you give me till then? I just need time to think, to put it all together. Then I will tell you, I'll explain it all. Can you give me till we stop?"

Clarice hesitated then nodded slowly. Jonathon was sure he saw a measure of relief in her eyes. She knew she had to ask the questions, but he knew as well that she didn't really want to know the answers. A part of her

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was clearly relieved that he wasn't telling her everything just yet. And so was he. Because once she knew it all...she would never look at life again with any shred of innocence or security. She would never again trust people as easily as she had in the past.

Life as she knew it would be permanently altered.

Jerome Reynolds turned off the main highway at the Silver Falls campground road and gassed the Corvette, pushing it through the slushy mud. "Man." He groaned as dirty slush spit up on the sides of the sports car. He forced through the worst of the road and parked outside the rest room building.

He hurried into the rest room, unfastening his pants as he pushed through the door with his shoulder. He'd needed to pee for the last couple miles. He was half way across the cold concrete floor of the rest room when he suddenly noticed the man standing over the trashcan.

Jerome halted in his tracks, his hands freezing with the zipper still in his fingertips. His eyes widened to perfect circles as he stared at the man who was holding a wad of what looked like bloody rags in his hands. The man looked like he was *sniffing* the bloody wad.

"Shit." Jerome whispered and slowly zipped his pants up.

The man raised his eyes and looked at Jerome, then took a step towards him.

Jerome backed towards the door, his hands slightly raised. "Look, man." He said. "I don't want no trouble. Whatever you did...man, that's between you and God. I ain't no judge."

The man stared through him as he slowly approached.

Jerome released a shaky, nervous laugh. "Hey...whatever, man...I sure they deserved it...I even testify for ya." Jerome's hands groped behind him for the door handle.

The man continued to come forward towards him.

"Screw this." Jerome turned quickly and yanked open the door. The man lunged forward suddenly and grabbed Jerome by the back of the neck. "Ahhh! No!" Jerome yelled as the man launched him across the rest room. He crashed into the wall and slumped to the floor. Jerome groaned and barely opened his eyes. The man was coming towards him. Jerome closed his eyes and feigned unconsciousness.

The man rifled through Jerome's pockets, took his car keys then left the rest room. Moments later, the Corvette rumbled then pulled away from the rest room.

Jerome slowly opened one eye, then both eyes. The rest room was empty. Jerome sighed then fainted.

The SUV pulled off the main highway and rolled up beside the two pumps out front of the small roadside gas station. Jonathon killed the engine and watched through the windshield as a short stocky man in his forties came ambling out of the one car garage and approached the SUV. His hair was shoulder length and he wore a hippy band around his head. When he spoke, he sounded stoned.

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"Hey, my friend." He greeted Jonathon with genuine cheerfulness. "Call me George. What can I get ya?"

"Filler up." Jonathon said. He studied the small gas station, eyes narrowed as he searched the area. "Is there a phone I can use?"

Hippy George nodded towards the building. "Shor. On the back side, by the bathroom." He went around to the nearest pump, removed the SUV's gas cap and stuffed the nozzle of the gas hose in.

"Wait here." Jonathon told Clarice. He popped open the driver door

"Where are you going?" Clarice was instantly uneasy.

Jonathon slid out of the rig. "Just wait here." As he walked away from the SUV, he could feel the weight of Clarice's eyes following him. Even he felt uneasy about leaving her side, even for a moment, but he had no choice. He couldn't do this alone. He needed help if he hoped to get himself and Clarice out of this alive.

The pay phone on the wall looked like it hadn't been used in years. A thin layer of mold like residue clung to the keypad digits and spider webs ran from the phone receiver to the would plank wall the phone was fastened to. Jonathon had his doubts that it even still worked as he swiped away the spider webs and picked up the receiver. A fat, black spider scurried away, disappearing into a crack in the wall.

"Sorry, buddy." Jonathon told the spider as he pressed the receiver to his ear. To his surprise, there was a dial tone. He dug in his pocket, withdrew two quarters and dropped them in the coin slot, which had also acquired a layer of grime and a few cobwebs as well. He punched out a sequence of numbers on the keypad, then waited.

He glanced towards the front of the building. He was out of view of the SUV and he didn't like that.

"Hello?" A deep, older voice came over the line.

"It's Lancaster." He spoke into the phone. "She's with me, and safe, for the moment. But he's right on our ass. I don't know how long we can stay ahead of him."

"Where are you?"

"About seventy miles past the Silver Falls campground at a roadside gas station." Jonathon paused, then added, "He almost caught us at the campground. I slowed him down, but not for long. He's probably already on his way here."

The voice at the other end of the line was quiet a moment. "Does she know what's going on?" He asked slowly. "Does she know about you?"

Jonathon stared at the ground. "No. I haven't explained everything to her yet. But..." He cleared his throat. "I think she recognized me from...before. She hasn't asked me about it, but she will." Jonathon went silent a moment, then spoke quietly. "Did I make a mistake? Maybe I shouldn't have altered things."

"Do you really think her original fate would have been better?" The older man asked. "You know what happened, what became of her."

"I know." Jonathon hissed, frustrated. "How..." He faltered. "It doesn't matter. It's done. Now, I need to know how to stop him."

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"How to kill him." The older man corrected.

"How to kill him." Jonathon confirmed, then. "*Can* he be killed?"

"Yes." He said without hesitation. "But first, you need somewhere out of the way to go. Do you remember how to get to the cabin?"

"Yeah. I remember." Jonathon said. "But like I said, he's right on our ass. I can't get far enough ahead of him to make a plan."

"Shoot him in the head." The man said bluntly. "It won't kill him, of course, but he won't recover until the bullets are removed. If possible, dispose of his body where it won't be discovered too soon. The longer it takes for his body to be found and the bullets removed, the more time it gives you to get to the cabin. And once there, you have a better chance of seeing him coming."

Jonathon shifted his feet, anxious to get back to Clarice. "What the hell happened?" He whispered. "What did I do to him?"

"Johnny." The man hesitated. "There's something you need to know...about what Victor did to him after you...changed things." He paused then added quietly with a measure of pain in his voice. "He took his soul, Johnny. He took everything."

Jonathon's face tightened and flexed as he listened to the horror story the man relayed to him. Tears burned his eyes and he tried to blink them back, but some broke loose and slid down his face. He cleared his throat as it thickened and tightened. What the hell kind of monster were they dealing with?

"Johnny." The man added when he'd finished. "Watch your back. He isn't the only threat. Victor isn't going to just let you go."

"I know." Jonathon cleared his throat again and swiped at his eyes. "Thanks, for everything. I hope I live long enough to pay you back one day."

"Take care of yourself, Johnny." There was real care and concern in the man's voice.

"I will." Jonathon said. The phone at the other end hung up, leaving Jonathon with a dull dial tone in his ear. He slowly hung up the phone and glanced around. He rubbed his hand over his mouth, sniffed and wiped his eyes again - then suddenly flinched hard as a rush of images snapped through his head.

A black Corvette pulling into the gas station. The killer stepping out and turning towards the SUV.

Jonathon gasped and gripped the wall. "No..." He broke into a run, sprinting around the building and towards the SUV out front.

Clarice sat anxiously waiting for Jonathon to return. She watched George the attendant in the side mirror as he removed the nozzle from the truck's gas tank and replaced the cap. She glanced towards the back of the building where Jonathon had disappeared. What was he doing? He wanted a phone. Who was he calling?

A black Corvette pulled off the highway and passed through Clarice's field of vision and rolled to a stop on the opposite side of the two gas pumps. She barely noticed the car as she continued to watch the back of the

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building.

The corvette's driver door opened. In the SUV's side mirror, George was approaching Clarice's window. He glanced towards the Corvette as he appeared at Clarice's door.

"Sweet ride." George said, then looked at Clarice. "That's twenty-five, darlin'."

Clarice started to tell him that Jonathon had the money when her eyes moved past George's head and the driver of the Corvette turned to face her. "Oh god." She gasped as a paralyzing fear gripped her. "No..."

"Whoa, darlin'." George said. "It ain't nothin' to freak out about."

Clarice began rolling up her window quickly. "Go!" she yelled at George. "Get out of here!"

"Wha..." George started.

"He'll kill you!" Clarice cried. "Run!"

George turned around slowly, uncertain, as the Corvette driver looked straight at Clarice. Tears spilled down her face as she locked the door and scooted towards the middle of the seat.

George looked from the driver to Clarice. "What the...?"

The killer moved towards the SUV, his vacant eyes looking right through George. George grew visibly uneasy. "Hey...dude..."

"Get down!" Jonathon yelled suddenly. George spun around to see Jonathon coming towards them at a run, a 9 mm Beretta gripped in his fist and aimed at the killer.

"Whoa!" George ducked and ran to the rear of the SUV.

Jonathon open fired as the killer turned at the sound of his voice. The first shot caught him in the chest and slammed him back against one of the pumps. Clarice screamed and covered her head with her arms, flinching with each shot of the weapon.

Jonathon continued to fire off rounds into the killer's chest as he hurried forward. The killer's body jerked and flopped against the pump as it filled with lead. The gun clicked three times in Jonathon's hand before he realized it was empty. He ejected the empty clip on the run and slapped in a full one.

The killer slumped to the ground, unmoving. Jonathon walked up and looked down at him. The killer stared back at him through bleary eyes, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Everything Jonathon remembered, everything he had just learned, came rushing to the forefront of his mind. His eyes stung with new tears. "I'm sorry." He whispered tightly. "You deserve better than this." He pointed the weapon at the killer's head, blinked at the tears blurring his vision, and fired off three rounds in succession.

George flinched and huddled at the rear of the SUV. "Whoa...this is some freaky trip, man."

Jonathon forced the tears back and walked away from the body. He looked at George and aimed his weapon at the attendant. "Get out of here!" He yelled. "Now!"

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George ran as fast as his stocky frame would move and climbed into a small pickup parked near the garage. He tore out of the parking lot, rear tires spitting up gravel.

As soon as the pickup was out of site down the highway, Jonathon stuffed the handgun back into its shoulder holster and returned to the body. He heaved the body up onto his shoulders and, after checking to make sure no cars were coming, hurried across the two lane road.

Jonathon could feel Clarice's eyes following him, he could feel her confusion and fear. But for now he couldn't think about that. His first priority was keeping her alive. He walked to edge of the gravel shoulder on the far side of the road and looked over the edge. It was a long straight drop to the swollen river below. The heavy water and strong current would either suck the body down and lodge it beneath the surface till the waters lowered, or it would sweep it away, far down river. Either way, it would take some time before the body was found and an autopsy performed.

Planting his feet firmly, Jonathon heaved the body off his shoulders and launched it off the ledge. It soared down through open air and hit the river below, the rough waters sucking it under. He watched to see if it would resurface but he saw no sign of it. A deep sense of loss threatened to grip him but he resisted. He had to stay focused.

He trotted back across the road and slid quickly into the SUV. He cranked the engine dropped the rig into gear and stomped on the gas. Clarice looked towards the edge of the road where he'd dumped the body.

"Is he...dead?" Her quiet voice was shaking and thick with tears.

Jonathon shot Clarice a quick look that filled her with a cold chill. The SUV sped out onto the two lane highway and gunned down the road.

Clarice was barely holding it together. "How...how can he not be dead?" She cried, frustrated and terrified. "What is he?"

When Jonathon just stared forward at the highway ahead of them, Clarice's intense fear turned to extreme anger at being left in the dark. "What the hell is he!" She cried out sharply, startling Jonathon.

Jonathon released a pent up sigh. "That will take some explaining." He said quietly.

"He can't die." Clarice trembled, her fierce anger suddenly deflating. "Can he?"

Jonathon drew in another slow deep breath and released it slowly. He looked at Clarice, her fear etched all across her beautiful face. He wanted nothing more than to just hold her and promise her that he would save her from this nightmare. But it was a promise he was afraid to make.

"If it's alive...it can die." He whispered, swallowing tightly. It was the best he had to offer. His face tightened as he clenched his jaw. The image of the killer's face rose in his mind; His bleary eyes, blood draining from his mouth...his head snapping with each bullet that drove into his brain. Other images began to rise behind those.

Jonathon's jaw tightened more fiercely, sending an ache up through his face and into his temples where it settled and began to throb like a fast, pulsing heart beat.

Chapter 5

...Before...

JONATHON

The small boy they led into the room was eight but he only looked about six. His blond, wavy hair was thick and hung over his forehead, into his eyes. The boy didn't seem to notice and didn't try to wipe it out. He stared straight forward, a blank look in his eyes. He looked blind, but he wasn't. Johnny had seen the boy before and he wasn't blind.

"What are they going to do to him, father?" Johnny asked the man standing beside him. He called Victor father, but he wasn't his father. Johnny didn't have a father, or a mother. None of the kids at the institute did. He just had Victor...and Uncle Lee - but he was Johnny's secret friend.

"Just watch." Victor clasp his hands behind his back and watched through a large window. The room on the other side of the window was about medium size and was equipped with only an exam table. The walls were bright white and a large fluorescent light on the ceiling made it even brighter.

Johnny watched the three men in long white lab coats lead the blond boy to the table. One of the men lifted the boy onto the table and laid him on his back. Johnny could feel the boy's fear like a heat wave, though the boy lay silent and unmoving.

"They're scaring him." Johnny said.

"No." Victor murmured. "He isn't scared. He doesn't feel like we do. None of them do."

Johnny stepped closer to the window and flattened his hands on the glass. One of the men pressed his palm to the boy's head and held him down while another placed a scalpel to the boy's throat. The boy's fear spun into a whirlwind of terror, hitting Johnny hard, like a physical force, causing him to take a step back. His eyes widened as the man with scalpel cut an incision across the boy's throat. Blood drained out and pooled on the table. The boy coughed and blood spittle sprayed from his mouth then trickled from the corner. The boy's eyes went dead.

"Why are they killing him?" Johnny cried. Tears filled his eyes.

"They aren't." Victor said quietly, watching intently. "Just watch, Johnny."

Johnny's throat was tight as he turned his attention back to the boy on the table. The incision on the boy's throat slowly healed. The boy gasped and drew in a sharp breath. A fierce wave of terror hit Johnny. But it wasn't his own. The boy's mind spun chaotically and suddenly his thoughts came together in one single word that screamed through his head.

Clarice!

7...Transference...

Paul McCormick sat at the oblong table and stared at the two way mirror. His reflection stared back at him, revealing a man on the edge. He knew this procedure. He was usually on the other side of that glass. He could feel the unseen eyes watching him and for the first time since entering law enforcement, felt a shred of pity for

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the criminal who had to sit there and wait.

But the men he'd put at this table were usually guilty. He himself was...what? Innocent? Hadn't he been holding his weapon on officer Brent while he let the suspect escape? It still made no sense to him. What the hell had happened back there at the house? How could he literally forget what had taken place between the time Officer Brent had handcuffed the suspect and the moment McCormick realized Sergeant Kempt was holding his weapon on him?

The door to the interrogation room opened. Police Chief Tim Ukiah entered and took a seat across from McCormick. Tim Ukiah had just enough Native American in him to color his hair a deep black and tint his skin, and at times got razzed about being the Chief. Perhaps that was why he wore his hair short and dressed like a white man.

Paul was okay with the Chief. He was straight forward but fair. He didn't pull any punches but he didn't throw unnecessary ones either. Paul had never felt uneasy in the presence of the Chief. Until now.

Ukiah laid a folder on the table in front of him and opened it. "Paul." Ukiah cleared his throat and looked at the detective. "There's a Dr. Orlando here who would like to speak with you about what happened. The feds are coming in on this too, they'll want to speak with you as well."

Paul ignored the information about the feds, that was to be expected. But the doctor? "What kind of doctor are we talking about?" Paul asked slowly, defensively.

"A doctor of psychiatry."

"A shrink." Paul corrected. He grew visibly agitated. "Look, I don't know what happened out there, but I'm not crazy."

"No one is suggesting that." Ukiah assured him.

Paul leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "Right." He leaned forward. "You think I don't recognize that tone? The one we all use to convince a suspect we're not really accusing them of anything just yet, when we're already convinced he's guilty? I'm not a fucking criminal, Tim. I can't explain what happened, but don't treat me like a scum bag suspect."

"Just calm down, Paul." Ukiah said. "I don't think you're guilty of anything, and I don't think you're crazy. But something happened out there that no one can explain. Dr. Orlando is just here to try and help us figure it out. He came in on his own, I didn't call him."

Paul frowned. "Why would he come here without being called in?"

"He thinks..." Ukiah cleared his throat. "He thinks our suspect may be one of his patients."

"Excuse me?"

"Why don't I just let you talk to him." Ukiah said and stood up. "He can better explain it."

Ukiah went to the door and opened it, then motioned for someone to enter. A man walked in and stood beside Ukiah. He was middle-aged but his neatly trimmed hair and thin neat beard gave him a younger appearance. He had a pleasant demeanor but something in his clear blue eyes put Paul on edge. A wolf in sheep's clothing was the first thought to cross his mind.

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"This is Dr. Orlando." Ukiah told Paul. "From the West Ridge Behavioral Institute." He looked at Orlando. "This is Detective Paul McCormick."

Orlando approached the table and held out his hand. "It's good to meet you, detective."

Paul hesitated then accepted his hand, nodding. Ukiah remained at the door while Orlando took the seat across from Paul.

"I'll be out here if you need anything." Ukiah told Orlando, then cast Paul a quick glance before exiting the room.

As soon as he was gone, Paul eyed Orlando. "What is the West Ridge Behavioral Institute? Is that some fancy name for a nut house?"

"No." Orlando spoke low as he looked through the file Ukiah had left on the table. "I'm not a shrink, detective. I specialize in behavioral modification and therapy."

"Which means?"

Orlando looked up. "Which means...I don't spend my days talking to repressed men about their twisted relationship with their mamas." He returned his attention to the file. "My work is real science."

My ass, Paul thought as he studied the other man. "Why do you think our suspect is one of your patients?" Paul asked. "Do you have an escapee unaccounted for?"

Orlando raised his eyes without lifting his head. "The people we're working with at the institute aren't patients." He said low. "And West Ridge isn't a prison. No one *escaped*."

"My mistake." Paul murmured. "Why do you think our suspect is one of your...people?"

Orlando didn't answer immediately as he looked through the papers in the file. He cleared his throat and looked up. "Why don't you tell me what happened at the Stuart residence."

Paul shook his head. "I don't know what happened. One minute my weapon is aimed at the suspect, and the next..." He faltered. "...he's gone and I'm holding Officer Brent at gunpoint. That's all I remember."

Orlando looked at the file again. "Sergeant Kempt stated that you ordered the release of the suspect." He looked up again. "That you threatened Officer Brent's life if the suspect wasn't released."

"I don't remember that." Paul said tightly.

Orlando sat back and looked at McCormick thoughtfully. "Did anything else...unusual happen?"

"Like what?"

Orlando leaned forward, eyes slightly narrowed. "Did your...nose bleed?"

"Yeah." Paul frowned. "Why? Does that mean something?"

Dr. Orlando tensed with renewed interest.

The Shadow Pines motel sign was back lit by the late afternoon sun and overshadowed by the looming Rockies. Jonathon parked the SUV in front of a row of bungalow type rooms and turned off the truck.

The engine ticked. Clarice asked softly, "Are we safe?"

"For now." Jonathon tugged the keys from the ignition and opened the driver door. "Wait here. I'll get us a room."

Jonathon headed for the small building a few yards away with a sign on the door that read *Office*. He seemed a fraction more relaxed and that helped Clarice relax a little. Actions speak louder than words, her mother used to say. Jonathon could tell her to relax until he was blue in the face, but as long as he was tense, she would be tense.

She wondered when, exactly, the full weight of her grief would hit her. Although she'd done her share of crying since the loss of her family, she knew the worst was yet to come. And that scared her, almost as much as all this insanity scared her. A part of her was actually glad to be distracted from her grief and the unbearable reality behind it.

A heavy breeze swirled leaves and dust into the air, passing behind the SUV in a small dust devil. The shrubbery in front of the rooms shuddered and rattled. Clarice resisted the anxiety that threatened to rise up inside her. Jonathon said they were safe for now. He wouldn't have stopped if he hadn't believed that one hundred percent, that much she was certain of. For whatever reason, he was compelled to keep her alive and everything he did seemed directed towards that end.

The office door opened and Jonathon came out with a room key clutched in his hand. He motioned for her get out of the rig. When she was at his side, he handed her the key. "We're in room five. Unlock the door. I have to grab something from the truck."

Clarice walked down the narrow concrete walk till she came to the bungalow with a brass number 5 on the door. She unlocked the door, opened it and stepped inside. The room was medium size with a full size bed, an adjoining bathroom and even a small kitchenette.

The SUV's door shut outside and she stepped deeper into the room as Jonathon entered behind her and closed the door. He was carrying a black sports bag.

"What's that?" She asked.

Jonathon set the bag on the end of the bed. "An overnight bag." He said. "The owner of the SUV left it behind." He unzipped the main top zipper. "There's a couple clean t-shirts and some socks and stuff." He looked at her. "If you want to take a shower, you can grab a clean shirt to put on."

They had been going full boar ahead since they'd left Aaron's house that she'd forgotten she was still wearing the same clothes she'd changed into after the funeral. She suddenly felt grimy and in desperate need of a shower. She wondered if she smelled too. Maybe that's why he had suggested the shower. At any rate, it was a good idea.

"A shower sounds nice." She said quietly.

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Jonathon reached into the bag and took out a folded white t-shirt and handed it to her. "Go ahead and shower now." He said. "You'll feel a lot better, and it'll help you sleep."

She took the shirt but hesitated before heading for the bathroom. "You said when we stopped you would..." she let the sentence roll away.

"After you shower." He said quietly, his back to her. "The hot water will help get rid of the tension in your body and help you relax." He gradually unpacked the bag, checking the contents. "And trust me, you're gonna need to be relaxed to hear this."

"It was you...wasn't it?" Clarice suddenly whispered before she could think about what she was saying. "Twenty years ago...it was you who saved me and my family. But...how?"

A tension rippled through Jonathon as he continued to stand with his back to her. "After your shower." Was all he said.

Clarice nodded though he couldn't see her. She went into the bathroom and closed the door. She set the t-shirt on the small counter next to the sink then looked at her reflection. She barely recognized the woman staring back at her. Hair messed. Eyes haunted. Skin pale. She looked dead. Maybe she was. Maybe this was all just some weird transition into the next life. What if the man who had killed her family was really a demon, trying to drag her to hell. And Jonathon...

Maybe Jonathon is an angel...trying to get me to heaven.

Jonathon sat on the edge of the bed, elbows resting on his knees, head in his hands. His eyes were closed as he listened to the thought as it drifted through his head. But it wasn't his thought. He tried not to invade her privacy, but he couldn't help hearing her.

An angel. Him? He didn't want her to see him that way. He was no angel, not even close. It would be great if that were the case. Him being her guardian angel, keeping her out of the hands of the devil while he guided her to heaven. How gallant and honorable that would be. But unfortunately it was nothing of the kind.

He released a slow sigh and pressed his palms into his eyes as a sudden warm sensation rushed through him as he felt Clarice's mind and body begin to relax beneath the hot shower spray. A new ache spread through him and he struggled to resist it. But the need and desire was there, whether he embraced it or not. The intense longing to hold Clarice to him and make love to her was nearly more than he could handle. But he knew he could never go there with her if she didn't know the truth about him...and once she did, would she even let him near her?

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there, before he realized the shower had turned off. When he heard the bathroom door open, he lifted his head from his hands and opened his eyes.

Steam drifted out of the bathroom door as Clarice stepped out. Her wet hair clung to her shoulders and neck. The t-shirt hung down to mid-thigh. She wasn't wearing her pants and her legs were still slightly damp, the bandage around her wound wet and beginning to loosen a little.

The strong scent of shampoo drifted to Jonathon as he stared at the woman. He tried to avert his eyes, but he couldn't stop them from taking in every inch of her body or prevent them from lingering briefly on her full breasts, braless beneath the t-shirt, her firm nipples pressing out against the thin material.

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As he gazed at her, he wondered if the intense hunger inside him showed in his eyes. Could she feel how much he wanted her? He tried to block his own mind from probing her thoughts, but it was pointless. She wanted him, almost as much as he wanted her, and he didn't think she even realized it. Not fully, anyway.

"Feel better?" He asked as he tore his eyes away. And that's how it felt, like he literally had to tear his eyes off her.

"Much." She said softly, clearly self-conscious standing before him with very little covering her. As if to explain why she was dressed so skimpy, she added nervously, "My pants had blood soaked all through the leg...I rinsed them out in the sink and hung them up to dry."

"You should hang them out here by the heater." He said as he stood up, forcing his eyes to look anywhere but at her. "And your bandage will need to be redressed."

He could feel her eyes on him, but he knew if he looked at her again - really looked at her - he might do something impulsive and stupid.

"I can change the bandage." She said slowly. "If you want to shower."

He cleared his throat and chanced a quick glance at her. "Shower sounds good."

"I'll just..." She moved back towards the bathroom. "...get my pants and bring them out here."

She disappeared in the bathroom as Jonathon grabbed a dark blue t-shirt from the bag then, as an afterthought, grabbed a pair of boxers as well. He didn't really take to wearing another man's underwear, but they were clean and he'd already spent too long in the shorts he was wearing.

When Clarice returned with her wet jeans, he headed to the bathroom. "Hang them by the radiator heater beneath the window." he said as he stepped into the bathroom. "They should dry by morning." He closed the door, took a deep breath and felt his heart beat against the inside of his chest like a bird going crazy in its cage. He'd never felt this level of desire for a woman before. He had never, in fact, felt any desire for a woman before meeting Clarice for the first time. He knew how to deal with physical threats, he knew how to fight an enemy...but he had no idea how to deal with this.

He turned on the shower and shed his clothes then stepped beneath the hot spray. His whole body, heart and mind ached for Clarice and the evidence of it was too obvious. After washing his hair and body, he cranked the shower temperature to cool and stood beneath the cold spray until it affected him appropriately. But he knew the cool down effect wouldn't last for long.

When he left the shower, he dried off, slipped on the t-shirt and pulled on the boxers then his jeans. He couldn't go back out there in only the boxers and t-shirt. He needed more confinement than just the thin boxers.

The motel room was already growing dim with twilight as the sun faded behind the mountains when Jonathon finally left the bathroom. Clarice was sitting on one side of the bed, her knees drawn up and the t-shirt pulled down over them to her ankles.

"You should cover up." He said. "It's gonna get cold."

"It's warm enough with the heater." She said quietly, watching him as he went to the window and looked out into the deepening shadows of the oncoming night.

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He knew they were safe for awhile, but he still couldn't relax completely. There was more than one threat out there, coming their way. "Did you change the bandage?" He asked low without looking at her.

"Yes."

"Does it hurt bad?" He asked.

"Not too bad." She said. "I'll live...for now, anyway."

Jonathon looked at her. A tiny smile played at the corners of her mouth and it was the most beautiful thing to see. For this one moment, she had let go of the horror of this situation and allowed herself to relax.

"I'm sorry." She said. "I couldn't resist that last bit."

A faint smile pulled at the corner of Jonathon's lips, he couldn't resist it. "Don't apologize. It's nice...to see you more relaxed."

A more prominent smile touched her lips. He stared at her mouth, unable to look away. Good god, how he wanted to kiss those lips. Feel them drop kisses on his neck, brushing across his ear as she pressed her warm, soft body against his...

"Are you all right?" She asked softly, snapping him out of his thoughts.

He cleared his throat and looked away, forcing his eyes back out the window. "Yeah." He could hear the thickness in his own voice and was certain she hadn't missed it either.

"Please tell me what's happening." She spoke in a near whisper. "Come over here, sit down." She flattened her hand on the bed. "And talk to me. Please."

The bird in his chest was beginning to flutter its wings again, a little faster with each passing moment. He had to tell her. If not everything just yet, at least a good part of it. But where the hell did he begin?

He walked around to the opposite side of the bed and sat on the edge, his back to her. He couldn't look her in the eyes as he tried to explain the chaos he'd created in her life. And just simply looking at her distracted him too much, made it impossible for him to collect his thoughts.

"Clarice." He cringed at the tremor in his voice, but couldn't seem to vanquish it. "There's so much to tell you...I'm not sure how or where to begin."

Her hand touched his shoulder and he flinched, hard. He didn't trust himself to turn and look at her. What was she doing?

"That isn't what I meant." She said softly. "I want you to tell me what's happening...between us."

The fluttering bird in his chest went into spasms. He realized he was more prepared to tell her the truth about their situation than he was to talk to her about how she made him feel.

"I don't." He swallowed thickly. "I don't understand what you mean."

Her other hand touched him and he could feel her nearly naked body press up closer to his back. When she spoke, her lips brushed the back of his neck, sending electrifying shivers down his spine. "Yes you do." She

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whispered. "You think I don't see how you look at me? After I took my shower, do you think I missed the hunger in your eyes as you sat there and stared at me like a starving man?" She pressed her lips against the nape of his neck. "I know you want me. I want you too."

Her hands rubbed gently across his tense shoulders, making his head spin. He could feel her hunger and need for him, not only in her touch but igniting her mind as well. It was intense to the point of desperation. And then he understood.

"Clarice." Jonathon stood up quickly, pulling away from her touch. He had to get away from that touch or nothing would stop him from giving in to it, regardless of why she wanted him. His chest heaved and he struggled to steady his voice. "You don't really want *me*. This is a common feeling among those who have been rescued from life and death situations. It's called transference. The survivor experiences feelings and emotions that are brought on strictly by gratitude for the one who saved them. But the feelings aren't real." He looked at her as her lovely dark eyes gazed back at him. Maybe it was better that her feelings weren't real. "I could be...anyone. And you would still have these feelings."

A sheen of tears glistened in Clarice's eyes, making Jonathon hate himself for having to say that to her. She was in a desperate situation and she needed comfort, she needed to feel connected to someone, emotionally and physically. She needed to be held, and made love to, and assured that somehow - *somehow* - everything would be okay. And had she continued to look at him that way, tears in her eyes, he couldn't have resisted her. But she blinked back the tears and looked away.

"You're wrong." Was all she offered in response as she scooted back to the other side of the bed and slipped beneath the blankets.

He stared at her for a long moment as she lay on her side, turned away from him. Again he wondered how much better he'd really made things for her by altering the events of her life. But he remembered too clearly how things had played out the first time, and surely nothing - not even this - could be worse than that.

He tried to take some measure of comfort in that as he returned to the bed where he was sitting previously. "I said I would explain things to you when we stopped." He said. "And I think it's time I did."

"I don't care anymore." Clarice whispered, her voice thick with tears. "I don't want to know. In the morning, I want you to leave...without me. My fate is my fate." Her voice grew quieter still and heavy with tears. "You shouldn't have to die because of me."

The torment inside Clarice's mind sliced through Jonathon's head like a razor. He squeezed his eyes shut as they threatened to fill with their own tears. Her pain was excruciating and it ripped him apart inside.

He stood up quickly and walked to the door, opened it then paused without looking at Clarice. "I'm not leaving you here." His voice was low but firm. "And anyone or anything that intends to hurt you...will have to kill me first."

He left the room, closing the door a bit too hard behind him.

Inside the interrogation room, Dr. Orlando continued to interview Detective McCormick. Tim Ukiah watched through the observation window. There was something he distinctly disliked about Orlando, he just couldn't put his finger on it. The man reminded Tim of a dangerous politician, if there was any other kind. A politician who looked people in the eye and made them trust him, when deep in his corrupt mind he was planning the

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next world war or holocaust or something to that effect.

Tim shook his head. His Indian heritage was beginning to surface. He imagined that plenty of the white men who made promises to his ancestors had this guy's look and demeanor. It wasn't that Tim was prejudice against the white man, he was one quarter white himself, but he knew the look of deceit when he saw it and he often wondered if that ability to spot bullshit wasn't inherited from his native ancestors.

The good doctor was involved in all this insanity, Tim was certain of that, but just exactly *how* remained to be seen. Because Tim was also convinced that Orlando wasn't being straight about this *patient* of his. Orlando didn't look like any kind of psychiatrist Tim had ever met. What he looked like to Tim was a scientist of some form, and not the kind that worked on cancer cures or anything else so noble. The idea of what this man might create gave Tim the creeps.

Maybe he was just letting his imagination run away with him. There really wasn't any concrete evidence this man wasn't exactly who he said he was. It was just a feeling in Tim's gut. And he'd learned to trust those gut feelings. They'd saved his life more than a few times.

The door to the small room opened and an officer stepped in. "Sir."

Tim looked away from the window. "What is it?"

"Sir, the Colorado state police located our rig." He said. "The one the suspect took."

Tim grew alert. "Where was it?"

"At the residence of a Dale Chambers." The officer said. "Apparently the guy drove it home and parked it right in his driveway out front."

Tim frowned. "I don't understand." He said. "Dale Chambers. Is that our suspect?"

The officer shook his head. "No, sir. When the state police arrested him, he claimed to have no idea how he came to be driving the vehicle. According to Chambers, he thought he was still driving the SUV he and his wife bought two years ago."

"That doesn't make sense." Tim's frown deepened. "How can you think you're driving one rig when you're driving another..." The words faded away as he turned back to the window and his eyes came to rest on McCormick. "What the hell is going on?" He whispered.

His eyes shifted to Orlando. The feeling in his gut intensified. Just what the hell were they mixed up in? And more importantly...what kind of suspect were they dealing with?

Chapter 6

8...Love Me Tonight...

When Jonathon returned to the room, he was carrying a small bag. He set it on the counter in the kitchenette and began emptying it. He took out two microwaveable burritos, two small bags of Doritos and two cans of soda. When he'd paid for the room, he'd noticed a variety of vending machines in the office. The kitchenette was equipped with a microwave and something hot to eat sounded good, even with his mind and emotions in a turmoil. A body could only go so long before it demanded sustenance.

He put both burritos in the microwave then leaned against the counter and watched Clarice. She was still laying on her side under the blankets, her eyes closed, but he could feel her hovering close to consciousness. He wondered if she would ever have another good night's sleep again.

Darkness pressed at the windows and Jonathon went to close the blinds. It made him uneasy to think there might be unseen eyes out there watching him. It wasn't easy for anyone or anything to sneak up on him, but it could happen. And he wasn't about to make himself or Clarice an easy target.

The microwave dinged and shut off. There were paper plates in the cupboards, stocked by the motel owner, a courtesy to their patrons. Not everyone thought to carry paper plates with them. He took down two plates and placed a burrito on each plate, then accompanied each with a bag of Doritos. He took one plate and one can of soda and went to the bed. He placed the items on the night stand then set down next to Clarice and shook her gently, waking her from her light sleep.

"What is it?" She asked with a drowsiness to her voice and a hint of alarm.

"It's okay." Jonathon said. "Nothing's wrong. I'm sorry to wake you, but I thought you might want something to eat. You need to keep your strength up."

Clarice blinked the sleep from her eyes and scooted up a little in the bed. She looked at the plate of food. "Where did you get that?"

"Vending machines." He said. "In the office. Eat up." He stood and returned to the counter where his plate still sat. He was famished, but when he tried to actually eat, it felt like a chore. He glanced at Clarice. She opened her chips and ate one slowly, without enthusiasm.

"Don't like it?" He asked.

"No, it's fine." She said quietly. "My stomach, it's just...I don't know, maybe it's just all the stress."

Jonathon pushed his plate back and went to the bed again. He took her plate and set it on the night stand.

She looked up, a bit startled. "It's okay." She said. "I'll get it all down."

He sat down next to her and she looked away. He drew in a deep breath and released it slow. "Forget about the food for now." He said quietly. "I want to apologize for what I said, before." He looked at her face until she met his eyes. "I think I hurt your feelings."

"No." She whispered and looked away. "You were just telling it like it is. I should be the one apologizing, for putting you on the spot like that." She chewed her lower lip and blinked back the sudden sheen that

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glimmered in her eyes. "I thought something was there...when it wasn't. You don't need to apologize for my mistake."

Jonathon stared at her. The pain and anguish and grief raged through her like a hurricane. He watched the one lone tear slide down her cheek as she stared down at the blankets. He reached out and wiped the tear away with his thumb, then allowed his hand to linger on her face.

She looked up slowly, with uncertainty.

"You didn't make any mistakes." He murmured. "There was no misunderstanding on your part. I'm the one at fault, the only one. I dragged you into this so suddenly you didn't have time to adjust. And then..." He faltered. What was he doing? What if the feelings she felt for him really was just a form of transference? He could be doing more harm than good if that were the case. But as he looked into her eyes, opened his mind and felt what she felt...he knew he had been wrong before. She wasn't just drawing close to him because she needed someone, anyone, to connect to. She loved him. But what puzzled him was the depth of that love. It was too deep to have just developed over this short amount of time. And yet it was there, deep and strong as if she had been loving him all her life.

"What?" She whispered.

He blinked and realized she was staring at him. He'd trailed off in the middle of a sentence and gotten lost in his thoughts. "And then...when you reach out to me, when you respond to what you see and feel in me...I push you away." He licked his lips. "That was cruel and unfair of me."

Only when Clarice covered his hand with hers did he realize his hand was still on her face. "Why did you...pull away?"

He closed his eyes briefly then slowly opened them again. "Because what I feel for you terrifies me, Clarice." He admitted for the first time, to her and himself. "I would die for you. But it isn't dying that scares me...it's living. Living in the same world with you, knowing..."

Her hand squeezed his gently. "Knowing what?"

"Knowing you could never love me if you really knew me." He whispered tightly. Tears burned his eyes at the revelation he was only now admitting to himself.

"You saved me and my family once." She said softly. "And you saved my life again." She leaned closer. "And that's all I need to know tonight." She kissed the corner of his mouth lightly. "The rest can wait till tomorrow, or next week...or never."

Jonathon's chest tightened. "Clarice..." He started.

She kissed his lips softly, turning his face to hers.

With every ounce of will he possessed, he drew back away from her sweet mouth. "You don't understand." He whispered. "There are things I have to tell you before I can allow this to happen. Things you have to know about me."

"These things." Clarice asked quietly. "If you tell me now...will it stop this from happening?"

"Yeah." He whispered tightly. "I think it would."

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"Then don't tell me tonight."

He closed his eyes. "Clarice..."

"Please." She stroked his face with her fingertips. "Give me tonight. And then tomorrow...you can tell me whatever you think I need to know. But just not tonight."

He looked at her for a long moment then felt his last resolve give way. He leaned in and kissed her, soft and tentative at first, almost afraid she would disappear and prove to be nothing more than his imagination. But she remained, real and in the flesh.

The kiss deepened and he felt himself letting go, falling into her. He wasn't certain just when they left off kissing and touching, and became one with each other. All he was aware of was the wonderful sensations coursing through him as his body moved against hers, rocking them gently like a small craft on an open sea.

Her breath was warm as her gasps exploded softly on his shoulder, neck and face. Her skin was hot to the touch and damp beneath his fingertips. She felt so good wrapped around him so completely. She made him feel as safe and secure as he knew he did for her. The ecstasy coursing through her ignited his mind as well as his body and it was almost more than he could take.

Like drops of honey, her name fell from his lips, splashing across her damp skin and heightening her need for his fulfillment. She held onto him as their passion carried them away to a place both knew so little about. A place so sweet and serene he thought it must be as close to heaven on earth as two beings could get. And in that moment, Jonathon felt all the horror that had shredded Clarice's life fade away and cease to exist as he held her tight in his arms and their bodies melded together.

As their passion flared and lifted them higher and higher, he brought her to climax again and again until his own body could no longer hold back. His arms tightened around her as his intense love and desire for her released in a powerful flood of heat, filling her up. She clung to him like a drowning woman, her own body giving way to sweet release once more. They gasped with the sheer force of their relinquished passion then kissed deeply, exploring each other's mouths as their bodies slowly relaxed.

Jonathon broke their kiss only to kiss her again then nuzzle her throat, kissing the tender, sweat damp skin. After his embrace relaxed, he continued to caress her body with his hands, unwilling or perhaps unable to let go of her just yet. He knew they would make love again, perhaps many times over, before morning. Tonight might be the only night he ever had with her, he didn't intend to waste it.

His mouth sought out her mouth again and he kissed her warmly. "I love you, Clarice Stuart." He groaned softly into her mouth. "I loved you at first sight." He broke their kiss again and buried his face in her shoulder, tightening his arms around her. "I had to save you."

Her arms held him close as tears burned his eyes. "I *had* to." His body shuddered. "I saw what they did to you, what it did to your life...I had to save you."

Laying deep in Jonathon's arms, Clarice pressed her face against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. His eyes were closed, but he wasn't asleep. She could feel it in the way he responded to her every little move. She pressed her naked body to his and smoothed her hand over his firm stomach and up his chest.

His fingertips began to lightly stroke her hair and trace paths down her spine.

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She wanted to ask him what he meant when he said he saw what they did to her and what it did to her life. What was he talking about? But at that precise moment in time if felt too good to be laying where she was, feeling him so close to her, the memory of their intense love making still fresh in her mind and body. She didn't want to ask any questions for which the answers might ruin the moment.

"Are you okay?" Jonathon spoke quietly in the dark, his arm tightening around her just a bit.

Clarice kissed his chest softly and rubbed the center of her palm over his flat nipple in a slow, circular motion. "I'm perfect." She whispered.

"Yes." He murmured. "You are."

She smiled and pressed tighter against him. "Do you think we're going to make it out of this alive?" Her throat was suddenly tight with tears, squeezing her words. The instant she'd lost Aaron and her parents, her life had lost all meaning and purpose. She hadn't cared if she lived or died. But with a single touch of his hand, his heart, Jonathon had restored her will to live, her need to survive.

His lips pressed against her hair and he breathed deep. "I do."

She closed her eyes and kissed his chest again. "I believe you." She had to. She had to believe it was by divine intervention she and Jonathon were together. That there was a future planned out for them by God himself. Otherwise, it meant that life trickled along by random events that possessed no meaning. And if life was meaningless...what would be the point of surviving all this?

Jonathon turned onto his side facing her and pulled her deep into his arms, kissing her with a depth of love and passion that she'd never experienced before. He held her against him, his lips sweet against hers, as if he could read her thoughts and knew she needed the extra assurance that they would somehow make it through this in one piece.

His tongue explored her mouth and she moaned as his hands began to caress her body. He drew her leg up over his waist and pressed his hips in closer. She gasped softly as he entered her once more. Their kiss deepened as Jonathon's arms wrapped around her and rolled slowly onto his back, drawing her on top of him. She flattened her hands on his chest and pushed herself up a bit as she began to move against him. Her eyes closed as the ecstasy of holding him deep inside her overwhelmed her.

His hands slid up her sides then covered her breasts. Her eyes opened slowly. He was staring up at her as intently as if he were gazing at a real live angel. She could see so much in his deep blue eyes, so many emotions she didn't yet understand. He wasn't lying when he'd said he loved her. It glowed in his eyes. Those beautiful eyes that had filled her dreams for the past twenty years. She had fallen in love with him that night when he'd held her in his arms in the dark hallway of her childhood home, protected her, saved her and her family. How was it that she didn't understand until just now that she had loved him from that moment on? She'd only been ten years old, and yet the woman she would become had looked into those eyes that night and loved him...at first sight.

Still holding her eyes, Jonathon sat forward and wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her heated body against his as they moved together in perfect harmony. He kissed her face, her jaw, her throat, then loosened his arms and leaned her back just enough to kiss her breasts, his warm mouth covering her sensitive nipples, first one and then the other.

"I love you, Jonathon." She gasped softly, the words falling from her lips before she even knew they were there. But they were true words and she couldn't help but speak them aloud as his intense love and passion

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filled her up inside, bring her closer and closer to sweet release.

She held his head to her as his hot mouth devoured her full breasts and his hunger and need for her grew more evident as his rhythm intensified, coaxing small cries of pleasure from deep inside her. He released her breasts, gasped deeply then pulled her up tight against him again before rolling them down on the bed once more with his body covering hers.

The urgency of his love making quickly drew her to the edge of ecstasy and pushed her over. She cried out sharply and clung to him as his rhythm quickened, lifting her to climax over and over. When he finally released, it was powerful and wrenched a strong cry from deep within him. His breathing was ragged for a long moment after his release as he laid against her damp, hot body. Her hands stroked his sweat damp back and she dropped kisses on his shoulder and neck.

When he finally lifted himself away from her and laid back down on the bed beside her, his breathing had calmed somewhat but was still unsteady. In moments, though, he was settled into the steady rhythm of sleep. Clarice once more laid her head on his chest and closed her eyes, although she wondered if she would even sleep at all tonight.

But even before the thought had passed all the way through her mind, sleep was already wrapping its tendrils around her and drawing her deeper and deeper into its embrace.

9...Thief In The Night...

Someone's in the room.

Jonathon's eyes snapped open. He laid perfectly still. Beside him, Clarice slept soundly. No nightmares, just peaceful sleep. Her warm body was cuddled up close to his and felt increasingly good. But he couldn't think about that now because they weren't alone in the room.

Very slowly, he reached up beneath his pillow and withdrew the 9 mm handgun. A shadow moved across the far side of the room. He heard a low rustling like someone digging through the sports bag. Jonathon relaxed a bit. A petty thief. He slowly returned the handgun to its place beneath his pillow. He didn't need a weapon to deal with this level of a threat.

The thief stepped into the bathroom and Jonathon could hear him rifling through the cabinet above the sink. No doubt looking for drugs.

Jonathon quickly pulled on his jeans and quick stepped to the bathroom door. He leaned against the wall to the side of the door and waited. When the thief came out of the bathroom, Jonathon grabbed him from behind, wrapping his arm around the thief's neck in a rear naked choke. The thief gasped, startled, and flailed against Jonathon's hold but couldn't break loose.

The knife seemed to come out of nowhere and Jonathon saw it too late. The thief slashed his arm then swung down to stab him in the side. Jonathon released him and dodged backwards. Blood drained down his arm and hand and dripped onto the carpet, but he ignored the wound and kept his eyes on the intruder.

The thief was clearly young and inexperienced. He faced Jonathon and held up the knife.

"Bad idea, kid." Jonathon warned in a low, dangerous voice. "I'm telling you now, just walk away. I don't want to hurt you."

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The thief moved the knife back and forth, but his fear was evident in the unsteadiness of his hand. Still, he was a kid and kids wanted to sound tough. "I got the knife, mister."

Jonathon's hand shot forward and plucked the knife from the kid, tossing it into a dark corner of the room, then before the kid could blink, Jonathon once again had him in a rear naked choke. "Don't be stupid, kid." Jonathon hissed in the kid's ear. "I could kill you right now."

"Jonathon?" Clarice was suddenly awake and sitting forward in the bed, the blanket pulled up over her chest. When her mind cleared of sleep and she registered the situation, alarm filled her voice. "Jonathon! What's happening?"

"It's okay." He said. "Our guest here was just leaving." He leaned close to the kid's ear. "Weren't you?"

The kid's eyes bulged in his head as Jonathon's tight grip on his throat steadily cut off his oxygen. He nodded vigorously as his hands tried to pull Jonathon's arm away. Jonathon released him suddenly and shoved him towards the door. The kid stumbled forward, grabbed the door handle and fled the room.

Clarice grabbed her t-shirt and pulled it on quickly then hurried to Jonathon. She touched his arm then jerked her hand back when she felt the blood. "Oh god." She rushed to the bed and turned on the lamp. The sight of Jonathon's arms drenched in blood filled her with panic. "Oh my god, you're bleeding!"

"I'll be fine." he said. "Hand me the bandage wrap. It's just a flesh wound."

Clarice quickly retrieved the bandage wrap. "Let me do it." She said, but he shook his head and took the wrap.

"I told you, it's just a flesh wound." He moved towards the bathroom. "I can take care of it." she started to follow when he entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He went to the sink and turned on the cold water then stuck his arm beneath the stream. He scrubbed away the blood and looked at his forearm where the kid had cut him deep. His skin was smooth, flawless. The deep gash was gone. Healed.

Jonathon stared at his reflection for a long moment. *You have to tell her who you are.* He closed his eyes and recalled too vividly how good it felt to hold Clarice, make love to her, feel her love for him. He opened his eyes as cold reality settled in. "You have to tell her *what* you are." He whispered.

He looked away from his image and grabbed a towel. He dried his arm and wrapped the bandage around where the cut had been. Until he figured out how to tell her the truth, she had to believe he was as human as she was.

Before...

CLARICE

The officer sat down on the sofa beside Clarice. He had a notepad in his hand. She leaned against her mom, whose arm was wrapped around her shoulders protectively. "Is this really necessary?" Dana asked. "We already told the police what happened."

"We just have some follow up questions about what your daughter witnessed." He said.

The officer was young. Younger than the other cops who had come there before. Clarice looked at him from her secure position next to her mother. He smiled down at her. His eyes were friendly. Concerned.

Hour of Darkness

"My daughter was traumatized." Dana said. "You can't possibly think she actually saw what she thought she saw."

"As I said, it's just routine follow up." He looked at Clarice again. "Honey, can you tell me what happened? Did you see the man who shot the two bad men?"

"I really don't think-" Dana started.

"He had black hair." Clarice spoke low, cutting off her mother's words. "And blue eyes. Dark blue like...the water in the lake where we go camping. But..."

"What, honey?" The officer pressed gently.

She frowned as she thought hard, trying to remember what it was about his eyes that were different. "His eyes weren't just blue. They had...gold in them, and it was like...the gold parts glowed."

"This is crazy." Dana said. "She was terrified. If she saw anything, it was just a reflection of light."

The officer wasn't listening to her mom. He was staring at her. "And what else?" He asked quietly. "Did he say anything to you?"

Clarice nodded. "He said that he wouldn't let anyone hurt me. Then he told me to close my eyes and cover my ears."

"Then what?"

"Then he shot them." She said softly. "And then he said 'You're safe, Clarice.'"

"He knew your name?"

"Uh huh."

"Have you ever seen him before?" The officer asked.

Clarice shook her head.

"How do you suppose he knew your name?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

The officer scribbled something in the notepad then looked at her again. "What happened then?"

Clarice looked nervously up at her mother then back to the officer. "He disappeared."

"You mean he left the house?"

"No." She shook her head. "He...disappeared. Like magic."

The officer frowned. "Do you mean he vanished into thin air?"

"Yes."

Hour of Darkness

"I told you." Dana said. "She was traumatized. She didn't really see anyone disappear."

The officer looked at her mom. "What do you think happened to those men?" He asked. "Who do you think shot them?"

Her mom shifted uncomfortably. "I-I don't know." She admitted. Her voice shook a little. "Maybe someone was outside, heard Clarice scream and came to help."

"Someone who just happened to be packing a nine millimeter handgun?"

Clarice looked up at her mom. Dana met her eyes briefly then glanced away. "I don't know." She said. "But I do know that human beings don't just appear out of nowhere and then disappear into thin air. It isn't possible."

"I agree." The officer murmured and Clarice's heart sank. He didn't believe her either. "Human beings don't do that." He closed his notepad and stood up. Her mom stood up with him.

Clarice remained sitting. She stared at her hands in her lap. Nobody believed her. Not even Aaron, who always believed everything she said. She wouldn't lie to Aaron, but he still didn't believe her. Her dad didn't either. Why did everyone think she was lying? She never lied. Never. Everyone said she was just seeing things, but she wasn't.

The officer shook her mom's hand and apologized for the inconvenience. Then he bent down and held out his hand to her. She shook it tentatively. "Thank you for talking with me." He spoke quietly. "You've been very helpful."

Aaron hollered at their mom from the other room. Dana took a few steps in that direction and called, "In a minute, honey."

The officer leaned closer to Clarice. "I believe you." He whispered then smiled.

Clarice smiled back.

10...The Morning After...

"Here." Jonathon handed Clarice his black leather jacket. "Take this. It's cold outside."

Clarice took the jacket and slipped it on. The heavy sleeves hung down over her hands and the hem struck her upper thighs. Jonathon had found a long sleeve thermal shirt in the bag and put it on beneath one of the t-shirts.

He grabbed the sawed off shotgun and stuffed it in the bag to conceal it, then dropped his shoulder holster in with it and tucked the 9mm in the back of his jeans, covering it with his double shirts. He looked up at Clarice. She'd pulled the jacket tightly around her and was breathing in his scent. When she caught him watching her, she smiled.

"Smells good." She said softly. "Like you."

A smile tugged the corner of his mouth as he picked up the bag. "We should get going."

There was only a trace of a limp to Clarice's walk as she headed for the door.

Hour of Darkness

"How's the leg?" He asked. He opened the door ahead of her and looked out, scanning the area outside quickly.

"Better." She said. "It don't hurt so much anymore." She shrugged as he turned back to face her. "I'm a bit sore, though."

"That's to be expected." he said. "After the incident at your brother's..." His words faltered as she just looked at him, and it suddenly dawned on him what she meant. "Oh." He cleared his throat. "Sorry about that."

She moved up close to him till her body was touching his. She looked up in his eyes. "Don't you dare apologize for last night." She whispered.

"My mistake." He murmured and leaned down, kissing her lightly on the lips.

She licked her lips when he drew back. "Mmm." She touched his arm where the thief had cut him. She could feel the bandage wrap beneath the thermal sleeve. "How is your arm?"

"It's okay." He said quickly and opened the door wider for her. "We should go."

The gray light of early dawn poured down like a smoky haze as they stepped out of the room and closed the door. Clarice went to the SUV while Jonathon returned the key to the office. She wished they could've stayed another night or two. Last night, while Jonathon had held her, she'd almost forgotten the nightmare she'd suddenly and violently been thrust into. But being back on the road, on the run, it would all come rushing back full force.

Jonathon returned to the truck and slid in behind the wheel. He cranked the engine and it turned over smoothly.

"Do you know where we're going?" She asked when they were away from the motel and headed down the road.

"Yes." He said as he stared straight ahead. "But we have to make a stop first before we get on our way."

"Stop where?"

Jonathon glanced at her but seemed unable to hold her eyes for very long. She wondered if that was a bad sign. "There's a guide station about ten miles up ahead." He said. "This is prime hunting grounds that draw hunters from out of state. They need guides to take them up into the mountains."

"And this is relevant to us...how?" Clarice queried.

"The guided trips last about a week." He said. "The hunters leave their rigs at the station. We need to swap the SUV for something more fitting for where we're going." He lent her another quick look. "And the cops will be looking for this rig by now. We have enough to deal with, we don't need the cops on our ass as well."

Clarice nodded slowly. She understood. They had to steal another rig. But Jonathon hadn't technically stolen *this* rig, had he? The man had given him the keys willingly.

Willingly. The word floated through her head as she glanced at Jonathon. That whole incident at the mini-mart made no sense to her. How *had* Jonathon convinced the man to exchange rigs with him?

Hour of Darkness

She wanted to believe Jonathon was her knight in shining armor, rushing in to fight off the dragon and whisk her away into happily ever after...but there were too many gaps she didn't know how to fill. And his insistence that there were things she needed to know about him filled her with unease. Yet she had given herself to him last night without a second thought. Was his transference theory right? Had she merely done that out of need for comfort and connection?

Morning sunlight began to break through the fog. The evergreen trees were laced with frost and glimmered like jewels wherever the sun beams hit them. Clarice watched Jonathon as he drove in silence. A level of tension had returned to his face. Last night, the tension had evaporated as he'd held her so close and made love to her with such passion and intensity, as if that would be their one and only night together. The thought that they would never share another night like that again generated an empty, hollow feeling in her heart. It wasn't just transference. She loved this man who she knew so little about. Loved him beyond her own comprehension.

Last night he'd told her he would die for her. And as she looked at him now, she knew she would give her life for him as well.

The SUV sat in the deep shadows of the trees at the far end of the small gravel parking lot in front of the guide station. A group of four hunters shouldered their packs and readied themselves for the trek into the mountains. Each pack was outfitted with a compound bow and the men were dressed in camo.

Jonathon sat quiet and motionless behind the wheel of the SUV and watched the small procession. The guide came out of the station in hiking boots and a flap jacket, wearing his own pack, minus the compound bow. He wasn't hunting with them, just directing them to their prey.

The group headed off down a trail that led into the trees. Jonathon watched them till they were out of sight, then continued to wait another ten minutes before opening his door and stepping out. Through the trees he could hear the roar of a waterfall, engorged and swollen. He looked at the rigs parked in the gravel lot. A 1972 blue and white Chevy suburban was parked at the far end. It appeared to be in cherry condition and sported heavy treaded mud tires.

"Come around and get behind the wheel." He told Clarice.

She frowned. "Why?"

He nodded towards the blue and white Chevy. "I'm gonna take the suburban, but I want you to follow me up the road in this."

"I thought you wanted to get rid of this rig." She said.

He looked at her. "I do. But not here. The longer it takes them to find it, the more of a head start we'll get. When the hunters return in a few days, they'll figure the missing truck is a random theft. There won't be any reason for anyone to link it to us."

She nodded and climbed out of the SUV, went around the front and slid up in behind the wheel. "They haven't been gone long." She pointed out. "Will they hear the rig start?"

"You hear that?" He asked. "That thundering noise is a waterfall. The trail they took is headed right towards it. As soon as they entered the trees, it would've drowned out all other sound."

Hour of Darkness

"Oh." Clarice nodded.

Jonathon closed her door and walked to the end of the gravel lot, glancing around to make sure no one was lingering back. He squatted down next to the driver door of the Suburban and reached underneath the rig, feeling around. He found what he was looking for and popped open the hidden compartment. A set of keys fell into his hand. He smiled and stood up. Right where the owner of the rig *told* him it would be.

He unlocked the door and climbed inside, starting the truck. The engine sounded good, strong. It would take them where they were going. He closed the door and backed the Chevy around and pulled forward. He nodded to Clarice and she started the SUV. He drove the Chevy to the edge of the two lane road and waited for the SUV to pull up behind him.

The two rigs drove out onto the road and turned left. Jonathon made sure the SUV remained only a single car length behind him. The road was beginning to wind and he didn't want to lose sight of her. Every few seconds he cast a quick look in the rear view mirror to assure himself she was there.

He'd heard her thoughts on the way to the guide station. He almost wished she didn't really love him the way she did. Almost wished it. But after last night, he couldn't bring himself to wish away what he'd felt in her body and mind as they'd made love. He needed her love more than he'd ever needed anything in his life. But as much as she was convinced she was in love with him...how fast would that change once she learned the details? He should have waited. He knew that now. He knew it last night. And yet...if she came to him again, he wouldn't be able to turn her away. Maybe deep down, he was just a selfish bastard.

He shoved the thought away and spotted a gravel pullout. He guided the Chevy off the road and waited for the SUV to park next to him. He got out the Suburban and walked around to the driver door of the SUV and opened it.

"Get out." He said.

As Clarice slid out from behind the wheel, he opened the back driver side door and took out the sports bag, handing it to Clarice. He then reached in, cranked the engine over and dropped the SUV into gear.

"What're you doing?" Clarice asked uncertainly.

"Getting rid of it."

The outer side of the pull off slanted a little downhill towards the edge which dropped off into a deep ravine a few thousand feet below. Jonathon gripped the door frame and the steering wheel, put his weight into it and began to slowly push the SUV towards the edge. When it reached the slanted ground, it moved a little faster and Jonathon pushed harder. He stepped back away from the truck at the last moment as its own weight and momentum carried it on over the edge and out of sight. Jonathon stepped to the edge and watched the rig fall through open air then smash against the rocks below, tumble and splash into the raging river. As he watched the SUV bob in the swift waters then slowly sink, he concluded that the river was becoming more useful by the moment.

"Come on." Jonathon said, casting one last look at the river below. He took the bag from Clarice as they walked to the Suburban. He took the shotgun out of the bag then put the bag in the back seat and climbed in behind the wheel. Clarice got in the passenger side as Jonathon laid the shotgun on the seat between them and turned the engine over.

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"It's gonna be a long drive." He said as he pulled the Chevy back out onto the road. A stiff silence filled the Chevy for a moment before he added, "It'll give us time to talk."

Clarice turned and looked out the passenger window. The Chevy picked up speed, but Jonathon wasn't driving quite as fast as before. The road was becoming winding and the threat behind them wasn't as imminent. It would be tragically ironic after going through so much to save her if he ended up killing her in a freak car accident because he was taking the corners too fast.

Her anxiety was evident even without touching her mind. She knew she had to hear what he had to say, but after last night, after establishing their connection so completely and intimately, she was terrified of what he would tell her.

"We should have talked last night." He said low. "Before we..." He rubbed one hand over his mouth anxiously. "I shouldn't have allowed that to happen without telling you everything first."

"If you're sorry it happened." She whispered without looking at him. "You can just say so. You don't have to make excuses as to why you're regretting it now."

The moment they hit a short straight stretch of the road, Jonathon pulled the Chevy to the shoulder and let it idle. Clarice looked at him. "What're you doing?"

He moved the shotgun from the seat to the floorboard then reached over and pulled Clarice across the seat till she was sitting up next to him. He cupped her face and kissed her, his passion and need for her every bit as evident in this kiss as in each and every kiss he gave her last night. She instantly responded.

"I'm not sorry." He murmured thickly against her lips as their kiss ended. "And I don't regret it now, nor will I ever." He tilted her face up so he could look in her glistening eyes. "But the things I know...they are things you should have let me tell you beforehand. Because it's your regrets that I'm afraid of."

She stared up in his eyes. There was still so much innocence in her. And for a brief moment, he saw in her lovely dark eyes the ten year old little girl he'd held close and protected so long ago. Except for him, it hadn't been so long ago, less than two weeks. Perhaps that was why it was still so easy to see the child she'd been, and feel the desperate need to protect her.

"I'll never regret making love to you." She said softly, pulling him out of his thoughts. "No matter what you tell me. I'll never wish last night never happened."

He pulled her close, held her tight. *Please, God, let her be right.*

Leland became aware of his fate the moment he looked up and Victor was standing in the doorway of his study. Come to do his own dirty work. Unusual. Leland was expecting Hunter. It was more Victor's style to send in his hired gun to do the job. Less messy. Job was done quick and efficient. And nothing could be linked back to Victor.

But perhaps, Leland surmised, that even Victor was human enough to kill his own brother himself, rather than send in a cold, calculated assassin to do it for him.

"Morning, Vic." Leland didn't get up from his desk. "Wasn't expecting you."

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Victor didn't miss the underlying meaning of his brother's words. Leland didn't expect him to miss it. "Where is he going, Leland?" Victor's voice was low, almost pleasant if it wasn't for the dangerous edge.

Leland raised an eyebrow. "Where is who going, Vic?"

"You've been feeding him information." Victor said. "You told him how to put Alec out of commission."

"Those are your toys, Vic." Leland spoke quietly as he poured himself some wine and leaned back in his chair, sipping at the glass. "Your playground. It always was. And I wanted no part of your horror show then, and I don't want any now."

Victor stepped just inside the study. "You were a fool then, Leland." He said. "And you're an even bigger fool now. I know you've been talking to him."

The wine swirled slowly in the glass as Leland stared at his younger brother. The man had never really been right in the head. Even as a kid, he'd had a taste for the bizarre. Leland recalled with great distaste and disgust the experiments young Victor had performed on unsuspecting small animals. The torture he'd put them through. Leland was certain that if Victor hadn't become a doctor of science...he would have become a serial killer.

"Do what you came here to do." Leland said bluntly. "Or get the hell out of my study. I've got work to do."

The handgun appeared in Victor's hand as if it materialized from thin air. It didn't. Victor had had it on him when he came in. Leland knew that the moment Victor had appeared in his doorway.

"You can't save him." The gun hung down at Victor's side. He had yet to raise it in a threatening manner. But the fact that it was in his hand at all was threat enough. "You may not have wanted to be a part of my project, but you still know what he is." Victor's eyes narrowed a little. "Yet you never were able to see him as less than human, were you? "

Leland came up out of his chair so suddenly that Victor took a step back, startled. "You." Leland hissed as he jabbed his finger at the younger man. "You are the one who is less than human. Jonathon has more humanity in him than you will ever have. Good God, man." Leland shook his head as his throat tightened with emotion. "How could you do what you did?"

Victor spoke without feeling. "He was just another experiment, like all the rest."

"Then he's a failed experiment." Leland said tightly. "He's of no use to you. Why can't you just let him go? Find Alec and take him back. But for once in your life...show Jonathon some mercy and leave him be."

Victor looked at the older man thoughtfully. "You always knew, didn't you?"

"Knew what?"

"That Jonathon wasn't a dead cell." Victor motioned with the hand that held the gun. "You taught him how to hide it from me. You taught him how to appear just like any other normal kid. When the truth was..." Victor raised the gun with purpose and aimed it at Leland. "...he was my most successful experiment. And now...I want him back." Victor cocked the gun. "And you're going to tell me where he is."

Leland stared at his brother across the top of the desk. "You can't make me tell you a damn thing." Leland spoke low. "The only power you possess...is in that gun in your hand. And that gun can't make me talk. It can

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only kill me."

Victor looked at Leland with cold, emotionless eyes. "So be it then."

The gun fired. Once. Twice.

Leland jerked back and fell into his chair, both shots catching him in the chest. He lay slumped in his chair, dead eyes gazing blankly at the ceiling.

...Before...

JONATHON

"He can feel, Uncle Lee." Johnny said. "Father doesn't think he can, but he does."

Uncle Lee crouched before him. "I know, Johnny."

"He feels her." Johnny told him. "He cried out her name, in his mind."

"Do you know who she is?" Uncle Lee asked. "How does he know her?"

Johnny shrugged. "I don't know. But he feels her every day."

Rising slowly to his feet, Uncle Lee sat on the bed next to Johnny and touched his shoulder. "Johnny, you can't tell Victor about the girl. Or about any of this."

"But why?" Johnny asked. "If father knew they could feel, then he would stop hurting them. If he knew."

"He knows, Johnny." Uncle Lee said softly, sadly. "And he doesn't care. He is the one who can't feel."

Johnny looked down at his hands in his lap.

Uncle Lee wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer in a fatherly hug. "I'm sorry, Johnny." He whispered. "But you have to remember what I said before, you can't let Victor know what you can do. If he finds out, he'll hurt you too. Like he does the others. And you can never - never - tell him about the girl."

Johnny raised his head. Tears filled his eyes. "But why, Uncle Lee?"

The older man looked down at him. Deep sadness filled his eyes and strained his face. "Because Victor would kill her."

Chapter 7

11...To Tell The Truth...

Where the hell did he start? The beginning? He wasn't even certain where the beginning was. How did he explain Alec to her? Who he was? How he came to be *what* he was?

"Just tell me." Clarice said quietly. She still sat next to him and could surely feel the tension tightening his body. "You don't have to sugar coat it. I've seen enough so far that you don't need to coddle me. Just tell it like it is."

The fear and anxiety in her pressed at his mind, but she was being honest when she said to tell it like it is. She was tired of being afraid. And tired of not knowing why her life had suddenly become a living nightmare.

Jonathon released a slow sigh. This was it. The moment of truth. He couldn't put it off any longer. But he couldn't just blurt it out. It was too...unbelievable. And he had to prepare her for that.

"What I'm about to tell you." He said slowly, quietly, his eyes straight ahead. "You're not going to believe it at first. You won't be able to." He swallowed tightly. "But I need you to know right now, before I begin, that I would never lie to you. And if you can believe me on that...then you will eventually be able to believe the rest." He gripped the steering wheel tighter. "But at first...you won't." He looked at her. "You'll think I'm crazy."

He returned his eyes to the road and drove along for a few minutes in silence. Clarice didn't push him. She could clearly sense he needed time to put his words together so they would make as much sense as possible. Even though he knew that nothing concerning their situation made any sense at all.

"Do you know where your mom went to college?" Jonathon asked slowly.

Clarice thought for a moment. "In Texas, I think." She said. "Somewhere near Fort Worth. In a small college town, Stephen...something. I think."

"Stephenville." It wasn't a question. Jonathon knew exactly what town it was.

"Yeah, that was it." Clarice nodded.

"Did she ever talk about it?"

"About what?"

"The college. Her college years." Jonathon said.

Clarice shrugged. "Not a lot. She got in on some kind of special program scholarship or something, I think. She didn't really specify. Why?"

Jonathon shifted in his seat and gripped the steering wheel more firmly. "The college was a government funded institution."

She waited for more and when he didn't give it right away, she said, "So? Don't a lot of colleges receive funding from the government?"

Hour of Darkness

"Some do." He said low. "But this wasn't just some government financial aid program. The funding came from a discreet research department. And...there were requirements for the students who joined the college through this program."

"What requirements?"

"The students." Jonathon said. "Were required to participate in one medical research study per year."

"Where are you going with this?" Clarice asked slowly. "What does this have to do with our situation right now?"

Jonathon tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "I'm trying to tell you." He said firmly. "But to explain it, I have to start from the beginning, and it begins with the college."

"And my mom?" Clarice whispered. Her words were suddenly tinged with fear. "How does my mom fit into this?"

"Your mom." Jonathon said. "Took part in one of the medical studies. But what she didn't know...what none of the participants knew...was that the term 'medical' was being used very loosely."

"I-I don't understand." She said. "Loosely? What does that mean?"

Jonathon took a deep breath and released it slow. "It means it was bullshit. All of it. The so called medical study, everything. They weren't conducting medical studies, they were..." He hesitated. "They were conducting genetic experiments."

Clarice stiffened beside him. "What...do you mean by...genetic?" She asked with uncertainty. "I don't know what you're getting at."

"Genetic engineering." He said. "Recombination DNA." Then added more quietly, "Among other things."

A heavy silence settled over Clarice for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice had a hard edge to it. "Are you...are you talking about...cloning?" She asked stiffly. "Are you trying to say that the man who killed my family was...Aaron's clone? That that's why he looks just like him? Because if that's what you're getting at, then yes...you are crazy."

"No." Jonathon interjected firmly. "That isn't what I'm trying to say. In fact, I wish..." He sighed deeply. "I wish it were that simple."

"That *simple*?"

"Clarice." Jonathon spoke more gently. God, how was he supposed to do this? But Pandora's box was open and there was no closing it. "These experiments...they were about the female participants. The men were of no real value, they were just there to deter suspicion about what the studies were really for. The women were the key players."

He felt a tremor run through Clarice. "What were the experiments?"

"They gave the men placebos, to make them believe they were a part the study." He said. "But the women...they inseminated, with the foreign genetic material."

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Clarice trembled again. "You mean they...put that in my *mom*?" She cried. "What do you mean by *foreign*? What *was* it?"

This is it, Jonathon thought. Time to bite the bullet and stop dancing around the facts. He had to force the words out. "The foreign genetic material, it was like nothing they had ever seen before." He was stalling, but there was no getting out of it.

"What the hell was it?" Clarice cried again.

Jonathon released a slow sigh. "Extra terrestrial DNA." He whispered. He almost cringed at the words, even to him of all people, it sounded nuts.

"Extra terrestrial?" Clarice spoke slow, her voice suddenly numb. "You mean...*alien*?"

"Yes."

"As in *outer space* alien?"

"Yes."

"I'm supposed to believe this?" She whispered tightly. "I'm supposed to believe they impregnated my mom with an...an *alien*? You are out of your mind. You're-"

"Clarice." Jonathon cut her off sharply. "That's not what I'm saying. They didn't impregnate her. The *inseminated* her...with the genes."

Clarice shook her head. Tears filled her eyes. "I don't know what the hell you're trying to tell me. I don't know how you can expect me to believe that aliens exist at all... much less that the government has access to their DNA. I-I don't..."

"Clarice." Jonathon said softly. "Do you really think I would make something like this up? After all you've been through, after all we shared last night...do you really believe I would make up some bullshit story that would only hurt you more? Why would I do that? Do you think I was lying last night when I said...I loved you?"

Tears slipped from her eyes. "No." She whispered thickly.

"Do you believe I want to hurt you?" He asked. "Do you believe I would ever do anything to deliberately cause you anymore pain and suffering than you've already endured?"

"No." She cried softly.

"I'm not lying to you, baby." He said quietly. "I do know how hard this is to believe...but I'm not lying."

Clarice wiped at her eyes and cleared her throat. "So..." She started, faltered, then began again. "So what did it do to...to the women, when they..inseminated them?"

She was disassociating her mother by generically referring to 'the women' rather than saying 'my mom', but Jonathon understood that fully. She had to have time to absorb it all, and until then, the disassociation was necessary. "It didn't do anything to the women." He told her. "The genes went into a kind of hibernation until..."

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"Until what?"

"Until they encountered living, growing tissue to bond with, become a part of."

"I don't know...what you're saying." She whispered.

Her subconscious was piecing it together but her conscious mind was refusing to accept it.

"When your mother got pregnant." He said quietly, his voice strained, even to his own ears. "The foreign genetic material...woke up, so to speak. The forming embryo provided a host for it to attach itself to. At first...it just held on and drew strength from the embryo until..." The ache in Jonathon's head settled into a painful throbbing in the center of his forehead. "Until it grew strong enough to dominate the embryo."

He could feel Clarice's desperate urge to slide across the seat away from him, be as far from his strange story as possible. Little did she know that his story would get much more bizarre before he was through telling it.

"My mom was only pregnant once." Clarice spoke so low Jonathon barely heard her. "With Aaron and me. So what're you trying to say? That we're..." She drew in a shaky breath and released it unsteadily. "That we're...part *alien*? That we're not even human? And...and if that were even possible...how could you..." She faltered as her voice thickened with disbelief and tears. "How could you...be *with* me like you were last night? We wouldn't even be the same species."

Jonathon's guts twisted painfully. He was going to lose her and there was nothing he could do about it. He'd come too far to turn back now. He had to finish telling her the truth.

"You're not an alien." He assured her solemnly. It should have been an amusing statement followed by a smile and a laugh, but the truth was too close to her misunderstanding that there was no humor in it at all. "Aaron wasn't either." He couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes. "You and Aaron weren't twins."

Clarice's head snapped up. "What're you talking about?" She asked tightly, defensively. "We were twins. How the hell can you say we weren't?"

"I didn't mean it that way." He said slowly. "There was a third baby. You were triplets."

"No." Clarice shook her head with emphasis. "No, there was only me and Aaron."

"There *was* a third baby." Jonathon insisted. "But your mother was told that he was born dead. That he hadn't even survived through the first trimester of her pregnancy."

Clarice shook her head again. Fresh tears filled her eyes. "No." She said stiffly. "Our parents would've told us. They wouldn't have hidden something like that from us."

"Your parents probably didn't tell you because they were told the fetus hadn't even fully formed." He spoke gently, wishing that that alone could ease her fear and confusion. But it wouldn't. Not even a little. "They were told it wasn't even really a baby yet. Maybe...maybe they just wanted to focus on the fact that they still had you and Aaron, two healthy babies, two blessings from God. Maybe they didn't want you and Aaron to feel the loss that they felt."

The morning steadily slipped into afternoon as the Chevy sped along the winding road that was taking them deeper and deeper into the foothills of the Rocky mountains. The sun melted the frost from the evergreen bows and the drops splashed down on the windshield of the suburban. Jonathon barely noticed.

Hour of Darkness

"So why are you telling me this now?" Clarice wondered aloud.

Jonathon released another slow breath. "I said your parents were *told* that the baby was born dead." He glanced at her briefly. "But it wasn't."

She stared back at him in stunned silence as he returned his eyes to the road.

"They took it." He whispered.

"Who?" Clarice breathed out unsteadily.

"The ones from the research branch who had conducted the experiments." He told her sickly. "They monitored the test subjects they had inseminated, and when your mother became pregnant, they planted doctors to oversee her pregnancy and study the growing fetuses. They were secretly extracting DNA samples from all three fetuses."

Clarice looked visibly sick. "Why were they doing that?"

"They were testing the three of you for the foreign genes." He said quietly. "They wanted to know if their experiment had been successful."

"What were they trying to accomplish?" Clarice sat with her head turned away towards the passenger window. She was taking in the information he was giving her...but she had yet to comprehend it. Or believe it.

"They were trying to make a hybrid." He whispered. "A being that could pass for human...but possess the abilities of the...others. They'd tried before, creating them in the lab, making test tube babies using the genetic material, but they had been unsuccessful. None of the babies survived beyond the early fetus stage. They thought maybe there was too much lab involvement and it was hindering the foreign genes from growing naturally. That's when they began to inseminate unsuspecting test subjects. They called it an uncontrolled experiment. Completely hands off."

When Jonathon paused, Clarice continued to sit in silence, staring towards the passenger window, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. "What happened to our...to the baby that our parents thought had died."

A tightness gripped Jonathon's chest. His jaw ached as tears burned behind his eyes. "He was the only one of you three who tested positive." He said quietly. "They took him to another facility set up to study and experiment on the hybrid children. But although the foreign gene dominated his DNA, he displayed only minimal abilities. And after about the age of ten, he stopped displaying any abilities at all and seemed to withdraw inside himself."

Tears streamed down Clarice's face but she didn't cry openly. "Did he have a name?" She whispered thickly.

"They called him Alec." Jonathon blinked back the tears as the memories came rushing to the forefront of his mind.

Silence filled the Chevy for a few minutes when Clarice asked with a tremor in her voice, "Why did he kill his own family?"

Jonathon looked at her. "What?"

Hour of Darkness

"That's what you were going to tell me next." She whispered. "That Alec killed my parents, and Aaron...and is trying to kill me too." She looked up at Jonathon and it broke his heart to see the innocence gone from her eyes. "That's why he looks like Aaron."

He nodded slowly and looked away from her. "Yeah. That's what I was gonna say." Victor had turned Alec into the monster that was relentlessly pursuing them. He had taken everything from him, even Jonathon. A tear slipped free and Jonathon quickly swiped it away.

Victor Orlando stood at the edge of the road across from George's gas station. He looked over the ledge at the river below. The water was muddy brown and violent, surging and swirling and crashing against the banks.

The fierce water had sucked Alec's body down with ease. Had the body been swept downstream or was it lodged at the bottom of the river? If it was still down there, perhaps wedged between some underwater rocks or logs, there would be no retrieving him. Not for months, when the water finally lowered and calmed.

But Victor was confident they would find Alec. He knew where to start looking.

He took out a cell phone and dialed a number then pressed the phone to his ear. A voice answered at the other end almost immediately. Victor spoke into the phone as he stared down at the river.

"I know where Jonathon disposed of the body."

The cop car appeared around the corner so suddenly that Jonathon barely had time to register it as a police vehicle before it zipped past them. His heart was racing. He gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white.

He watched in the rear view mirror as the cop car disappeared around another bend in the road. He forced his pulse to calm. No one knew what they were driving or where they were headed. But he was on edge in a bad way. Clarice wanted to know why Alec had killed her family and was now hunting her. How did he tell her it was his fault? That it was because of his decision to alter the course of her life...that Victor had done what he'd done to Alec. Maybe Jonathon wasn't the direct cause of Alec's state of mind, but it was his own actions that brought it about. How did he come back from that?

They passed a road sign that informed motorists there was a rest area a ½ mile ahead.

"Could you...stop." Clarice spoke suddenly, startling Jonathon and pulling him from his disturbing thoughts.

"What?"

"There's a rest area up ahead." She spoke low, unsteady. "Could you stop. I...I need to use the bathroom."

Jonathon nodded. "Of course."

When the turn off to the rest area came up, he guided the Suburban into the small parking area and shut off the engine. A few yards away, a small brick building stood in the heavy shadows of the thick wooded area. On the left side of the building was a sign that said WOMEN. On the right side, MEN.

Hour of Darkness

A dirt path led up to the rest rooms. Grass was growing up through the path and moss clung to the outer brick walls of the building. Nothing appeared to have been attended to in some time.

Jonathon scoured the woods behind the rest rooms. They were so shadowed it still looked like night in there. It made him feel ill at ease, but he knew that for now it was just paranoia. They were in no immediate danger.

Clarice scooted across the seat and opened the passenger door. When Jonathon opened his door as well, she looked back at him. "I can go alone." She said quietly. Her voice was dull, lacking emotion.

"I know." Jonathon stumbled on his words. "I was just..." He shook his head. "Go ahead."

She pulled the leather jacket tight around her body as she walked up the dirt path and disappeared into the women's bathroom.

Jonathon stood in the open driver door and continued to study the woods. His eyes continually flicked back to the small brick building. He didn't like her being out of his sight.

The bathroom smelled dingy, stale but at least it didn't have a disgusting stink to it. The sink was grimy and the mirror had a layer of dust on it.

Clarice wiped a clean spot on the mirror with her hand then turned on the faucet in the sink. At least the water was clean. She cupped her palms beneath the water spout and leaned over, splashing her face. The towel dispenser had a couple old thin paper towels still left in it and she plucked them out, drying her face.

The woman in the mirror looked even worse than her reflection in the motel mirror. This one had clean, controlled hair and was freshly washed, but it was the eyes that were different. She didn't recognize the eyes looking back at her. They were dark and haunted.

Clarice looked away and went to one of the stalls. She went inside and closed the door behind her then sat down on top of the toilet lid. She hugged herself fiercely as her body began to shake. The dam of tears burst and she cried uncontrollably, rocking back and forth.

It was too much. She couldn't handle any more. She hadn't even had a chance to grieve for her family...and now this. How much was God going to drop on her before he finally decided she'd had enough?

She leaned forward as the sobs wrenched from her body, tightening every muscle, making it hard for her to breathe. She tilted her head up and looked towards the ceiling. "Please..." Was all she could get out.

A sudden light rapping on the door made her jump and stifled her sobs instantly.

"Are you all right?" Jonathon asked from outside the door. There was genuine concern in his voice.

She cleared her throat. "I'll...I'll be out in a minute." She told him. She could hear the heavy tears in her voice. She sat on the toilet lid a short while longer, trying to calm her nerves. But when she finally left the stall and went to the sink again, her hands were shaking badly as she turned the water back on. She splashed her face with cold water in an attempt to dispel the red puffiness around her eyes. But there was no mistaking she'd been crying. Her eyes were still glossy with tears and blood shot.

She grabbed some toilet paper from inside the stall and blew her nose, then left the bathroom.

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Jonathon was back down by the truck, waiting for her. She avoided looking at him as she went to the passenger side of the Chevy and climbed in. She stayed to her side of the seat when Jonathon got in and closed the door.

He didn't say anything about her puffy face or red, bloodshot eyes. He just started the truck and drove out of the rest area.

He didn't offer to tell her anymore just yet, and she was glad. It was only going to get worse, she could feel it. Although she wasn't sure just how it could get any worse than it already was, she was fast learning that things could always get worse.

...Before...

CLARICE

The hallway stretched away from her as she ran, her breath unsteady and her heart racing. She could hear the man behind her, calling to her, telling her he wasn't going to hurt her. But he had already hurt her dad and brother. Her legs felt weak, like she'd been running for hours, but she couldn't reach the end of the hall. Her mother was down there, she would save her from this man.

Tears flowed from her eyes and blurred her vision. The hallway swam in front of her, making her feel dizzy. Someone screamed and she froze in place. They screamed again. It was her mom. Someone was hurting her. The man who had taken her into the bedroom.

"Momma!" She cried out and ran forward, this time making it to the end of the hall and turning the corner. She rushed to the bedroom door and shoved it open, then stopped short, her heart shuddering in her small chest. "Momma?" More tears flooded her eyes. Her mother was on the bed, naked. The man was on top of her, doing things to her that the young girl didn't quite understand yet. Her mother's head turned and she looked at the girl. Her eyes were empty, blank. Tears trickled from the corners and wet the blanket on the bed.

"Momma?" The young girl cried again, unsteadily.

The man on top of her mother twisted his head and grinned at the girl. "Watch closely, honey." He said. "And Uncle Sean will show you all you need to know about being a woman." He shoved hard against her mom and her mom cried out, but it was a quiet cry, like she was tired.

She felt the other man behind her before she heard him. His hands clamped onto her small shoulders. Her heart beat wildly and her throat closed with fear. She began to breathe hard and fast. The man on the bed drew back and stood up. The girl's eyes widened as he turned around. His pants were open and she could see his-

She clamped her eyes shut as a fierce heat spread through her cheeks. She'd never seen 'it' before...except once when she'd accidentally walked in on Aaron taking a bath. But never an adult man.

The man behind her shoved her forward towards the other man. She almost stumbled because she refused to open her eyes. "Your turn." Uncle Sean said to the man behind her. "She's all wet and ready for you."

The man stepped around the girl and went to the bed. She opened her eyes a crack and saw him kneel on the bed between her mom's legs and began unfastening his pants. Uncle Sean stepped in front of her, blocking her view of the bed. She clamped her eyes shut again because he was still exposed. "Time for your first lesson in womanhood." He said and scooped her up with one arm.

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The girl screamed and kicked. "Momma!" She cried out in terror, but her mother just laid there on the bed, eyes watching her blankly as the other man took his turn at her.

Uncle Sean carried her to her own bedroom and dropped her on the bed. He straddled her small body, pinning her down, as he began tugging at her clothes. "No." She whimpered and tried to hold her clothes on, but he was too strong. He leaned over her, his breath hot against her ear. "This'll be fun, sweetie. And when I'm done with you...and my buddy is done with you...you'll be a woman. All grown up." He kissed her cheek and she gasped. "Now won't that be something?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and cried out in her mind - Help me! Somebody please help me!

Chapter 8

12...Nightmare...

Afternoon turned to evening as the two lane road took them further away from civilization. The sun was sinking behind the Rockies and a bitter chill began to seep into the Chevy interior. Jonathon turned the heater up and glanced at Clarice. She hadn't said a word since they'd left the rest area, and that was hours ago. She just hugged the jacket around her and stared out the window at the trees and falling darkness.

Her mind was numb and he forced himself to stay out of her head. She had a right to figure this out without him invading her privacy anymore than he'd already done.

He watched the road. The Suburban's headlights cut a path through the growing darkness, guiding them, showing them the way. It had been at least a decade, if not longer, since Jonathon had been up here. But he was certain it would be morning before they came to the turnoff that would take them where they needed to go.

The Chevy rounded a long curve in the road and around the other side lights glowed in the twilight. To Jonathon's surprise, off to the side of the road was a small cafe, an old style general store, and a couple tiny cabins that were rented by the night. He didn't remember this being here before, but again, it had been over a decade since he'd been up this way.

He pulled the Chevy off the two lane road and parked in front of the cafe. Clarice turned slowly and looked at him. "What're we doing?"

The Chevy's engine cut off. Jonathon took the keys from the ignition and stuffed them in his pocket. "Right now." He said. "We're gonna get something to eat."

The air was icy and bit at their faces as they walked from the Chevy to the cafe. Inside the cafe, it was warm and had a cozy, down home feeling to it. The place was nearly deserted but for a couple old guys sitting at the counter drinking coffee. One of the old guys looked up when Jonathon and Clarice entered.

"Howdy, stranger."

Jonathon nodded. "Hello."

The other old guy looked at them. "Don't get many strangers in these parts." He said. "Where you two youngsters from?"

"Denver." Jonathon lied.

"Ayuh. City kids, huh?"

"Fraid so." Jonathon smiled and directed Clarice to a corner booth.

"Whatcha doin' all the way up here?" The first old guy asked, turning on his stool to look at Jonathon.

"Oh Willie, stop botherin' the folks." An older woman behind the bar berated the old guy without conviction. She was plump and friendly, smiling at Jonathon as she came around the end of the counter with two menus and a pot of coffee.

Hour of Darkness

Before they even asked, she poured them both a cup of hot coffee. "Coffee's on the house." She said and handed them the menus. "Just give me a holler when you're ready to order. Name's Helen."

Clarice offered the woman a warm smile as she took one of the menus. "Thank you."

"Sure thing, sweetie." She winked at Jonathon. "She's a doll."

Clarice's cheeks turned a light shade of pink as she ducked her head. For whatever reason, Jonathon found that endearing, and exceedingly attractive.

"That she is." Jonathon told Helen with a smile.

When the older woman was gone, Jonathon opened his menu and scanned the contents. "I think I'm just in the mood for an old fashion burger and fries." He closed the menu and looked at Clarice. She had her menu opened, but there was a blankness to her eyes that told him she wasn't really looking at it. When her eyes focused and she caught him watching her, she closed the menu and set it aside.

"I'm...really not very hungry." She said quietly. She picked up her cup of coffee, sipped at it then set it aside.

"Well, you need to eat something anyway." Jonathon said. "You hardly ate anything yesterday, and who knows how much you had to eat before that. You can run on empty for only so long before you just shut down."

He waved to Helen who quickly returned to their table. "We'll have two hamburgers with fries and a couple cokes."

Helen scribbled it down. "Won't be but about ten minutes." She said and returned to the kitchen with the order.

Clarice twisted the coffee cup on the table in front of her, eyes avoiding Jonathon. He thought about last night, how she'd held him, even clung to him. She'd opened her self to him completely, physically and emotionally. He didn't have to read her mind because she was showing him and telling him everything he needed and wanted to know.

But that was last night. That was before he'd begun to systematically unravel everything she thought she knew about her family and even life itself. There was a barrier between them now and he feared it could never be removed.

It seemed less than ten minutes before Helen brought them their food and drinks. Jonathon thanked her and she left again. Clarice stared at her plate. Despite the stress and tension grinding his guts, the smell of the food instantly ignited Jonathon's appetite. He picked up the burger and bit into it without taking his eyes off Clarice. In reality, he couldn't force her to eat. But he sensed that even she was being tantalized by the smell of her meal.

She picked up a French fry and ate it slowly. Then another one. Before long, she was eating away at the burger as well. Not as enthusiastically as he was, but still eating it nonetheless.

By the time Helen came to take their plates away, both of them had eaten every last bit of food in front of them. Jonathon smiled at Helen. "Best burger and fries I've ever had."

"Thank you." She smiled. "If you need anything else, just let me know." She took away their empty plates.

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Jonathon sipped at his soda. "Feel better?"

"Yeah." Clarice admitted quietly but she still wasn't wanting to look at him.

Clearing his throat, Jonathon said, "I think we should rent one of the cabins for the night. There's still a long drive ahead of us and we could both use some rest."

A tension instantly gripped Clarice. He knew what she was afraid of.

"You can have the bed." He watched her as he sipped his glass of soda.

She finally raised her eyes and looked at him. "It's a little late to be so formal, don't you think?" She whispered then looked away again.

"I just didn't want you to think I was..." He cleared his throat. "That I was expecting anything."

The muscles in Clarice's face tightened and flexed as a glossy film of tears coated her eyes. It seemed as if she wanted to say something but decided against it. When she did finally speak, it was to excuse herself.

"I need some air." She whispered and stood up, heading for the door.

Jonathon watched her leave the cafe, wanting to follow her, always wanting her in his sight. But he stayed where he was. She was struggling and she needed some space to come to terms with everything being thrust at her.

He could see her through the window and that helped him relax a little.

Only a faint glow from the cafe's interior lights lit the parking lot. Clarice pulled the heavy leather jacket more tightly around her and leaned against the back end of the Suburban. No cars passed by on the two lane road a few hundred yards away. And beyond the road, on the far side, was only blackness.

She felt exposed standing out there alone but she hadn't lied when she said she needed some air. Last night was still too fresh and vivid in her mind, and now Jonathon wanted them to spend another night together in close quarters? He said he wasn't expecting anything, and she knew he was telling her the truth. But what was the truth for her? Did she really *not* want a replay of last night?

Every nerve in her body came alive at the thought of feeling him touch her again, feeling him make love to her again. She'd been with him that whole day and even with all that he had told her, all the horror and fear it filled her with...she still couldn't stop thinking about last night in his arms.

But he still had so much left to tell her. He wasn't even close to finished. It was like he had opened Pandora's Box when he began explaining these things to her, and God only knew what horror would come out of that box next. Could she really be with him again without first knowing the rest? Last night, he hadn't begun to explain anything yet. There was nothing to hold her back or give her cause for doubts and uncertainties. But that wasn't the case tonight.

She could feel the shakes starting to come back but she resisted them. Her parents were dead. Aaron was dead. She was alone and she had to figure out how to deal with the worst of life on her own. She didn't have anyone to run to anymore, anyone to make her feel safe or tell her they would be there for her come hell or high

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water.

Last night Jonathon had said he would die before he let anyone hurt her. But in truth, she didn't know this man. His actions seemed to back up his words...but what if he had an ulterior motive? He knew everything about this insanity, all the way back to before she was even born. How did he know so much about it? Was he part of it? Had he worked for the people who'd done that to her mom? And if so...did he work for them still?

Clarice stared out into the darkness. What if he'd been lying when he said that she and Aaron didn't test positive for the...foreign gene? She searched the darkness as if the answers she was looking for could be found out there somewhere in the night.

She glanced back towards the cafe. Jonathon still sat at the table. Helen was pouring him a fresh cup of coffee. She watched him smile at the older woman. It was a genuine smile that told her he was a man who respected others, and could appreciate the friendliness of a stranger regardless of age, weight, race or gender. He reminded her of Aaron. A genuinely good and decent man.

"Who are you, Jonathon Lancaster?" She whispered.

As if he'd heard her speak, he turned his head slowly and looked out the window.

The man was on top of Clarice. She screamed and cried out in horror but she wasn't strong enough to push him off or make him stop. Jonathon stood in the doorway, watching, unable to enter the room, unable to tear the fucker off her. He beat at the door frame, screaming her name, but there was an invisible barrier he couldn't get through.

"Get off her, you motherfucker!" He screamed and beat his fists frantically against the door frame. Clarice's eyes met his and she cried out for him to help her. Her small hand stretched towards him, her eyes wide. She screamed suddenly as the man violated her young body, her eyes rolled back in her head and she began to convulse with fear and shock. And still the man didn't stop.

Jonathon screamed and cried, beating his fists until they were bloody. "I'm gonna kill you, motherfucker!" He yelled so loud it made his throat raw. He wanted to turn away, he didn't want to see this, but Clarice's eyes focused and she reached for him again. Please don't leave me, she mouthed the words to him, her eyes flooding with tears. Please don't leave me, Jonathon. Jonathon help me!

* * *

"Jonathon? Jonathon!"

Jonathon bolted forward in the easy chair, his body soaked with sweat, his heart pounding like a jack hammer. "Clarice!" He cried out loudly, his voice thick and strained with fear.

"Jonathon." She was standing before him, her hand on his arm, shaking him.

He blinked as the nightmare faded and reality set in. He stared at her through watery eyes, widened with fear and horror. She was all right. He *had* saved her. She hadn't been raped, her young body broken and permanently crippled. She was okay. She was safe.

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Without warning, he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her into his arms, hugging her tight, his face pressed against her stomach. His body trembled and shuddered with the memory of what had happened the first time that horrific night had played out. *Before* Jonathon had changed the course of events.

Her fingers combed slowly through his hair. "You were just dreaming." Clarice said softly. "That's all."

Jonathon squeezed his eyes shut and continued to hold onto her, the warmth of her stomach heating his cheek through the thin t-shirt. Suddenly, he jerked back as if she'd shocked him. He released her and sat back in the chair.

"Jonathon, what's wrong?" She asked. "What is it?"

He didn't answer as he stared blankly past her, his eyes deeply troubled.

"Is...is it him?" Clarice whispered unsteadily as she sank to her knees before him. "Is he coming?"

The depth of fear in her voice snapped Jonathon back to attention. "What?" He blinked, then shook his head. "No. No, we're safe. For now."

She looked at him for a long moment then stood up. She took hold of his hand. "You need some real rest and you can't get that by sleeping in the chair." She urged him to stand up. "Sleep in the bed." She hesitated then added quietly, "If you don't want me in the bed with you, I can take the chair. It's no big deal."

He looked at her, the memory of the nightmare still tormenting his mind. "Right now." He murmured. "I couldn't even think about sleeping without you next to me."

"What were you dreaming about?" She whispered.

He shook his head and drew her with him to the bed. "It doesn't matter now." He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. "It was just a dream." He breathed in her scent and closed his eyes. "Just a really bad dream...and nothing more."

He shed his jeans and t-shirt and crawled into bed in just his boxers. Clarice slid in next to him, the thin t-shirt she was wearing feeling like no barrier at all. She pressed up close to him and began stroking his chest and stomach with her fingertips. He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath and released it in a shuddery sigh as her touch began to heat him from the inside out.

A low groan surfaced in the back of his throat as she began to lightly kiss his chest, then down his stomach. She slid lower beneath the blankets and began to love on him in a way he'd never experienced before. He gripped the sheets on either side of him as his heart rate sky rocketed. Her tenderness and passion made him fall in love with her all over again. Tears burned in his eyes as he groaned deeply with pure pleasure and ecstasy.

When he couldn't take it any longer, he reached down and drew her up over his body, peeling off her t-shirt. She straddled him and welcomed him inside as she moved against him with a startling level of urgency. Small cries slipped from her lips as his own desperate need quickened their rhythm.

"Jonathon!" She cried out sharply when he'd taken her as far as she could go.

The feel of her body tightening and tensing then letting go brought him the rest of the way. He gasped loudly and pulled her down against him as their bodies shuddered against each other. He slowly rolled them over till

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he was covering her body with his then began to kiss her deeply, his hands caressing her damp, hot skin.

He broke their kiss with a small gasp and nuzzled her throat, sucking and nipping at the tender skin. She moaned softly and stroked his hair, his back. He moved lower still and suckled at her breasts, taking his time.

When his lips moved down her stomach, he paused, kissing her naval tenderly and with affection. He pressed his lips to her stomach and closed his eyes. There was no heartbeat yet, but soon. How would she feel when she found out? How would she feel when she learned the truth about him?

He shoved the unsettling thoughts away and accepted the blessing of the moment. And at this moment, she loved him. And she was safe. Unharmed. Untouched. He had saved her and never again would he question his decision to alter that fateful night.

13...The Cabin...

Yesterday, as Jonathon had begun to explain the chaos to her, Clarice's life had crossed a line it could never cross back over. A change had taken place that couldn't be changed back. On one hand, it was a terrible, horrifying alteration of life as she knew it. But on another...

She looked at Jonathon as he gazed down the road in front of them. The slight frown to his brow, the distant look in his eyes, told her his mind was miles ahead, mapping out the way for them. Her gaze slid down to his thighs, the strong muscles pressing firmly against the denim.

Her pulse quickened a bit. The memories of the last two nights filled her mind and gave her a strange sense of peace. How could the best and worst moments in a person's life happen simultaneously? How was it even possible?

It was strange how love could find you in the deepest, darkest corner of hell. Nothing could stop it if it took a notion to seek you out.

Love.

She rolled the word around on her tongue. It tasted sweet. It had a power that convinced her she could face the devil himself and overcome.

Jonathon's body was warm against hers as she sat next to him once again in the front seat of the Suburban. Yesterday she had pulled away when he'd begun to explain things to her, it had been too much at once, more than she could process. Even now she was still trying to process it all, knowing there was still much to come. But after last night, she knew she wouldn't pull away again, regardless of how horrific the rest of the story became. Jonathon was the only person left in this world that cared if she lived or died. He could be from another world himself and she would still love him and need him.

It seemed the miles flew by, one every microsecond. And it felt like only moments after getting back on the road, that Jonathon was steering them off the main paved road and onto a gravel road that led back into an ocean of towering evergreens.

A half mile up the gravel road, a metal gate blocked their way, locked with a heavy chain and solid padlock. The Chevy stopped and Jonathon got out. "When I open the gate." He told Clarice. "Drive the truck through."

She nodded and slid over behind the wheel.

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As he walked to the gate, Jonathon reached into his pocket and took out a key. He unlocked the padlock, unraveled the chain and pushed the gate open, holding it while Clarice drove the Suburban through. He reattached the chain and padlock then took his place back behind the wheel and headed them up the mountain.

Thick evergreen trees blocked out most of the morning light, creating a dark tunnel through the trees. Jonathon switched on the headlights as the Chevy's tires crunched and occasionally spun an extra turn on the gravel before catching traction again and moving them forward.

Clarice smiled when the thick trees began to break up and rays of sunlight sifted down between the branches, glittering off the frosted bows. Tiny, crystal clear waterfalls poured down rock embankments, cutting deep paths through the snow. The sun shimmered and sparkled across the surface of the snow.

"It's so beautiful." Clarice breathed.

Jonathon smiled and looked at her. "Beautiful indeed."

A little less than an hour after leaving the main road, Jonathon pulled the Chevy to a stop in front of the cabin. Except it actually looked more like a lodge. She sat forward. "This is it?" She looked at Jonathon. "When you said cabin...I thought maybe one room, possibly two, with an outhouse forty feet from the back door."

Jonathon just shrugged and smiled. "Well, my friend likes to be in luxury, even when he's roughing it."

"He has to be rich to afford all this."

"He's not hurting." Jonathon stepped out of the Chevy and stood for a moment, surveying the surrounding landscape. Clarice slid out behind him and followed his eyes as they swept in a slow circle. In every direction, just a few hundred yards from the cabin, towering pines and cedars grew in thick masses, spreading away and further up the mountain.

"Why did you bring us here?" Clarice asked quietly. "I mean here specifically?"

"It's away from people." Jonathon spoke low, thoughtful. "Whatever happens, there'll be no witnesses. No one asking questions. If we win this fight, we can dispose of the body and no one will ever know what happened."

"And if we don't win?" Clarice whispered.

Jonathon released a slow breath. "Then it won't matter." He looked at her, then turned back to the Chevy. "We should go inside." He lifted the sports bag out of the truck. "There's meat in the freezers. I could do for a home cooked meal."

Clarice didn't move as he started for the large porch. "Is...Alec our only threat?" she asked slowly, halting Jonathon in his tracks. "Or is someone else out there too...hunting us?"

Jonathon turned slowly and stared back at her for a long moment in silence. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." He murmured, then urged gently. "Come inside, Clarice. Lets just do this one step at a time."

The dead man's vacant eyes stared blankly at Davie Williams. At eight years old, Davie had never seen a dead body before, except once when his parents took him to his Uncle Henry's funeral. And even then, his mom had pulled him away before he could really look inside the coffin and see his dead uncle. But this was

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different. This dead man was in the river and he had three holes in his head.

Davie squatted to his heels on the edge of the bank and studied the body. He was sure the holes were bullet holes. Sometimes, when he was at his friend Jared's house, he would watch CSI. His own mom wouldn't let him watch that stuff because she said it was too violent and gory. But Davie thought it was neat. And he was pretty sure this guy had been shot.

The body bobbed in the dirty, swirling water. It had lodged in a fallen tree whose roots were still attached to the bank. The flood waters had washed away the bank beneath the tree and caused it to fall down. Davie stood up and went to the trunk of the tree still anchored to land and crawled up on it. There were a lot of small limbs jutting out all over the tree trunk and Davie stood up slowly, using the limbs to steady himself as he inched out towards where the body was stuck.

The tree swayed in the water, making it hard for Davie to stay on his feet, but he managed. As he neared the end of the tree, it began to sink a little into the water. He stopped and craned his neck to get a closer view of the body. It was wedged in by its arm.

"Cool." Davie whispered. He took one more step closer to the body when a man suddenly shouted out at him from the bank.

"Davie!" There was fear and alarm in his dad's voice. "What the hell are you doing? Get back here! Now!"

Davie gripped one of the limbs to steady himself as he looked back at his dad. "Dad!" He yelled, then pointed to the dead body. "Look!"

Grant Williams looked to where his son was pointing. The dead man's body lifted and sank as the flood water swirled around it. The three holes in his forehead were clear and evident.

"Davie!" Grant yelled, moving towards the tree trunk. "Get back here! Hurry up, son!"

Davie worked his way back to the bank and hopped down off the tree trunk. "He was shot wasn't he, dad?"

Grant swallowed thickly and grabbed his son's arm, pulling him back up the bank away from the river, glancing back uneasily. "Looks that way." he murmured.

"What do we do?" Davie asked, excited.

Grant urged his son up the embankment, helping him up a steep incline. "I think we better call the police."

"Awesome." Davie grinned and shot one last look back at the dead man floating in the water by the fallen tree.

Chapter 9

Jonathon spent the morning familiarizing Clarice with the cabin and surrounding grounds. He pointed out a man made hiking trail that led away from the rear of the cabin and disappeared up through the trees. He explained that the path led up the mountain to a gorge which had a rope bridge that stretched across to the other side. The path on the opposite side of the gorge then wound back down into civilization.

Standing at the head of the path, Clarice asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I want you to know the layout." He said. "When it comes right down to a face off, we can't know what's going to happen. We'll make our plans and prepare to fight...but if things go wrong, you need to know how to get out of here, and where to go."

"If things go wrong." Clarice whispered and looked at Jonathon. "You mean, if you get killed."

Jonathon stared back at her. He could feel how much that prospect terrified her. She loved him more than life, and would give hers to save him. And that was something he couldn't allow her to do.

"Yeah, that's what I mean." He said. "And if that happens, you grab one of the guns if you possibly can and get the hell out of here. Can you shoot?"

"No." she said quietly, a numbness to her voice.

"I'll teach you." He said. " Now if Alec comes after you, shoot him in the head." He tapped his temple. "The *head*. Don't waste ammo on body shots."

Clarice turned away. "Stop it." She whispered. "I don't need to hear this because you're not gonna die. You'll be right here with me all the way."

Jonathon grabbed her arm and pulled her around, a bit forcefully. "You *do* need to hear it, Clarice." He insisted tightly. "You have to be prepared for anything. Because I can die just as easily as you."

Her eyes slowly watered as she stared back at him, hard and determined. "Are you sure about that?" She whispered thickly.

"Sure about what?" He frowned, uncertain.

"That you can die as easily as I can?"

His frown deepened. "What are you talking about." He asked slowly, cautiously.

"What am I talking about?" She grabbed his arm and shoved up his sleeve, pulling the bandage down to reveal smooth skin, no wound. "I'm talking about *this*." She released his arm suddenly and took a step back, her hands shaking. "I saw the gash....and all the blood. But now, there's nothing. No sign you were ever cut by that knife. People don't heal like that."

"Clarice..." Jonathon stepped towards her.

She took another step back. "I'm not stupid, Jonathon." Her voice trembled. "I can see that things don't add up with you. The way you *convinced* that guy to change rigs with you. How you knew Alec was coming when

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we were leaving the campground." She licked her lips and hugged herself tightly. "The way you look at me so intently sometimes, like you can see my thoughts...feel what I feel." The tears began to slide down her face. "How...how you were there twenty years ago, in our house, at just the right moment to save us from those men."

Jonathon could only stare at her. How had he not picked up on this? That she was figuring him out more and more by the moment?

"Did you really expect me to think you were simply an average man trying to save me?" she shook her head slowly as more tears spilled down her cheeks. "You can't really believe I'm that naïve."

Jonathon held her eyes for a long moment then spoke quietly. "No, I don't." He combed his fingers through his black hair. "There are things I should have told you before now, and I was going to get to it. But I guess there's no time like the present."

"No." Clarice said thickly. "It isn't necessary. You don't have to tell me the details."

He swallowed tightly. "But you have the right to know who I really am."

Clarice stepped forward. Her hands were still shaking when she took hold of his. "I *know* who you are, Jonathon." She whispered. "All I need to know, anyway. It doesn't matter to me why you're the way you are, or why you can do the things you do. You've proved to me over and over again that you're someone I can trust." She stepped closer till her body was touching his. She looked up in his eyes. "That you're someone I can love. I've lost everything that mattered to me in this life. And I refuse to lose you too just because you're not like other people. I don't want you to be like other people." She slid her arms around him and pressed her face into his chest. "You make me feel safe."

His arms wrapped around her and pulled her tight against him. He kissed the top of her head and closed his eyes. *You make me feel safe too.*

She tilted her face up as he looked down at her. "It scares me when you talk about dying. Please tell me that you *can't* die as easily as me. That you're...as indestructible as Alec is."

"Clarice." Jonathon shook his head slowly. "I'm not like Alec. I can heal from non fatal wounds, and perhaps even bullets to the body. But if I get shot in the head..." He released a slow breath. "I'm not coming back from it, whether the bullet is removed or not."

Tears trickled down Clarice's face. "Then *don't* get shot in the head."

The corner of his mouth twitched with a smile. "I'll do my damndest to avoid it." He promised as he leaned down and kissed her lips.

The tension of the topic filled them with the desperate need to be close to one another, to make each other forget for a space the horror that lurked so close and threatened everything they held sacred.

In the large king sized bed in the master bedroom, Jonathon made love to Clarice again. And somehow, it felt even more intimate, more passionate, more free than anytime before. But he realized that this time, there were fewer secrets between them. She was beginning to understand who and what he was, and it wasn't driving her away from him but rather drawing her closer. And that understanding linked him to her in a way that wasn't there before. It opened the door to their passion and fueled it as powerfully as gasoline on an open fire.

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Long after the heat of their hunger had been cooled, they laid together on top of the blankets, naked and sweaty. They said very little, simply held each other, lightly caressing one another's body, savoring the taste of their love still on their lips, the feel of their love still echoing through them, the scent of their love still strong on the air.

Clarice turned and pressed her damp, heated body against Jonathon's. "I love you." She whispered against his damp chest.

It was the truth. The sweet, mind blowing truth. And that's all he needed to know to win this battle. To win the war. It wasn't his weapons or his abilities that would bring them victory. It was her love for him that would give him the power to save her. To save *them*.

His arms tightened around her. "I love you, too."

...Before...

JONATHON

The boy whimpered in his sleep and tossed and turned, his face pinched with tension. His body trembled and a fit of shakes hit him. Foamy saliva formed at the corners of his mouth and trickled out. Johnny crept across the floor of the boy's room, trying to be as silent as possible. He couldn't let Victor find out he was coming in here at night. Victor didn't want him to be friends with the other kids.

The boy's shakes worsened and he began to thrash a little. Johnny crawled on the bed and grabbed the younger boy, hugging him from behind in a protective, soothing embrace. He held the boy tight around the chest as he shook and thrashed. "It's okay." He whispered. "He's not here. He can't hurt you right now."

The younger boy slowly began to calm until he was laying still in Johnny's arms, his breathing leveling out as a fitful sleep came over him. Johnny closed his eyes and let his mind go, drifting away with the boy to where the girl was. They stood together and watched her sleeping peacefully, snuggled deep in her soft blankets, her family in the rooms next to hers. The boy walked into the room and looked down at her, then raised his eyes to Johnny. Johnny could hear his words though he never spoke.

Something bad is going to happen to her.

"How do you know?" Johnny whispered.

I feel it. It's coming...soon.

"Can you save her?" Johnny asked as he looked at the innocent girl sleeping, a tiny smile on her lips. Johnny had come here with the boy before, he had watched the girl sleep. He was only twelve, and she was just ten, but he loved her already. When she slept, he could see the beautiful woman she would grow in to.

No.

Johnny looked at the boy, fear settling in his heart.

But you can.

"How?" Johnny asked.

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You have to learn how to do it first...then you can save her.

"Do what?"

Jump.

14...Security...

The shooting range out behind the cabin was small, the targets barely fifty feet away. But if it came down to a shooting match, Jonathon didn't expect that Clarice's target would be any further away. In fact, he would likely be much closer. He handed her the Beretta Storm Px4. It was a small, compact handgun with a powerful punch. The size would make it easier for her to grip and handle more accurately.

"I've never shot a gun before." Clarice held the subcompact gun tentatively in her hands.

Jonathon positioned it in her grip, showed her how to hold it properly and pointed it towards the target. "Just aim and shoot. Line up the sights with the area on the target you want to hit, keep your grip steady and squeeze the trigger."

Doubt darkened Clarice's eyes as she attempted to follow his instructions. She raised the gun and aimed it at the target fifty feet away. Her hands wavered as she pulled the trigger. The gun fired and bucked in her hand. The shot went awry, missing the target altogether.

Clarice lowered the gun slowly and stared at the untouched target. "If it comes to shooting my way out of this." Clarice looked up at Jonathon. "I'm a goner."

He grinned and shook his head. "No, you're not." He had her aim the gun again and stood behind her, his hands covering hers, helping her keep them steady. His lips were close to her ear and he spoke to her softly. "Just imagine for a moment that someone has a gun pointed at my head. The only thing standing between me and a bullet in the brain...is the accuracy of your shot. You're my only hope. If your shot isn't dead on...then *I'm* dead." He drew his hands away from hers and stepped back just a little. "Hold the gun steady and squeeze the trigger with only your finger. Don't use your whole hand to pull back, it'll throw off your shot. That target out there...that's my executioner. Now, if you really love me the way you say you do...you're not gonna let him take me away from you the way your family was taken away. You can save me. I have faith in you." He stepped in close and whispered sharply in her ear. "Now *kill* the motherfucker."

Clarice's face hardened as her hands steadied and she squeezed the trigger. The gun blasted. A hole ripped through the forehead of the paper target fifty feet away.

"Now that's what I'm talking about." Jonathon nodded and smiled. "See, you just needed the proper inspiration."

Clarice lowered the gun and turned to face him. "I could do it." She said slowly, her voice numb. "I could really kill someone...if it meant saving you."

"That's what I'm counting on." Jonathon leaned down and kissed her, then drew back and turned her back towards the target. "Now you're gonna show me again how dedicated you are to keeping me alive."

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Two uniformed officers stood nearly chest deep in the freezing cold muddy flood waters working together to dislodge the dead body from between the limbs of the fallen tree. Grant and Davie Williams stood far back on the bank watching as more officers waded in to help.

Lieutenant Norman Ackles barked an order at one of the officers still on dry land. "Call the coroner's office! Get him down here now!"

The officer nodded and spoke into the radio attached to the shoulder of his uniform.

From atop the steep embankment that the flood waters had eroded, Victor Orlando stood in silence among other onlookers, watching the activity, eyes narrow and interested.

The officers finally worked the body loose and hauled it back to land, laying it out on the bank.

Orlando gazed down at Alec's motionless, seemingly lifeless body. Three prominent holes were evident in his forehead. Jonathon had been taking no chances. Alec stared blankly at the sky. Even from the embankment Orlando could see the milky glaze over his eyes. If he hadn't known better, he could have believed he was truly dead. But soon, when the bullets were removed, Alec's eyes would be clear again, and his mind would lock onto the girl...and he would lead them straight to Jonathon.

"Soon." Orlando murmured as he gazed down at Alec. "Soon you'll be on your way again, sniffing them out like a good little blood hound."

A female onlooker standing a few feet away glanced at Orlando and frowned as if the man were out of his mind.

"What are we going to do when he finds us?" Clarice asked with a faint tremor to her voice. "I feel like we should be doing something."

Her and Jonathon were on the front porch of the cabin. Jonathon rested against the railing as Clarice leaned against him, her back to his chest. His arms were around her waist. He wore his shoulder holster with the 9mm tucked in snugly.

When Jonathon didn't answer immediately, she turned her face up to his. "Do you have a plan to..." She faltered. Alec had brutally murdered her family, and was now hunting her. But she wondered whose fault it really was. A part of her pitied him. After all the horror he'd brought to her life...she still pitied him.

"A plan to what?" Jonathon asked low.

Clarice blinked away the thoughts and added thickly, "To kill him." She looked away, staring out at the thick trees surrounding them. "Do you even know how?"

"Yeah." Jonathon whispered. "I know how. And the plan...is just to get him here."

Clarice sat forward and turned her body so she was facing him. "That's the extent of the plan?" She asked doubtfully. "Shouldn't...shouldn't we have some kind of alarm system to let us know when he gets here?"

Jonathon touched a fingertip to her lips and smiled. "Now you're thinking." He stood up off the rail. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

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He led her inside the cabin, through the kitchen and into the large walk-in pantry. At the far end was a shelf with items of food on it. Jonathon reached into a concealed crevice and she heard a latch pop. The tall shelf popped forward an inch or so and Jonathon pulled it open like a door. He reached inside and flipped a switch.

Bright lights illuminated a set of concrete steps that led down into an expansive basement.

The full length of one entire wall was nothing but a mass of video screens and computer panels.

"What is all this?" Clarice looked at Jonathon.

"State of the art security system." He said. "Every inch of this property within a five mile radius is being monitored as we speak. Anyone or anything of human origin pass through the radar system, and the alarm is triggered." He turned away from the monitors and indicated the rest of the large basement. "This can also serve as a panic room. At the top of the stairs is a steel door that will close when programmed to. This entire basement is impenetrable. The cabin could burn down around it and anyone inside this room would remain unharmed. He turned and nodded towards a set of computer screens apart from the ones monitoring the grounds outside. "These screens here are for interior surveillance. If you were locked down here, you could keep an eye on anyone in any room within the cabin."

He led her to another area and pressed a button on the wall. Panels slid open revealing a variety of weapons, handguns mostly with a couple rifles and a shotgun. At the bottom of the panel below the weapons were hand radios that looked very expensive. Jonathon picked one them up.

"You can reach out of the mountains with these. Call for help if necessary."

"Who is this friend of yours?" Clarice murmured. "And why would he have all this up here in the mountains?"

"He likes to be prepared."

"For what?" She asked quietly. "World war three?"

Jonathon shrugged. "If necessary." He met her unyielding eyes. "He's from the Institute. And when you spend your life working for people who won't think twice about erasing you if they decide you've become a security risk...you want eyes in the back of your head and weapons in your hands."

"I get it." Clarice murmured, looking around. "Does your friend know you're here now?"

"Yeah." He looked at the concrete floor then back up to Clarice. "He suggested I come here. It's secluded, and it gives us extra eyes to warn us when anyone gets near."

Clarice met his eyes. "Can he be trusted?"

"Yes." Jonathon said firmly, without a shred of doubt in his voice.

15...Like Sands Through The Hourglass...

The morgue was dim, quiet. The only light drifting out of the small office adjacent to the autopsy room was from a small desk lamp. The assistant M.E. sat at the desk filling out forms, hunched over, head down, thoroughly focused on his task at hand.

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Orlando moved quietly past the small office and through the autopsy room to the examination table in the center. A white sheet covered the dead body laying on the table. Orlando peeled the sheet away from the cadaver's face.

"You've been at rest long enough." Orlando murmured. "But just so we don't lose track of you again..." He withdrew an instrument that resembled an injection gun, but with a wider circular tip. He snapped a tiny round, flat object no bigger than a small watch battery into the tip, carefully turned Alec's head to the right and pressed the tip of the gun against the nape of his neck and squeezed the trigger.

Orlando turned Alec's head back to its original position and pocketed the instrument. He glanced towards the office. The assistant was oblivious to his presence. Orlando looked at the tray next to the exam table. A variety of surgical instruments were laid out on the tray. He picked up a pair of toothed forceps and leaned over Alec's head.

"Time to wake up." He whispered as he slowly inserted the forceps into one of the bullet holes, digging down deeper and deeper until he reached the bullet lodged in Alec's brain.

Clarice awoke with a tightness in her chest, her head throbbing. Beside her, Jonathon slept soundly. As she turned over, he shifted and she knew he would be wide awake in a moment's notice if she needed him.

She let him sleep and crawled out of bed. A dark grayness covered the open grounds between the cabin and the tree line, and beneath the trees a heavy darkness. Clarice stood at the bedroom window, staring out at the tall trees, just shadows against a dark gray sky.

Her heart thumped violently against her ribcage. She could feel Aaron again, the way she did back at the campgrounds. It had went away for awhile and she hadn't felt anything. She'd thought that was worse than feeling the bad stuff...but she wondered now if that were true. The anger and rage and torment she could sense in him was tearing her apart. What was happening to her? Was she really feeling what Aaron was feeling? Was he really in hell?

She glanced at Jonathon's sleeping form. He'd said what she was feeling was just her own grief and pain...but she knew the difference between grief and the intimate connection she'd shared with Aaron. And if it wasn't Aaron she was feeling then...

A shuddered rippled through her and she hugged herself tightly. The air inside the bedroom was cold, but it wasn't the chill of the winter night that had her shaking. Was it possible that she was connecting to Alec as she had with Aaron? If Jonathon was right and they had been triplets, then it could happen. But if that was what was happening here...then Alec was the one in hell. His own personal hell. But why did he hate his family so much? To the degree of brutally murdering them? And relentlessly hunting her down?

"Baby, what is it?" Jonathon mumbled, sleep still grogging his senses.

Clarice returned to the bed and crawled beneath the warm blankets, cuddling close to his body. She kissed his forehead and laid his head down on her chest. "Nothing, darling. Go back to sleep."

"You sure?" He managed softly as sleep drew him back into its embrace.

She held him close and pressed her lips to his hair. "I'm sure." She murmured. "Everything's fine." But laying there awake alone, without Jonathon's assurances to comfort her, a numbing fear gripped her heart. Would

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they make it out of this alive? Or would the nightmare swallow them up as it had Aaron and her parents?

Why, she wondered again, would Alec want to hurt them? How had he even been aware of them?

She laid back on the pillows and stared at the dark ceiling, her fingers slowly stroking through Jonathon's hair. What had they done to Alec that he was in so much emotional and mental torment? She realized that she needed Jonathon to tell her the rest of the story before time ran out. And she could feel time slipping away, faster and faster with each passing moment, like sand in an hourglass.

She wondered, if she could feel Alec so strong...could he feel her too? Could he sense how scared she was? Is that how he kept finding her...by the link through their minds? That wasn't something she could turn off. There was no switch.

Clarice shoved the dark thoughts away and slid down in the blankets, pressing up against Jonathon. Panic pulsed at the edge of her mind, but if she let it in, it would consume her and she would be no good to Jonathon. She had to be strong and keep her head in the game. If she sacrificed faith for hopelessness, she would lose her will to fight, to survive. And in turn, lose Jonathon. And losing Jonathon was not an option.

"What do you mean he just disappeared?" Harry Olson had been a medical examiner for over ten years and not once had a dead body just disappeared from his morgue without a trace. "A dead body doesn't just get up and walk out."

His assistant, Kenny Mayes, looked dumbfounded as he tried to make sense of the missing body. Kenny was young, early twenties, and had been working with Harry for barely two weeks now. So far, this was the first body Kenny had lost.

"I-I don't know what to say, sir." Kenny was flustered. "I was here all night, right there in the office."

Harry looked at the empty exam table, then at the tray of utensils. The toothed forceps were laying askew from the other instruments and had blood on them. Three bloody bullets lay on the tray as well.

Harry frowned. "Did you remove the bullets from the body?"

"Huh?" Kenny followed his boss' eyes to the tray. "I didn't do that, sir."

"Well, someone did." Harry said slowly. "And I don't think it was the corpse."

The uneasy feeling settled deep in Jonathon's gut the moment he opened his eyes. He knew the source and that put him even more on edge. He looked at Clarice asleep beside him. The sense that her sleep had been troubled was strong with him. But it made sense if she was beginning to feel what he was feeling. He'd hoped they would have more time, but maybe it was better this way. Just deal with it and move on.

He refused to consider the reality that they might not be alive to move on.

The morning was cold and a light snow was falling outside the window. Jonathon considered getting up but the heat of Clarice's body convinced him to crawl deeper into the blankets. He slid his arms around her and pulled her against him. There was no way to predict how things would go down once the shit hit the fan. If

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after everything, he lost Clarice...

He forcefully resisted the thought and held Clarice tighter. He would save her. Again.

"Jonathon?" Clarice murmured and turned into his embrace. Sleep weighed her eyelids and thickened her voice. "Is it time to get up?"

Jonathon pulled her closer and kissed her hair. "Not yet, baby." He whispered. "Right now, I just want to be right here under the blankets with you."

Something in his tone cleared away the cobwebs of sleep and Clarice opened her eyes wider. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." He kissed her lips. "Everything is fine. I just don't feel like leaving this bed, or you, just yet."

Clarice smiled and kissed the center of his chest. "What *do* you feel like doing then?"

With his fingertip, he tilted her face up and kissed her again, with more passion and conviction this time. When his lips finally left hers, he slowly drifted down her body, kissing and caressing her in places no man had touched in a very long time, driving her to the edge of ecstasy then drawing her back only to drive her there again. By the time he came to her, a flaming heat warmed her skin and her hungry body was arching to him, welcoming him in.

They clung to each other with their hearts as well as their bodies, the fear of losing out on the chance to spend a lifetime together heightening the force of their lovemaking.

Jonathon wasn't aware of Clarice's tears until he shuddered with sweet release and sank down against her body, his own body damp and trembling.

She touched his face, caressed it with her fingertips and kissed his mouth with trembling lips. "I'm so scared." She choked softly, her throat swollen with tears. "I'm so scared I'm going to lose you."

He kissed the tears from her cheeks, and caressed her face with his hands. "You're not going to lose me." He whispered with a rough hoarseness to his voice. "And I won't lose you. We're going to make it, Clarice. We're going to come out of this together. And I plan to spend the rest of forever holding you in my arms just like this, and loving you for all I'm worth." He kissed her mouth lightly, tugging gently at her lower lip. "Sound good to you?"

Fresh tears slipped from her eyes. "I like that plan."

"That's my girl." He murmured, dropping a warm passionate kiss on her lips. Clarice's arms slid around his waist and held him tight as their kiss deepened with an assurance of a future beyond this moment.

Chapter 10

16...Shot Through The Heart...

The fact that he killed people for a living and his name was Hunter was pure coincidence. He was quite certain when his mother held her newborn son in her arms and decided to name him Hunter, she didn't foresee his future career as a professional killer. But that's what he was and he was a force to be reckoned with. He could take a life, snuff it out, and walk away guiltless. Yet for the incredible threat he was to his targets, he appeared frighteningly normal. He was a good looking man who knew how to dress. His manners were impeccable and women found him refreshingly respectful and chivalrous. Even the liberated women couldn't help but be drawn to his charms.

But though one might think this all an act, a carefully construed facade to fool those around him, Hunter was not an actor or an impostor. He was all he appeared to be and then some. Killing was simply his job. It was what he was good at. A talent he was born with. He didn't hate his fellow man, or harbor resentments towards his mother, and he certainly wasn't infected with a diseased mind that drew sexual gratification from torturing and butchering other human beings.

Hunter was an all around good guy who simply made a living as an assassin. Had he been married, he could've easily maintained a normal family life without his wife and children, friends or neighbors ever suspecting he was anything other than a loving husband and father. Because it wouldn't have been a ruse. He could see himself falling in love, raising healthy, well adjusted children. He wasn't a psychopath or even a sociopath. He didn't just assimilate into society as a fully functional human being, as a criminal profiler might deduce. He *was* a fully functional human being.

He was just good at his job. And he enjoyed his job. Not because killing excited him, but because he saw it as an art. Much the same way a true fighter will fight to refine his skill rather than for the thrill of simply beating the shit out of another person. Those who did it for the thrill and excitement of harming a fellow human being was not a true artist, rather a sick son of a bitch.

Hunter was not a sick son of a bitch.

The wind blew through his neatly cropped sandy blond hair as he sped down the two lane road in his vintage 1964 Shelby Cobra convertible. He would only drive the classics. Modern cars repulsed him. They had no shape, no character. Classic cars had heart and personality. You didn't treat a classic like a piece of machinery, but rather like a lover. A sweet classic car was quicker to create a sexual charge in him than taking a life. When he ran his hand down over the smooth swelling curve of the Shelby's fender, it was akin to caressing the soft curving hip of a beautiful woman.

At times, while caressing the car, he'd actually developed an erection. But not once during or after killing another person, whether male or female, had he felt the urge to masturbate. He might have an unusual attraction to his car, but he was no sexual sadist.

Hunter smiled at the thought as it passed through his mind. He wasn't plagued with twisted, violent sexual fantasies. He might fantasize about having sex with a beautiful woman on the sloping curve of the Shelby Cobra's hood, but he was certain that engaging in sex on the hood of a muscle car was a common male fantasy. So it didn't disturb or worry him.

He glanced at the tracing device secured to his dash. There were no blinking lights. No indication that Orlando's blood hound was on the move yet.

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He rounded a curve and instantly shifted his foot from the gas to the brake, slowing ever so slightly as he spotted the woman thumbing for a ride. She was tall and slender but with full, not too big, just the right size breasts. She was wearing faded denim jeans with a frayed slit just below her left butt cheek, showing just enough of her firm butt to be appealing but not vulgar. She wore a fleece lined denim jacket over a white button up shirt that was unbuttoned just enough to reveal the swell of nicely tanned tit flesh beneath.

Her long, honey blond hair swirled on the light breeze as she spotted him and emphatically waved her thumb in the air. At her feet was a small army green back pack. When she noticed the car slowing, she grabbed it up and trotted towards him.

His eyes drank her in, the way her soft hair flowed in the breeze, the gentle rise and fall to her lovely breasts as she hurried towards the Shelby Cobra. His crotch swelled with a fierce erection.

About time the woman reached the hood of the car, he remembered the handgun laying on the passenger seat and quickly stuffed it away beneath the driver seat. The woman smiled as she approached the passenger door. She was pretty in a natural way. He was as repulsed by plastic women as much as he was by modern cars. But this woman was all natural.

"Hey, can I catch a ride?" She asked, already reaching for the door handle. Her face was flushed from the biting chill on the air. Even if he hadn't found her devastatingly sexy, he would have still offered her a ride. After all, he was a good guy and believed whole heartedly in helping out his fellow man, or woman.

"Hop in." He offered her just enough of a smile to show himself friendly. She was certainly no stranger to men lusting after her, and he was sure that many of those men had been lewd and vulgar in their behavior. He hated to admit it, being of the same gender, but his fellow man could be rather primitive when dealing with the fairer sex. A woman like this, in fact every woman, deserved to be treated like a lady and with respect. He might be a professional killer, but he was also one hundred percent gentleman as well.

The woman opened the door and slid smoothly into the passenger seat as if she were tailor made for this car. She stuffed her pack down between her feet then closed the door and turned to him. She held out a slender, pretty hand. "I'm Charlie, well Charlene, but my friends call me Charlie. At least they would if I had any." She laughed lightly at her own joke and Hunter smiled. She wasn't just sexy, she was adorable as well. He imagined if he ever did fall in love and settle down, it would be with a woman like this.

He shook her hand. "You can call me Bob." He said. Bob wasn't his name, but he liked it. It was a very nonthreatening name. And the last thing he wanted people, especially this woman, to see him as was threatening. "So do I call you Charlene...or Charlie?"

"Well." Charlie smiled thoughtfully. "Since you're rescuing me from a long freezing walk up the mountain, I think you've earned the right to call me Charlie."

She laughed again. And once again, Hunter found her adorable. She was beautiful to say the least, but she didn't have the characteristics of a woman who relied on her looks to gain her leverage. This woman had to know she was truly a sight, but still she didn't possess that look in her eyes that just assumed he wanted her, that every man would want her. She was light hearted and free, much like a child but with all the maturity of an intelligent, secure woman.

Good God, he thought, *I think I'm falling in love*. He'd never had this reaction to a woman before, even the ones he'd truly enjoyed in bed and out. This one was unlike any he had ever met. For the first time ever, he actually dreaded the fact that he was on a job.

Hour of Darkness

"Do you always drive a convertible in the winter, Bob?" She asked lightly, putting emphasis on his name as if she truly enjoyed saying it. But then, who didn't enjoy saying the name Bob? It had pop.

He smiled. "I like the fresh air."

She looked thoughtful as she cocked her pretty face to the side. "You know what, Bob? So do I. I think I will get me a convertible and drive all over in the winter."

He chuckled. He couldn't help it. This woman had him thoroughly mesmerized.

"Of course," She went on to say. "I might have to steal one since I don't have any money. Or," She looked at him with deliberate sweetness. "I could just con a handsome guy into driving me. Say, a guy named *Bob*."

"When and where, darlin'." He said and flashed her a genuine smile. She laughed and met his eyes, holding them for a brief moment. He had learned to read people, it was part of his talent, and her eyes were telling him she found him as appealing and intriguing as he found her to be. He thought about asking her if she'd ever fantasized about having sex on the hood of a classic convertible car before but decided that might be a bit too forward this early in their relationship. Although something about her told him she wouldn't be offended and might, in fact, take him up on it.

That thought enforced the pressure in his crotch. He was almost disgusted with himself for sporting an erection as if his only working thought about this woman was bedding her down. When in truth, he could spend hours, days, in her company just listening to her talk and laugh. Yes, he wanted to take her to bed, that was a given. But it wasn't all sexual. He could see them cuddling in one another's arms after a heated session of love making, talking or not, just basking in each other's presence.

"Do you live out here?" The woman asked, bumping him out of his drifting thoughts.

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. The tightness in his jeans was becoming a bit uncomfortable. "No." He said. "Just out here on business." Before she could ask him about his business, he added, "How about you? You headed home or something?"

She shrugged. "Or something." Then smiled. "A guy I know got me a job at a small ski lodge. I wasn't doing anything else at the time, so I thought it might be fun."

"A guy." He raised one eyebrow and looked at her. "Boyfriend?" An unexpected sinking feeling weighed down his gut.

"No." She laughed softly. "He was just a friend from college. He knew I was looking for work."

"Just a friend, huh?" He nodded slowly. "Does *he* know he's just a friend?"

"Of course." She laughed again. "Why do you ask?"

"And he's okay with that?"

"Yes." She smiled.

He shrugged. "Well, I don't know if I believe that."

She looked at him with wide, inquisitive eyes. "Why would you say that, Bob?"

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"Well." He glanced at her and smiled charmingly. "Because I can't imagine any guy being okay with having you as just a friend."

She smiled and narrowed her eyes a bit. "But I thought we were just friends."

He didn't miss the probing tone in her voice or the feelers in her words. "I don't remember establishing that." He said quietly, a smile tugging the corner of his mouth as he stared straight ahead. He knew where this report was taking them and he couldn't say he wasn't in favor.

Charlie smiled and sat back against the passenger seat, chewing her thumbnail thoughtfully.

He chuckled low and shook his head. "That didn't sound like a cheesy line." He gave Charlie a genuine charming smile. "Don't get me wrong. Any guy would be lucky to have you as a friend. I didn't mean to imply anything chauvinistic or sexist."

She returned a genuine sweet smile. "I know that isn't what you meant, Bob."

"Good." He said. "Because I want you to know I'm not that kind of guy."

Charlie chewed her lower lip then glanced at him and smiled again. God, she had the most tantalizing smile. "So you're not attracted to me, Bob?"

"I didn't say that." He chuckled.

"So what would you say?" She asked softly, almost hesitantly. It was clear to him that she wasn't in the habit of coming onto strangers, and that her attraction to him was as startling and powerful to her as what he was experiencing.

She was in uncharted territory and she could be spooked easily if he came on too strong. He had no desire to take advantage of her, but neither did he want to scare her away. He was as eager to explore this sudden attraction as she was, but he had to proceed cautiously.

"Well." He said slowly. "I would say that I think you're a very lovely, charming woman that I, indeed, find quite attractive. But where some beautiful women are the type that men only want for one thing...you make a man want more than just that one thing." He looked at her. "You make a man just want to be with you, even when sex isn't an option."

She stared at him, a smile playing around her full, kissable lips.

"Is that saying too much?" He asked, knowing the answer before she gave it.

"No." She spoke quietly and leaned across the tiny space between them. "Just the right amount." She kissed the corner of his mouth and for a moment he thought she was going to take it further, but she drew back and sat straight in her seat, a cute smile on her lips.

He licked his lips and smiled and looked at the road ahead of them. To his surprise, that tiny kiss affected him more powerfully than any full on oral sex he'd received from other women. And some had been damn good. But nothing had ever done this to him.

This was far from over. And he eagerly awaited the next move.

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He glanced at the tracer device. It was still dark and quiet.

He willed it to remain so.

"I need you to tell me the rest of the story."

Clarice cuddled next to Jonathon on the sofa. A roaring fire blazed in the fireplace. Outside, the snow had stopped falling and the air had turned intensely brittle.

"I don't really want to know anymore." She said quietly. "But if I die at Alec's hands, I at least want to know why."

Jonathon tightened his arm around her shoulders. "You're not gonna die." He murmured against her hair.

"Tell me anyway." She whispered.

She felt a tension grip Jonathon. He didn't have to say it aloud for her to understand that the story would only get worse. And he loved her enough not to want to drop anymore weight on her shoulders, especially right now. But he surely knew she would eventually ask him to tell her the rest of it.

When he didn't start in right away, she asked in a low voice, "What happened to Alec that he would become..." She faltered momentarily. "...a brutal killer?"

There was pity in Jonathon's voice when he finally spoke, but also a trace of bitterness and anger. "Alec...was my friend once." He spoke low, his eyes sad and distant, then added in a whisper, "In another life." He cleared his throat as it began to thicken with emotion, then looked at Clarice. "He could feel you...almost from the start. When I was just twelve, Alec showed you to me for the first time." He gazed at Clarice and the gold specs glowed. "That's when I fell in love with you."

Clarice gazed back at him, her eyes warm. "How did he show me to you?"

"I used to..." Jonathon faltered as dark memories clouded his eyes and dimmed the glow in them. "I used to sneak into his room sometimes, especially on the nights after..." He looked away and blinked at a sudden well of tears. "After a particularly bad session."

"What do you mean a bad session?" Uncertainty laced her words.

When Jonathon looked at her again, his eyes were wet and shimmering. "He was put through endless tests...far beyond what you could imagine. Every day..." He released a breath. "...was a living hell for him. I would hear him afterwards, in his room, thrashing about in his sleep, in physical and mental torment."

Clarice stared at him as he talked. Her eyes focused and brimming with tears. He could feel her sympathy for her tortured brother. It was sympathy Alec deserved.

"I would go to his room." Jonathon said. "And I would put my arms around him until he calmed." Tears slid down Jonathon's face. His eyes were distant as he stared into a past that had been wiped away. "And that's when he began to take me to you."

"Take you to me?" She whispered thickly. Her tears flowed freely.

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"In his mind." He said. "We would stand next to your bed and watch you sleep. You were...the prettiest thing I'd ever seen." He focused and met her glossy eyes. "I couldn't help falling in love with you."

Clarice sat up straighter, an uncertain frown pinching her brow.

"What is it?" Jonathon asked.

"I..." Clarice's frown deepened. "I used to dream that Aaron would come to my room and watch over me as I slept." She whispered. "And sometimes..." She looked at Jonathon. "There was someone with him, someone I couldn't really see, but I could feel them there. When I asked Aaron about it, he would just say that he didn't come in my room, that it was just a dream. But..." New tears formed behind her eyes. "It wasn't just a dream...was it?"

Jonathon smiled and leaned closer, kissing her softly on the lips. "No."

"If you and Alec were friends." She whispered. "What happened to him?"

"One night, when we came to see you." Jonathon said quietly. "Alec told me something bad was going to happen to you. He said that...I could save you. But I first had to learn how to...jump."

Clarice frowned. "Jump?"

He looked at her. "Time jump." He said. "Somehow Alec knew I had the ability, even before I knew it. So I started practicing, trying to make small jumps, just a few minutes back. The first time it happened..." He smiled and shook his head. "I almost shit myself. But then I thought it was cool. I kept practicing, going a little further back each time. And then..." His smile faded as a sick look came over his face.

"What?"

He swallowed tightly. "And then your family was attacked." He whispered. "And...being linked to you the way he was...Alec saw it, felt what you went through." He looked down at the floor, his chest tight. "And I witnessed it through Alec. Every...detail." He stood up suddenly and went to stand by the fireplace, his back to her. "I wanted to go back, right then, and change everything for you." His throat clenched with emotion. "But I couldn't yet. And everyday that I was unable to make that crucial jump...was a day you spent in torment." He turned and looked at her. Tears wet his face and a look of pure anguish darkened his eyes. "Twenty years." He said tightly, anger searing his words. "Twenty fucking years it took me before I could make that jump. *Twenty* years. And every single day of those twenty years...Alec and I had to stand back and watch you suffer." He smashed his fist down on the mantel. "Every fucking day." He choked out. "And there was nothing we could do."

Clarice was crying when she went to him and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face against his throat. "But you did it." She whispered. "You made it back, and you saved me. You saved us all. You erased twenty awful years and replaced them with twenty wonderful years."

The anguish was still in his eyes as he looked down at her. "I didn't save everyone." He whispered. "I didn't save Alec."

"What happened?" She asked quietly. "What happened to Alec?"

He shook his head and cleared his throat. "When I jumped back...everything was different. Alec was gone. But I could feel him, I could feel the anger and rage in him, a deep sense of abandonment and betrayal." He

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closed his eyes against the grief and loss he felt deep inside. "I didn't understand it. I didn't know what had happened. All I knew was that it had to have been caused from the changes I made. I blamed myself." He sank down to the hearth and sat with his back to the fire. "By the time I located Alec, he was already on the way to your parents' home. I knew I couldn't stop him in time, so I tried to jump back just far enough to save them, or at least warn them. But," He shook his head. "When I tried to jump, I couldn't. I knew you were on your way to their house and I went after you instead, certain I could catch up to you before you got there."

He lowered his head to his hands and shuddered. Clarice touched his shoulder. "You did everything you could." She whispered. "If it wasn't for you, I would be dead as well. You saved me. Again." She kissed his shoulder. "What do you think happened that changed Alec?"

Jonathon released a deep sigh. "I didn't have any idea then." He whispered tightly, then looked at her. "But I know now."

"What was it?" Clarice asked slowly.

"Only one person, other than Alec, knew the things I could do. But when I made that jump," He said quietly. "Someone else figured out what had happened. They figured it out back then. And they changed things. But I didn't know that because I was still a part of the previous time line...the first one that hadn't yet been changed or altered."

Clarice frowned. "I'm not following this." She whispered.

"When I made my jump and came back." He told her. "I was the only one who hadn't been altered by the changes I made when I saved you. When I returned, I wasn't dealing with the Alec from my time line...but the Alec from the altered time line."

"But how did that make him different?"

"The one who had figured out what had happened..." Jonathon said. "He subjected Alec to a series of brutal mind manipulation therapies. He was trying to sever his link to you. As part of the so called therapy, he caused Alec to associate you, and your family, with the most unbearable pain and torment he'd ever suffered."

Clarice covered her mouth with her hands and cried softly. "Why...why would someone do that to him? What would be the purpose?"

Jonathon stared at his hands. Because Victor is a twisted son of a bitch, he thought. But he knew what the reason was. "You were a distraction." He whispered. "You, your family...and me. And in their tests, they couldn't afford distractions. Especially not with Alec. He had the abilities, they were certain of it, but they needed his focus. He wasn't giving them what they wanted like the others were. So the only solution was to eliminate the distractions." He looked at her. "Eradicate us from his mind."

She wiped at her eyes. "But...why did he come after my family then?"

Jonathon rubbed his hand over his mouth. "I don't think their therapies worked out the way they planned. I think that..."

"What?"

"That Alec's link to you...even his connection with me...was so vital to him that when they tried to remove it all." He shook his head. "I think it began to fragment his mind. His need for love and friendship was battling

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their brutal therapies until I think it all just cracked and crumbled. Spiraling him into a violent state of mind where all he could do was react. He still retained his link to you and your family, but he no longer understood it. All it would do was bring back the severe torture he had suffered. If he connected that to you and your family...then when he attacked them...I think he was just trying to stop the pain and suffering inside himself. I think that's why..." he hesitated.

"Why what?" She whispered thickly, fresh tears wetting her cheeks.

"Why...their murders were so brutal." Jonathon slid his arm around her and pulled her close, kissing her hair. "I believe he thought that they were the cause of his torture and torment...and he was trying to make it stop."

Clarice cried in his arms. She wasn't only crying for the loss of her family, but for the loss of a brother she had never been allowed to know and love. "And now." She whispered through her tears. "He thinks I'm the cause of it."

17...The Hitcher...

Byron "Bubba" Hollandsworth controlled the big rig with a skilled hand as he sped down the long straight stretch of two lane highway. His rear end was empty, having left the last trailer and load back in Denver days ago. He had a few days off before he had to pick up another load and he couldn't wait to get home to Sarah and the girls.

He glanced at the family photo wedged into his dash near the speedometer. Sarah was a sight and the two small girls at her side were her spittin' image. Bubba was what most people referred to as "burly", some even described him as a mountain of a man. He certainly didn't look like he fit with those three beautiful angels and some had even joked and accused him of photo shopping himself into that picture.

Bubba chuckled and gazed adoringly at the three most important people in his life. He certainly didn't appear to belong with them, hovering over them with his huge frame and rough features, but he thanked God in heaven that those three ladies couldn't disagree more. They were his refuge, but he was their rock.

Up ahead, a man walked along the shoulder of the road. His clothes sagged a bit and looked damp. He walked with his arms at his sides, staring straight ahead. Bubba slowed the truck and pulled up next to the man. The big rig rolled slowly along at a snail's pace. The man continued to walk as if he wasn't even aware of the huge rig rumbling loudly beside him.

Bubba reached over and popped open the passenger door. "Hey, buddy." He called out. "Need a lift?" Chilled air swept in through the passenger door. The man would catch his death if he stayed out in that cold in those clothes. "C'mon, fella, climb on in and get outta the cold."

The man finally looked up. He was a nice enough looking guy, though he seemed a bit lost. His blond hair was unruly and slightly dirty, and his clothes weren't just wet, but caked and grimy. Before Bubba could reconsider his decision to give the guy a ride, the man was climbing up inside the cab.

"Buddy, you look like someone just dragged you out of the river." Bubba shook his head and shifted gears as the big rig rumbled on down the road, slowly picking up speed. He stuck out his hand to his passenger. "Byron Hollandsworth." He chuckled. "But you can call me Bubba."

The man stared straight ahead. He didn't shake Bubba's hand. Didn't even look at him.

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Bubba shrugged and withdrew his hand. "Not a talker, huh?" He nodded. "That's okay. I can talk enough for the both of us."

The 1964 Shelby Cobra turned off the main road and into the parking lot of the Shadow Pines Motel. Hunter parked the convertible in front of one of the bungalow rooms. "How long till the van from the lodge arrives?"

Charlie pushed up the sleeve of her denim jacket and looked at her watch. "About an hour. I was supposed to be here by two. It's barely one."

"What if you hadn't caught a ride with me and missed it?"

She shrugged. "Guess I woulda had a long, cold walk up the mountain. Or eventually caught a ride with someone else."

He turned towards her. He knew it was fate that they were here at a motel an hour early. He couldn't believe how bad he wanted this. He dug out his wallet and handed her a few bills. "Go get a room."

She took the money tentatively and looked at him doubtfully.

He stared back her, reading her thoughts in her eyes. She was trying to decide if he was suddenly taking the situation for granted. He wasn't. "You can't stand out here in the cold for an hour." He said. "You might as well be warm and comfortable while you wait for your ride."

She just looked at him and he couldn't help but smile. Her cheeks flushed a light pink when she realized he knew what she'd been thinking. She opened her door and stepped out, leaving her pack on the floor board. "You won't leave yet?"

"I'll be here." He assured with a smile. "Now go and pay for your room."

She trotted to the office and slipped inside. He watched the door. He knew exactly how this was going to play out and he desperately wanted to play it out, right to the very end. But something was different about this woman. Different enough to change his life. And if he just went with it, he wasn't certain he could complete the job at hand.

Charlie returned a few minutes later with her room key. She reached over the passenger door and picked up her back pack from off the floorboard. Hunter got a clear view down the front of her shirt as she bent over, and it was a beautiful sight to say the least. Her lovely rounded breasts swelled beneath her shirt and pressed out against her bra. His pulse quickened. His groin throbbed like never before.

Charlie straightened and rested the pack on the top of the passenger door. She looked at him with those pretty eyes, so inviting. "Do you want to take a break from driving?" She shifted her feet in the gravel. "Hang out with me for an hour?"

He stared at her for a long moment, wondering if he would ever see her again after today. If he continued along his path in life, he knew he could never allow himself to see her again. "At this moment in time, there is nothing I would rather do than spend the next hour with you."

She started to smile, but it quickly faded when he continued.

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"But I have business obligations."

"Of course. I'm sorry." She looked down at the pack. "I just thought..."

"You thought right." He said. "I want to go in that room with you and live out every fantasy I've had about you since I saw you standing there on the side of the road. I want it so bad I can taste it."

"So why don't you?" She whispered.

He released a low groan and got out of the car, walking around to the passenger side. He took her face in his hands and kissed her deep and long, exploring her sweet mouth with his tongue. A deep groan rose involuntarily in his throat as a severe throbbing ache spread through his crotch. He pressed his body against hers, pinning her firmly against the side of the car, the rock hard hunger between his legs unmistakable.

He broke the kiss with a gasp, his mouth dropping to her slender throat, sucking and biting at her soft skin. His hands moved over her body with a will of their own, slipping beneath her shirt and up over her full breasts. He could hardly resist the urge to shed her clothes right there in the parking lot and lay her beautiful naked body on the hood of the Cobra and bring his fantasy to life. But it was out of the question.

He drew back just a bit, his hot breath panting against her neck, his hands still gripping her soft, sensual tits, the thin lacy bra not nearly enough to prevent her hardened nipples from digging into his palms.

"Please stay." She gasped softly against his ear.

He groaned in literal agony and kissed her sweet mouth again, wanting her like he'd never wanted any woman in his life. He squeezed her breasts firmly as she moaned into his mouth. Such perfect breasts, just enough to fill up his hands.

In all his life he had never had a moment of weakness, so this one caught him by surprise. He swept Charlie into his arms and headed for the rooms. He took her key and fumbled with the door as her tongue snaked around inside his mouth. As soon as the door popped loose, he kicked it open, stepped inside then kicked it shut again.

The hitchhiker turned his head slowly and looked at the picture of Bubba's family tucked into the dash. Despite the man's shoddy appearance, his attention to Bubba's picture didn't raise any red flags. The man studied the photo like someone studying a find-it picture, like he was searching for something that wasn't obvious to the naked eye.

Bubba smiled. "That there is all a man really needs to be happy." The man didn't respond or even give an indication he had heard Bubba speak. "The love of family."

Something shifted in the man's eyes and Bubba was sure he saw a longing that boarded on agony. Perhaps the man had lost his family. Sadness filled Bubba's huge heart. He couldn't imagine anything more hellish than losing the ones he loved. And by the depth of pain resonating out of this man, Bubba suspected he hadn't a soul left on this earth to love.

The big rig sped past a roadside motel. A classy little blue sports car was parked in the gravel parking lot along with a couple other less eye-popping vehicles.

Hour of Darkness

The hitchhiker's head turned as he watched the motel whisk by outside. A sudden alertness seemed to grip him. His eyes turned back to the road ahead. He sat more tensely in his seat.

Bubba shot him a sideways glance. Something had suddenly gotten the man's attention.

They weren't barely twenty minutes past the motel when Bubba's passenger suddenly popped the latch on his door.

"Whoa, there." Bubba instantly began gearing down and slowing the big rig. "If you want out, you gotta tell me first. You don't just jump out of a moving truck, buddy. Not unless you got a death wish."

The rig finally slowed to a crawl. The man opened his door to climb out.

"Hey, buddy." Bubba said, grabbing up his thick jacket. "Take this. It's cold out there."

The man looked at him, although it felt more like he was looking through him. He took the jacket and climbed down out of the rig, crossed the road in front of the truck and headed for a gravel road with a sign that read Rocky Mountain Guide Station. Bubba watched him for a long moment.

"Strange fella." He shifted the rig into gear and cast the hitchhiker one last glance. "God speed, my friend."

Chapter 11

He dropped her on the bed and was on top of her in an instant. He peeled her clothes away like he was peeling a fresh sweet, ripe piece of fruit.

Hunter shed his clothes and pulled her to him, her hot naked body scalding against his skin. His hunger for her put him in literal pain. The urgency in him was uncharacteristic for him, but he couldn't resist it. His mouth was on her breasts as he took her with a desperation that both shocked and excited him. The urgency within her equaled his own. She gasped and cried out and clawed his skin as he brought her to orgasm almost instantly.

The willingness of her body to give him what he craved excited him even more. When he suddenly released, it was powerful and fierce, wrenching a deep, guttural cry from his core. Even before he could begin to calm, the movement of her hot, damp body reignited the fire inside him. This wasn't uncommon for him. He had often conducted all night sessions, the woman passing out from exhaustion before him. He repositioned and took her from behind.

Feeling the heat of her body engulfing him, the willing way she accepted him, how just touching her skin affected him on a level he'd never experienced with a woman before...all of it combined together convinced him he could spend the rest of his life having sex with just this one woman.

Outside, a big rig sped by on the two lane road, reminding Hunter where his duty lay. He groaned and closed his eyes. Her skin was hot and damp beneath his hands as he gripped her tightly, pulling her back to him again and again until he felt himself peaking once more. He brought her to climax multiple times before finally emptying himself inside her.

Even then, he knew he could go on. But he couldn't stay, as bad as he wanted to. He felt like he was cheapening this amazing experience when he drew back from her and immediately began to dress - when what he really wanted was to just lay with her for awhile, feel her body beside him as they allowed themselves to calm down before then taking their time to really explore one another.

She laid on the bed, her beautiful naked body glistening with sweat and flushed with the heat of their intense love making. And that's what it had been, he realized. *Love* making. Not just sex. With other women, it had been just sex. But not with her.

There was a look in her eyes as she watched him dress. A look that sliced at his heart and mind. Did she think this was all he'd wanted from the start? He had to go, but he refused to leave her with that suspicion to poison this memory for her. He rested one knee on the bed and leaned down, kissing her soft lips. "I can't stay." He groaned low against her lips. "I want to, more than you know. But there's something I have to do." He kissed her again, feeling her need for him to stay with her.

"Will you come back?" She whispered through their kiss, her breath sweet and tantalizing in his mouth. "When you're finished?"

He pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. "No." He murmured. "I can't be with you...and still do the things I do."

She didn't ask what it was he did. She didn't beg him to stay. She just kissed his lips one more time and whispered, "If you ever decide you don't want to do those things anymore..." She stroked his face with her fingertips. "You know where to find me. We could run away to some tropical island..."

Hour of Darkness

When Hunter walked out of that motel room, he wondered at her words. And for the first time in his professional career, he pondered the possibility of being something other than a hired killer.

The tracer device was blinking and beeping when he reached the Cobra and, like a magic wand, vanquished his thoughts of a possible career change. He slid in behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. The Shelby Cobra purred to life. Hunter shifted into gear then cast one more look at the motel door, behind which a most exquisite woman lay naked and alone, longing for his presence.

"Goodbye, Charlie." He murmured as his body, mind and heart tingled with the memory of her recent touch. "It was wonderful to meet you."

The 1964 Shelby Cobra backed away from the motel and rolled up to the edge of the two lane road then idled motionless for a moment. The tracer indicated that the current target was close. Much closer than Hunter had expected. He guided the car out onto the road and sped away without looking back, knowing full well that to look back would be to turn around and never leave.

"What happened to me and my family...the first time?" Clarice asked quietly, her voice still thick with tears.

He shook his head. How could he tell her? "Trust me." He whispered. "You don't want to know."

She stood up and went to him. "Tell me."

"Clarice..." Tears burned in his eyes at the memory that he couldn't vanquish. She had been spared, she didn't have the memory to haunt her dreams, but he'd experienced it as surely as if he'd been right there.

She touched his arm. "I used to have nightmares about that night." She said in a near whisper. "About what would've happened if you hadn't saved us. They were so real...like memories rather than just dreams." Her eyes turned glossy with tears as she looked at Jonathon. "Were they somehow...memories?"

"No." Jonathon whispered. "That isn't possible. For you...it never happened. They're just dreams." He closed his eyes briefly. "Just really bad dreams."

"Is that the nightmare you were having when I woke you?" She asked quietly. "Is that why you grabbed me like that and held onto me so tight?" She slid her arms around him and pressed her lips to the base of his throat. "There was only one other time that someone grabbed me and held me like that." Tears slid down her face. "Just after you...disappeared from our home twenty years ago. I found my mom laying on the bed, crying. When she opened her eyes and saw I was okay, she grabbed hold of me, just like you did, and held me as tight." She kissed his throat. "It's the way you hold someone when you thought they were lost to you...and you suddenly realize they're still there, still within arm's reach." She kissed him again. "Safe."

18...The Perfect Shot...

The 1964 Shelby Cobra sat silently in the heavy shadows of the thick evergreens. Hunter watched with narrowed eyes as his target paced back and forth along the gravel walk in front of the guide station. He didn't approach him or make his presence known. His objective was to merely observe and follow until the target let him to Lancaster and the woman. Orlando wanted the woman dead, she was of no consequence to him, but he wanted Lancaster neutralized and retrieved alive.

Hour of Darkness

Hunter reached beneath the seat and withdrew a Beretta 9mm. He held the handgun lightly and rested it on his thigh. As with all his other possessions, the Beretta was unique in that it was gold plated and intricately engraved. It had been designed to honor fallen soldiers and law officers by being shot in the 21-gun salute. He'd purchased it for a pretty penny but found it well worth its price.

He thought about his female target. He preferred it when his targets were men, but when the job called for it, he'd put down women as quickly and efficiently as he had the men. He tried to picture the female target's face, imagine what she looked like. Not that it mattered. It would have no bearing on his ability to take her out. It wasn't easier for him to eliminate an unattractive woman than a beautiful woman. It was all the same to him. A target was a target.

Charlie's face rose unbidden when he tried again to picture what the woman target looked like. He tried to force away Charlie's image but it lingered relentlessly. His eyes remained on the target as he continued to pace back and forth, but his mind began to wander. Which wasn't custom for him at all. His mind was always focused one hundred percent on the job at hand. Except now, it did wander. Back to the motel. Was Charlie still there, perhaps still laying naked on the bed, hoping he would change his mind and return?

The sudden throbbing in his crotch snapped him back to attention. His moment with Charlie had been mind blowing, but it was over. Even as he sat there, she was already a part of his past. Fate hadn't meant her to be anything more. A mere interlude in the theater of life. He straightened in his seat and forced himself to focus on what was before him, rather than on what he'd left behind.

The target stopped pacing, stood motionless for a moment then walked to one of the trucks parked in the parking lot. It was an old red Ford pickup with a gun rack in the rear window. He punched his fist through the driver door window, unlocked the door and pulled it open. Once inside, he hot wired the truck and backed out of the parking lot.

Hunter was moderately impressed. He wasn't just a mindless lab rat. He knew how to think. Hunter wasn't sure if that was a good thing, all things considered, but a thinking killer was much more efficient at his job than one who killed irrationally. He should know.

When the Ford pickup pulled out on the two lane road and headed further up the mountain, Hunter started the Cobra and followed.

The late afternoon sun was slowly dropping behind the treetops. A heavy, biting chill crept onto the air the moment the sunlight began to fade. The shadows beneath the trees darkened and seemed to creep forward with the stealth of a deadly predator. Clarice shuddered beneath her thick jacket as Jonathon stood at the bottom of the back porch steps and loaded his arms with firewood.

"What is it?" He asked.

She flinched and looked away from the darkening trees. "Nothing." He eyed her doubtfully then packed on a couple more logs. She watched him weigh down his arms. "I could carry an armload too."

"I can get it." He walked back up the steps with ease, the huge load of firewood filling his arms. "No need for you to over exert yourself."

"Over exert myself?" Clarice smiled and frowned at the same time. She followed him back inside. "You don't seem too concerned about me *over exerting* myself when we're in bed."

Hour of Darkness

Jonathon dumped the load of firewood into a wooden crate next to the fireplace, dusted himself off then smiled at Clarice. "That's different," he said. "You're not really straining yourself."

Clarice raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Says you."

He chuckled and grabbed the front of her jacket and pulled her to him, kissing her warmly on the mouth. "You telling me that it's too much work making love to me?" He murmured against her lips.

"Not at all." She whispered back. "Physical exertion can be quite good and healthy. So why are you treating me like I'm made of glass all the sudden?"

He pulled her closer and unfastened the front of her jacket, slipping his hands inside and around her waist. "I consider it my job to look out for you."

"You were looking out for me just fine before." She said. "Nothing's changed."

Jonathon gazed down into her dark eyes. Something had changed, she just didn't know it yet. He didn't just have one person to look out for. There were two now. And he had no intention of losing either of them.

"Just being cautious." He kissed her again.

She drew back from his kiss and eyed him suspiciously. "What're you not telling me?"

"Nothing."

"We're not supposed to be keeping secrets." She pressed.

"No secrets." He assured. Was it his fault he knew the things he knew? He hadn't set out to discover them just so he could keep them from her. Still, it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her. He knew she would be so happy. But under the circumstances it might also put too much pressure on her. Trying to keep one another alive was stress enough, she didn't need to know just yet that she had another life in her hands as well.

"If you say so." She relented doubtfully.

"I do." He murmured as he lowered his mouth and nuzzled her ear. He peeled off her jacket as he began to kiss the curve of her jaw with purpose.

A low sighing moan rose in Clarice's throat. "Sometimes, boy." She whispered a bit breathless. "I think you're more machine than man. You never turn off."

"Haven't heard you complain before." He nibbled her earlobe.

Her pulse was already quickening. "I'm not complaining now." She moaned. "Just stating a fact."

He scooped her up in his arms. "Well state your facts upstairs." He said as he carried her up the thick log stairs to the master bedroom.

The cross hairs were dead centered on the woman's temple as Hunter's finger rested gently against the trigger. He'd followed the target to the locked gate, finding the Ford pickup abandoned outside the gate. Hunter had

Hour of Darkness

been forced to leave the Shelby Cobra there as well. He'd grabbed the Harris M89 rifle from the case in the trunk of the car and followed on foot. He hadn't caught site of the target again, but knew he was out there somewhere, concealed in the trees and the thickening shadows.

Hunter had picked a spot amidst the shadows of the trees that gave him a clear view of the large cabin. He'd caught movement inside, but couldn't get a solid line of sight. A moment before he was about to change position, Lancaster and the woman entered the bedroom upstairs. The large side window gave him a perfect unobstructed view of the two targets. Lancaster had been carrying the woman in his arms and laid her on the bed.

Unbidden images of Charlie had broken his focus, but he had it back now as he watched the couple through his scope, drawing them in close. They were naked on top of the bed, the woman straddling Lancaster, their bodies moving together in a gentle urgency. He slowly moved the scope site down the woman's body then back up, centering the cross hairs once again on her temple. It would be so easy to take her out right then and there. The shot was perfect. But still, his finger hovered, unmoving, on the trigger.

Lancaster leaned forward and wrapped his arms around the woman, pulling her tight against him as their love making intensified. She clung to him as they kissed long and deep.

Please stay. Charlie's soft, pleading voice swirled through his mind. Hunter blinked, looked away from the scope and rubbed his eye then refocused. The woman's back was arched as Lancaster held her upright. Her eyes were closed and her mouth slightly open as a tension gripped her face.

Images of his session with Charlie began to snap through his head. His groin began to ache as his crotch throbbled fiercely. His pulse quickened as he watched through the sites as the woman climaxed then clung to Lancaster in ecstasy. He centered the cross hairs on her face but all he could see was Charlie's face as she had given herself to him over and over again.

"Shit." Hunter lowered the weapon and rubbed his eyes. His face was tight with both anger and confusion. Why the hell hadn't he just pulled the trigger? She was right there, in his site. The shot couldn't be more perfect. His jaw tight with determination, he brought the rifle up fast and aimed, bringing the woman's head into the cross hairs once again. He still had the shot. But his finger refused to pull the trigger. For the first time in his professional killing career, he took a moment to consider how him doing his job would affect others.

As he watched Lancaster hold onto the woman in a protective, desperate embrace and release inside her, Hunter could feel Charlie in his arms once more. What would it do to him to have Charlie die in his arms, her blood all over him, no way to save her as she slipped away from him forever?

Hunter lowered the rifle. He would complete this job, but not like this. He would take her out later and she would be just as dead. But he wasn't a cold blooded killer. He wouldn't curse Lancaster with the memory of the woman he loved dying violently in his arms.

Chapter 12

As Jonathon dressed, Clarice stood at the large bedroom window in one of Jonathon's t-shirts and stared out at the trees. A feeling of deep unease swelled inside her. She was feeling Alec more and more, and it had never been stronger than it was at that moment. Was he out there, right now, watching her, waiting for the moment he could rip the life from her body as he'd done Aaron and her parents?

She jumped when Jonathon gripped her shoulders gently. "Hey." He slid his arms around her chest and held her back against him. "What's wrong?"

"Do you feel it?" She spoke low, fearful.

He kissed her hair. "Yeah, I feel it."

She pressed her back against his chest and could feel the beat of his heart. "Why did saving me and my family change Alec?" She whispered.

Jonathon pressed his lips to the top of her head but didn't answer.

She turned slowly, untangling herself from his arms. "Do you know?" She stared up at him. "Is it awful and you just don't want to tell me? Because I'm getting pretty accustomed to awful."

"I don't know for certain." Jonathon said slowly. "But I have a...theory."

"What is it?"

Jonathon went to the bed and sat on the edge. "The life you lived." He said quietly. "Before I saved you...you were alone, suffering mental anguish. And I think..." He looked at her solemnly. "I think you and Alec were somehow bonded by the pain and torment you each suffered every day. Like now, like with Aaron, you were connected. I think Alec...identified with you. Maybe saw you as a kindred spirit to some degree." A sadness filled Jonathon's eyes. "I think maybe you made him feel like he belonged, like he wasn't alone."

A sinking sensation weighed down on Clarice's mind.

"When I saved you." He stared at the floor. "Your life changed. You grew up happy and healthy. Your family was close, with strong ties of love and devotion. You were no longer in anguish and mental torment." He raised his eyes slowly. "And Alec..."

Tears blurred Clarice's eyes. "And Alec was left all alone." She whispered. "No one to identify with...or feel connected to."

"When I saved you." Jonathon's voice was low, thick with his own tears. "Alec lost you. But I think...he could still feel you, both you and Aaron. And if he somehow knew he was a part of your family, and he could feel how happy and loved you and Aaron were, while he was left alone in a place of torment..."

Tears slid down Clarice's face. "He would've felt abandoned...unwanted..." She looked at Jonathon with anguish in her eyes. "By the very people who should have loved him and taken him away from that place." Clarice turned away as the anguish and rage and torment she had felt in Alec suddenly fell into place and she understood.

Hour of Darkness

"It wasn't his fault." Jonathon stood up and went to her. "He couldn't rationalize like a human being. He was a hybrid and the foreign genes in his DNA were battling against his humanity. All he could do was react."

Clarice cried softly as Jonathon wrapped his arms around her again. "You shouldn't have come back. You shouldn't have saved me."

Jonathon turned her around and held her tight in his arms. "Don't say that." he whispered tightly. "Don't ever say that. Don't ever think that it would have been better that way."

"It's my fault." She cried against his shoulder. "He's this way now...because of me."

Drawing back, Jonathon looked her in the eyes. "He wanted me to save you. He couldn't have known how it would change things for him. But all he wanted was for your pain and torment to go away. He wanted you to be safe, happy and strong." He pulled her back against him and held her fiercely. "Things happen, Clarice. Awful things sometimes. And it's nobody's fault."

The alarm system triggered, filling the cabin with a banshee wail. Clarice jumped and clung to Jonathon. Terror filled her instantly as her heart raced erratically. Jonathon stiffened in her arms.

"He's here." she shuddered, clutching Jonathon's shirt in fistfuls.

"Get dressed." He said stiffly. "Now."

19...Hunter And Hunted...

He was working his way through the trees to the rear of the cabin when the alarm went off. Hunter froze and crouched lower to the ground. So much for the element of surprise. He looked around through the steadily darkening trees. He'd spotted the sensors and had been extremely careful working his way around them. Had he missed one? Or had the other target set it off? Didn't really matter now, they knew someone was coming. But he was certain they weren't expecting him. They had been relentlessly pursued by the other target, their focus would be on him.

Hunter reasoned that he may still have the element of surprise.

Jonathon checked the clip for the Beretta Storm and snapped it in. He handed it to Clarice. "There's thirteen shots." He said.

She took it tentatively. "What about you?"

"I have the shotgun." He said. "But you keep that on you at all times. And remember." He tapped his temple. "Shoot for the head."

"But that doesn't actually kill him." She was shaking but couldn't make it stop. "How do we stop him for good?"

"Just go for the head shot." Jonathon repeated. "Once he's down, we'll take it from there." He picked up the shotgun and confirmed that it was loaded.

Hour of Darkness

They descended the stairs slowly, Clarice close to Jonathon's back, the Beretta pointed downward the way he'd showed her. "I thought...I thought maybe I was ready for this." She shuddered. "But I'm not, Jonathon. I'm not."

"One step at a time." His eyes moved quickly, thoroughly over the ground floor as they came to the bottom of the stairs. "Stay with me." He spoke low. "It may not be him."

"Who else would it be?" Clarice's throat was tight, squeezing her words. She forced herself to breathe but her intense fear still shook her. "It is him. I can feel him, he's here."

Jonathon led her through the pantry to the basement. He set the shotgun down and studied the monitors. It was almost night beneath the trees, too dark to see anyone who might be lurking there. Jonathon pressed a button and the monitors switched to infrared.

Keeping an eye on the stairs leading up out of the basement, Clarice's hand flexed around the handle of the Beretta Storm. "Do you see anything?"

Jonathon's brow pinched with a hard frown. "No." He left the monitors and went to the cabinet with the radios. He took out two and handed one to Clarice, setting them on the same channels. "Take this." He said. "Keep an eye on the monitors. If you see anyone, let me know immediately." He took a Glock model 20 10mm from the cabinet and stuffed in a full clip. "Close the security door behind me and do not come out until I return. I don't care what you hear or see. *Stay* down here."

"You're going out there alone?" Clarice shook her head. "No. You said we were a team, that we had to have each other's back. I can help. I-I know I probably seem weak to you and you need to protect me, but I can be strong, Jonathon. I can. I'll make myself be strong."

Jonathon leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Baby, I know you're strong. I never thought otherwise. The fact that you're still sane after all you've been through the last few days shows me how strong you are." He glanced towards the stairs. "You're right, we are a team. And you will have my back by being my eyes for me. That may not be Alec out there. I need to know who exactly we're dealing with so we'll know how to handle the situation."

"If it isn't Alec." Clarice glanced towards the monitors. "Then who?"

"I can't explain right now." Jonathon said. " But lets just say you're not the only one being hunted."

Clarice stared at him. She had tried to avoid thinking about it directly, but the truth was...Jonathon came out of the lab the same as Alec did. Somehow he was different than Alec, but he was still...

"Don't give up on me now." Jonathon whispered.

Clarice blinked and realized he was staring at her, an uncertain look in his eyes as if he had been listening to her thoughts. Could he? She stared back at him and there was something in the way he looked at her that answered her unspoken question. She stepped closer and tilted her face up for him to kiss her. He did. "I will never give up on you." She told him softly, but with a hard edge of sincerity to her words.

"I'm counting on it." He checked the radios again to make sure they were in sync then kissed her once more. "If something happens and I don't come back-"

"You'll come back." Clarice interjected, her eyes hard with the determination to survive this.

Hour of Darkness

Jonathon nodded slowly. "Right." He moved towards the stairs. "Remember, close the security door. And don't open it for anyone but me."

"No shit." She muttered. He looked back and she smiled lovingly. "I won't."

He smiled and stared at her for a moment, as if taking his last look at her. Clarice didn't like that. It felt ominous and cold.

Please, baby, don't leave me alone in this world. The thought whispered through her mind as she stared at Jonathon.

His eyes flickered with emotion. "I'll be back." He told her with reassurance then turned and jogged up the stairs. He stepped through the doorway and turned around. He motioned for her to close the security door.

Clarice went to the panel beneath the monitors and pressed a button. She turned and watched the thick steel door slide close past Jonathon, blocking him from her sight, and exhale as it sealed the basement.

And perhaps her fate.

The grounds were heavily monitored with security cameras. Hunter picked his path towards the cabin carefully. Lancaster hadn't chosen this place on a whim. Orlando said he had inside connections, someone had directed him here. And if this place belonged to someone from the Institute, he could bet his ass Lancaster was well equipped to make a stand. And who knew what else he was equipped with. Orlando wasn't one to relinquish unnecessary details, so Hunter wasn't entirely certain what Lancaster was capable of. But he'd come out of the Institute's lab and that in itself warned Hunter to proceed with extreme caution.

Orlando had given him the means to neutralize Lancaster, but he had stressed that Hunter do it from a distance. To stay away from any up close encounters. Lancaster was dangerous in ways that Hunter himself couldn't begin to imagine. But if it came to a one on one showdown...Hunter would have his leverage. All he had to do was get to the woman.

The man walked boldly up the driveway. Clarice watched him in the monitor. It wasn't Alec. He was older, mid to late forties maybe. He was dressed nice with short black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. There was a faint familiarity about him, but Clarice didn't have time to figure it out. He had no visible weapon. He didn't appear threatening at all. Clarice knew better.

She picked up the radio and pressed the button. "Jonathon?" She said quietly.

"I see him." Jonathon's voice crackled through the radio.

"Who is he?"

A moment of silence, then, "Victor Orlando."

"Who is that?" Clarice asked.

She could feel the tension coming through the radio before Jonathon ever spoke. "My father."

Hour of Darkness

"What?" She breathed.

"Stay there." Jonathon reaffirmed. "Whatever happens, don't come out." A pause, then, "He'll kill you."

"And you?"

"No." Jonathon murmured. "He won't kill me. I'm all he has left."

"What do you mean?" Jonathon didn't answer. "Jonathon?" Still no answer. She looked at the interior monitors and saw Jonathon standing with his back pressed to the wall beside the front door, peering out the window on the other side of him. He wasn't holding his radio. He had turned it off and set it aside.

She watched him reach over and open the front door slowly. She shook her head. "No. What are you doing?"

Movement from another monitor grabbed her attention. A deep terror clamped around her heart like an iron maiden. She couldn't breathe. Her hands shook as she quickly raised the radio on impulse. She pushed the button. "Jonathon!" But he had left his radio behind as he stepped out the door, gun raised.

"No. God." She cried as she watched in horror as the man in the trees raised his rifle and drew Jonathon into his sights.

"What the fuck?" Hunter crouched at the edge of the trees, across from the rear corner of the cabin. He watched Orlando stroll up the driveway like he lived there. What the hell was he doing here? Had he set off the alarm? Deliberately perhaps?

Hunter's face tightened with tension and anxiety. He'd done jobs for Orlando in the past, and the man had never interfered like this before. Why now? Why not let Hunter do the job he hired him to do?

The front door of the cabin opened as Orlando approached the blue and white Chevy Suburban in the driveway. Lancaster stepped out on the porch cautiously, his handgun aimed steadily on Orlando.

Hunter raised the rifle and looked through the scope, drawing Lancaster and Orlando in closer. Was Orlando drawing Lancaster out into the open so Hunter could take his shot? He lowered the rifle and laid it on the ground beside him, then reached inside his jacket and withdrew the tranquilizer gun. He raised it slowly and looked through the small, powerful scope attached to the weapon, drawing Lancaster into his sights. He aimed for Lancaster's neck as his finger curled around the trigger.

20...Mind Games...

The Glock held steady in Jonathon's hand, centered on Orlando's forehead. Jonathon wasn't a killer but he could kill this man. He had told Clarice that Orlando was his father, but that wasn't exactly the truth. Orlando was the reason he existed, and even the one who had raised him, if you wanted to call it that...but they were not of the same blood. They were *nothing* alike.

"It's good to see you again, Johnny." Orlando stood a few feet from the porch steps. "You're looking well."

Jonathon moved slowly to the edge of the porch then stopped, the Glock holding steady on Orlando's head. He didn't speak, just stared at the older man.

Hour of Darkness

Orlando stared back at him without wavering. "You know it won't work with me, Johnny." He tapped his ear.

"That device in your ear won't stop a bullet."

"You're not going to kill me, Johnny." He said confidently. "Your kind aren't natural killers."

"No." Jonathon spoke dangerously low. "That was bred in through human genes."

Orlando nodded. "Indeed. In fact, our efficiency at killing may be our greatest strength."

A deep hatred for this man spread through Jonathon like a deadly heat wave. "Only for some." He said coldly.

Orlando's eyes flicked towards the cabin then back to Jonathon. "You're referring to the woman?" He lowered his eyes to the ground for a moment then raised them slowly. They were dead eyes, emotionless. "Why her, Johnny? Why are you going through so much to protect her?" His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Do you love her, Johnny?"

Jonathon didn't answer.

"And I assume she loves you as well?"

Jonathon just stared at him. His finger tightened just a hair on the trigger.

"Does she know, Johnny?" Orlando wondered. "Does she know what you are? Would she still love you if she knew? Do you think she would have had sex with you if she'd known?"

Jonathon's face hardened to granite. But beneath that...a tendril of fear took root. Orlando was going somewhere with this, leading up to something. Why the hell had he come here himself? Why hadn't he sent...

He felt the gun on him. Could suddenly hear the sniper's heartbeat.

He felt the hesitation again as he peered through the scope. Except this time it was different somehow. He was suddenly compelled to lay the tranquilizer gun down and pick up the rifle again. When he raised the weapon and looked down the scope, his cross hairs were on Orlando's temple.

Hunter frowned. Orlando wasn't his target...or was he? He tried to think but his thoughts were fragmented. He continued to stare down the scope. His finger twitched above the trigger.

"You told her about Alec." It wasn't a question. "But you would've had to. She would require some form of explanation, that's just logical." His eyes narrowed again. "But I'm betting you didn't tell her about you. Not really. She no doubt knows you're different but...she doesn't know *how* different, now does she?"

Jonathon's finger twitched on the trigger.

"I bet she just thinks you're a lab rat like Alec." He smiled without humor. "And by the way she was riding you up in the bedroom awhile ago...I'd have to assume she's accepting of it all."

Hour of Darkness

The bastard had been watching them. Jonathon tried to concentrate but Orlando continued to talk.

"But I bet if she really knew everything about you..." He shook his head slowly. "She may not be so willing to...*copulate* with you. In fact, I think it's time we asked her."

Jonathon focused and cocked the gun, his eyes as cold as ice. "You're not getting near her."

"You think I don't know what it is you're trying to hide from me, Johnny?" Orlando asked quietly. "It's why I'm here."

Jonathon's jaw ached as he clenched it fiercely. *Just shoot him.*

Hunter's thoughts seemed to ricochet through his head then suddenly came together in an instant, his mind was clear. And he knew who his target was.

He steadied the rifle and centered the cross hairs on Orlando.

Shoot him.

Jonathon felt the trigger begin to depress beneath his finger when he suddenly screamed and dropped to his knees. The Glock hit the wooden planks of the porch with a loud clanking noise as it fell from his hand. The sudden pain was excruciating, stabbing through his head like red hot ice picks.

He fell forward, his elbows cracking against the floor of the porch as he clutched his head and screamed more fiercely.

"Jonathon!" Clarice cried out when she saw Jonathon suddenly drop to his knees and clutch his head. She gripped the panel board and stared in horror as he fell forward. Her first terrifying thought was that the sniper had shot him, but there was no blood and he was still moving, writhing on the porch like he was in unbearable pain.

"Jonathon." She cried, tears streaking her face. She grabbed the Beretta and ran for the concrete stairs.

No!

The single word shouted in her head and she stopped in her tracks. Where had it come from? She stood motionless, her heart pounding, the gun gripped tightly in her fist. Had it been Jonathon telling her to stay where she was? Could he even do that?

Tears wet her face as her body began to shake. She stared up at the steel door, her head telling her feet to move but still unable to budge from where she stood.

Hour of Darkness

Hunter fell back, dropping the rifle, as if a physical hand had shoved him. He gasped as his head spun and a wave of dizziness overtook him momentarily. He sat forward slowly, his head gradually clearing.

"What in the *fuck*?" He gasped again then frowned as he felt something wet draining from one nostril. He wiped his nose with the side of his hand and stared at the blood smeared across his skin.

His brow pinched in a hard frown as a sliver of fear pierced him.

Another first for Hunter.

Chapter 13

21...Not An Option...

The unbearable pain ripping Jonathon's head apart suddenly disappeared. He lay on his back on the porch, gasping, his heart thumping fiercely in his chest. Tears of pain wet his face. He stared up at the underside of the porch roof, disoriented and dizzy.

He could hear footsteps climbing the porch. Then Orlando was standing over him, staring down at him thoughtfully.

"What..." Jonathon gasped, his body still in shock. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"Do you really think I would come all the way out here..." He raised his hand, he was holding a device small enough to conceal in his palm. "Unprepared?"

Jonathon frowned. He tried to move but his limbs felt heavy, sluggish. "What the...hell is that?"

"Just a little side experiment." He said. "It took awhile to perfect, but with Alec's help I worked out all the bugs."

"What?" Jonathon rested his head against the porch. "Alec?"

Orlando raised an eyebrow. "I had to test it on someone. And since I was primarily creating it for you, I couldn't let you know about it." He smiled. "Alec was the perfect specimen. He was a great help. Admittedly it wasn't enjoyable for him, he nearly died a time or two...but we got it worked out."

"You sick fuck." Jonathon spit out. "I hope Alec...rips your fucking head off."

Orlando clucked his tongue. "Vicious." He smiled. "Maybe your kind isn't as docile as I thought."

Clarice trembled. She stared at the monitor. Jonathon was laying on his back but he didn't seem to be in pain anymore. What had the man done to him? Whatever it was, Jonathon seemed to be at his mercy, and the man didn't appear to be the merciful kind.

She searched the other monitors for the sniper, but he was gone. She wondered where Alec was. He was there, somewhere, she could feel him as surely as if he were standing right next to her. She shuddered and looked around the basement with unease. Could he be down there with her, cloaked and invisible to her eyes? But surely he would've killed her by now if he was there. She turned back to the monitors and that's when she saw it - a ripple across one of the screens, like a reflection on water.

"Alec." She trembled again and looked at the screen that showed Jonathon and Orlando. Jonathon couldn't defend himself. Whatever Orlando had done to him, it had weakened him physically and mentally. If Alec attacked now...Jonathon would be helpless.

Steeling herself, Clarice gripped the Beretta tightly in her fist. With her other hand, she hit the button that opened the steel door and ran up the stairs, ignoring the voice in her head telling her to stay put.

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Jonathon could die without her help. And for Clarice, that was not an option.

Orlando stared down at Jonathon. "Where is she?"

"Go to hell." Jonathon's eyes were full of pure hate. Orlando expected no less.

He ran his thumb slowly over the tiny device in his hand. "Do you need a little help in remembering where you stashed her?"

"She's of no use to you." Jonathon groaned tightly. His head still throbbed. "Take me, but just leave her alone. What could you possibly want with her?"

Orlando stared down at him thoughtfully. "I don't want anything with her." he said. "It's what I want *from* her."

"What?" Jonathon looked uncertain, even fearful. Orlando had been right. That was his sole purpose for being here - to stop Hunter from killing the woman. He had thought she was just an unnecessary distraction for Jonathon, but as it turned out...she had become an experiment as well. One that Jonathon had performed without even realizing it.

"I was always curious." Orlando spoke low. "If the two could reproduce. You discovered that answer for me."

Jonathon tried to lunge at Orlando but the older man shoved him back down with his foot. Jonathon had no strength and he fell back to the porch.

"You fuck!" Jonathon spit again. "You're not taking them."

Orlando crouched down on his heels and fingered the device in his hand. "Where is she, Johnny?"

"Kill me if you want." He growled. "But I will never give them up."

"Where is she?" He spoke slow, stretching each word.

"Right here, motherfucker."

Orlando's head snapped up to find the Beretta Storm aimed at his face. And behind the gun - an extremely pissed off woman with no reason whatsoever *not* to blow his brains out.

"I'd say just give me a reason." Clarice whispered dangerously, fingering the trigger. "But you already have." She slowly drew back the hammer.

Orlando rose slowly to his feet, his hands slightly raised. "Take it easy."

"Fuck you." Up close like this, that first sense of recognition she'd had in the basement returned. She swore she had seen this guy before. But it didn't matter now. She was going to kill him.

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"Such ugly words." Orlando said quietly. "And from such a pretty mouth. I can understand what Jonathon sees in you. Beautiful but tough. Nice combination."

"Shut up." Clarice snapped. She glanced at Jonathon. "Can you get up?"

Jonathon moved but he was having a difficult time.

"What did you do to him?" Clarice demanded, her eyes drilling Orlando.

"Just a little assurance on my part." He said calmly. "Your lover is much more dangerous than you realize."

"Shut up." Jonathon choked out as he managed to get to his knees and sit back on his heels.

Orlando's hand twitched. Clarice narrowed her eyes and steadied the gun. "Drop it." She said.

"Do you really think..." Orlando murmured. "That you can shoot me before I can kill him? Because you see, sweetheart, he *can* die. And I *will* kill him. Granted, I don't want to. He is rather irreplaceable, but I will do what I must do."

Clarice held the gun in place, unwavering, but a rush of uncertainty coursed through her. She glanced at Jonathon.

"Shoot him." Jonathon whispered, barely able to stay on his knees. "Even if he kills me...he'll still be dead."

"Jonathon..." Clarice felt tears burn her eyes but she blinked them back. She wouldn't let this bastard see her cry.

"And our baby will be safe." Jonathon finished weakly.

"Wh-what?" Clarice faltered. "Our...baby?"

Jonathon closed his eyes briefly then looked up at her. "You're pregnant, Clarice." His eyes turned to ice as he shifted his gaze to Orlando. "And if you don't kill him...he's going to take our child. Like he took Alec from your mother...and you know what he did to Alec."

Despite her willing them to stay back, the tears spilled from Clarice's eyes. "How do you know I'm..."

Jonathon met her eyes. There was so much love for her and their child in those eyes that it nearly broke her. "I know, baby." He swallowed thickly as he gazed at her like she was the most amazing sight in all the world and beyond. "If you love me, Clarice. If you love our baby...you'll kill this motherfucker right now."

Clarice was shaking, but she held the gun in place. Hot tears filled her eyes and flooded down her cheeks as she gripped the gun more firmly. "I do love you, Jonathon." She whispered.

"You sure you want to do this?" Orlando murmured, his thumb resting firmly on the device.

"I'm sure." Clarice shifted the aim of the gun suddenly and pulled the trigger.

Orlando cried out and stumbled back, falling to the porch as the bullet cut through his hand, blasting the device to pieces. Blood gushed from the hole in His hand as he crumpled on the porch, hugging it to his chest. He looked up at Clarice slowly, his eyes watering from the intense pain.

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"He's not even human." Orlando choked out thickly as Clarice advanced on him, the Beretta realigned with his forehead.

Clarice's hand wavered, but only for a moment. She stretched out her arm, pointing the gun in his face. "Go to hell."

"I wouldn't do that, honey."

Clarice spun around, startled by the new male voice. Her heart shuddered. The sniper was standing over Jonathon, the muzzle of a gold handgun pressed to Jonathon's temple.

"Be a darling." He said gently. "And drop the Storm."

Clarice stared at Jonathon. He swam before her eyes as fresh tears swelled.

"Do what he says." Jonathon whispered and there was a defeated tone to his voice that terrified Clarice.

She lowered the gun and let it slip from her hand. It hit the porch with a dull clunk as the swollen tears in her eyes spilled over. They had almost made it...just like Jonathon had promised they would.

22...Don't Fear The Reaper...

Hunter stepped back as the woman walked calmly to Lancaster and knelt down before him, wrapping her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. He looked at Orlando who was slowly, painstakingly crawling to his feet. "I charge extra for saving your ass."

Orlando's face was twisted in a grimace of pain and anger. "I oughta have you kill the bitch as planned."

The woman hugged Lancaster more tightly. She whispered her love to him, telling him to be strong and not give up. She had guts, he had to give her that. She was crying but there was no surrender in her. He had to admire that.

Hunter turned his attention to Orlando. "As planned?" He raised an eyebrow. "Has the plan changed?"

Orlando walked a bit stiffly towards Lancaster and the woman. He cradled his bleeding hand against his chest, his usually immaculate clothes now soiled. He reached out with his good hand and grabbed the woman by the hair and ripped her back away from Lancaster. She cried out as he threw her down on the porch. This was the first time Hunter had seen Orlando lose his composure. He was no longer the sophisticated, debonair doctor he showed to the world. His face twisted again as he held out his bloody hand. "You're gonna pay for this, you bitch. Believe me, I can cause you all kinds of pain without harming the child."

Hunter stared at Orlando. The child? He looked at the woman. She curled away from Orlando, hugging her stomach protectively. She was pregnant? His eyes slowly turned back to Orlando. Was that why his plans had changed and he now wanted the woman alive? What did he care if she was...

Hunter's attention was pulled back to Lancaster. Orlando wanted the baby because it was Lancaster's. Was this just another experiment to him?

This isn't your business, just do your job and be done with it.

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But what, exactly, was his job now? Only thirty-four and he was already getting too old for this shit. Maybe he should have just stayed at the motel with Charlie and let this job go. He'd never had a job go so haywire as this one had gone. Maybe it was a sign.

Orlando was pissed. He drew his foot back and nailed the woman between the shoulder blades. She cried out and gasped for air. Lancaster shouted curses at Orlando and tried to reach for the woman. Orlando's foot cocked again when hunter stepped forward and planted a firm hand on Orlando's chest, halting him. "If you want her dead." Hunter spoke low, dangerous. "I'll put a bullet in her. Otherwise, knock off the bullshit. I don't do messy jobs. If you want to beat a pregnant woman like a fucking coward, you're not doing it on my time. I hired on to do a nice, clean job."

"Is that so?" Orlando's eyes were wide and his nostrils flared. He looked like a wild animal gone rabid. The calm, cool doctor was nowhere to be found. "I was watching. You had her in your sights. You had the perfect shot, but you didn't take it."

The woman crawled to her knees and worked her way back to Lancaster.

Hunter stared at Orlando. He had the sudden urge to shoot the man in the face. But this time, he knew it wasn't anyone else telling him to do it. This time, it was all him.

"When they were fucking in the bedroom." Orlando rasped. "You were lined up perfectly with her. I saw your aim, you could've taken her head off right then and there."

He could feel the woman's eyes on him. She was only just now realizing how close she'd come to dying in her lover's arms.

"What does it matter?" Hunter said slowly. "You wanted her alive, and she's alive."

"Yes." Orlando's eyes narrowed. "But you didn't know I wanted her alive, and still you didn't pull the trigger. Why is that? I've never known you to choke on a job before."

It had always been a gift with Hunter to keep his emotions out of his job. It had never mattered to him whether the one hiring him was decent or not. He did his job, he got paid, and that was it. He didn't ask why he was hired to kill someone. It wasn't his job to ask why. It was his job to pull the trigger and collect the money. And he'd always been very good at his job. Some even called him the best. But Orlando was right. He had hesitated, even opted out of the shot. Yet another first to add to his rapidly growing list.

Hunter ignored the man's questions and inquiries. "What do you want done with them?"

A look of pure evil entered Orlando's eyes and Hunter had to consider that the man might be possessed. He wasn't certain if he really believed in all that, but the evil and hate resonating out of Orlando was nearly enough to make him a believer.

"What do I want?" Orlando rasped thickly as he took a stiff step towards the couple. "I want to show the cunt just what kind of *thing* she's been letting inside her." He looked coldly at Hunter. "Get them inside." Orlando turned and walked stiffly into the cabin,

Hunter looked at the woman. "Get up." He said, not harsh. "Help him inside."

The woman looked up at him. "Why didn't you take the shot?" She whispered thickly.

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Hunter didn't answer. He didn't have an answer. He motioned towards the doorway with the handgun. "Inside."

Jonathon could feel Clarice nearly buckle under his weight as she helped him inside. His mind felt disoriented and in pieces, and he couldn't read her thoughts as clearly, but he could feel her fear. She'd never seen him this weak and it terrified her. It terrified him too. He couldn't protect her this way.

An even deeper fear gripped him, though, a fear much more paralyzing. He had seen her hand waver when Orlando told her he wasn't human. She'd come to her own conclusions that he was like Alec, infected with the foreign alien genes, and she'd accepted that. She still loved him even though he was different. But this...it was something altogether different.

There was a loud crash in the kitchen as Orlando knocked pans to the floor as he searched for something to wrap his bleeding hand with. Clarice had been smart to take that shot. She'd been using her head. And in doing so, she had saved his life. Tears stung his eyes as she helped him down on the sofa. He loved her so much. She was the most amazing living breathing being he'd ever come in contact with. And for a time, she had loved him with all her body, heart and mind. Even if he lost her now, he would be forever grateful for the short time he'd been loved by her.

Another crash in the kitchen. Orlando was losing it. Jonathon had never seen him as anything less than suave. Rather than the scientific genius he'd considered himself to be, he now seemed more like a mad scientist.

Jonathon leaned back against the sofa and closed his eyes briefly. He tried to will the strength to come back to his body and mind, but Orlando's little experimental device had done a number on him that he couldn't seem to recover from. Another shot and it would have killed him...or at the very least turned his brain to mush.

He felt Clarice's fingers in his hair, stroking. Her face was close to his and he could feel the terror wafting off her. She might as well be alone in this now. There was nothing he could do to help her. If Alec attacked...

He shoved the thought away. He wanted to turn into her touch, hold her and feel her love once more before Orlando took her away from him forever, but his own fear paralyzed him. He couldn't look her in the eye. He hadn't been honest with her, he had been afraid to tell her the whole truth about himself. His own selfish desire to keep her in his life had kept him from telling her what she had a right to know. And now, his baby was growing inside her. How would she deal with that once she really understood? Would she want it gone?

A tear slid from the corner of his eye and he felt her wipe it away with her fingertips. "Please don't give up now." She cried softly in his ear. "Please."

She clung to him still. But was it out of love...or desperation?

The resignation in Jonathon was crippling Clarice. She could feel him letting go, feel him giving up. But why? Why would he just stop fighting? That wasn't Jonathon. He said he would fight to the death for her and he had meant it. She wiped away another tear that slid from his closed eyes. She touched her fingertips to his face. His skin was warm, even flushed. So like her own skin. Orlando had tried to shock her by saying what he said about Jonathon, but she already knew he had the foreign genes in him. How could she not figure that out? What did he think he was going to accomplish by telling her what she already knew? Make her stop loving him?

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She glanced towards the kitchen. Orlando was wrapping his hand with a clean dish towel. Although his hair was short cropped and still neat, he looked wild and out of his mind. He hadn't foreseen this situation going this way. He hadn't expected her to get the upper hand. He was surely aware that if the sniper hadn't saved him, he would be dead now, his brains blown out across the porch. She didn't flinch or balk at the thought. She had been fully prepared to shoot him. The idea of killing Orlando filled her with no sense of guilt or remorse. She only wished she had been a little quicker at pulling the trigger.

The sniper stood in front of the fireplace, watching her and Jonathon. She couldn't read his eyes. They weren't emotionless like Orlando's, he simply had what was referred to as a poker face. She supposed that was necessary in his line of work.

Jonathon turned his head slowly. His eyes opened to slits as he tried to say something to her. She leaned closer. "Baby, what is it?" She whispered, turning her ear so she could hear him better.

"Don't..." He started thickly, faltered, then managed to get the words out. "Don't fear the reaper."

She frowned, puzzled by his words. The reaper? She drew back a bit and looked at him. His partially closed eyes moved past her to the sniper then looked back to her. He was trying to tell her something but she didn't understand. She turned her head slowly and looked at the sniper. He was still watching them. If it hadn't been for the gun in the sniper's hand, he wouldn't have appeared threatening at all. Had she met him in a social situation, or even in passing, the last thing she would've taken him for was a killer.

Was the sniper the "Reaper" Jonathon was referring to? And if so, why had he said not to fear him? The man had come there to kill her. The only thing that had prevented him was the change in Orlando's plan. The man was still very much a threat. Wasn't he? She recalled Orlando's accusations to the man about not taking the shot. Why *hadn't* he killed her?

But the reality was - their greatest threat was still out there. She'd seen Alec on the monitor. Hadn't she? Or had it just been a trick of the eye? But whether or not what she'd seen was Alec...he was out there somewhere. And close. She felt him. And when he came for her, she would be helpless. She had no gun, and Jonathon could barely move, much less fight for her.

She pressed closer to Jonathon and closed her eyes. Was all of this to be in vain after all? Had they fought to survive this far only to be violently killed, with no rhyme or reason to their existence at all? Was life really that unfair and irrational?

She opened her eyes slowly as warm tears slid down her face. She looked at the sniper. He was still watching her with the same indiscernible poker face.

23...What Meets The Eye...

Orlando rifled through a kitchen drawer, knocking utensils to the floor as he searched for something specific. Hunter turned his head just a hair and watched him. The kitchen and living room were separated only by a long counter, leaving the whole area wide open. What the hell was he looking for? He'd said he wanted to show the woman - or cunt, as he'd so crudely put it - what thing she'd been letting inside her. Hunter personally believed the man had gone over the edge. Hunter wondered why he was still even there. His job had been aborted - along with Orlando's sanity, he was beginning to believe.

Orlando yanked the entire drawer from its slot as it crashed to the floor. He left it and looked around. His eyes fell on the a butcher knife rack and staggered to it and began pulling out knives, dropping them on the floor until he found the one he was looking for. It looked to Hunter like a fillet knife and in his line of business,

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someone holding a fillet knife was never a good sign. He was startled when a deep anxiety began to twist his guts. What the hell was Orlando meaning to do with the knife?

"This will do." Orlando murmured then turned his attention to Lancaster and the woman.

Hunter tensed, although he wasn't sure why. None of this had anything to do with him. He'd become the best at what he did by not involving himself with anything apart from pulling the trigger. He had never felt anything - good or bad - about his targets. He took them out and walked away. No more, no less. So why was this job different?

The woman stiffened when Orlando came into the living room with the knife. "What the hell are you doing?" Her voice shook. She was terrified but determined to do everything in her power to protect the man she loved. He could see Charlie being as strong and devoted. It was admirable.

She tried to put herself between Orlando and Lancaster. "Don't touch him!" She cried and lunged off the sofa at him with no regard to her own safety, surely knowing she could easily be stabbed and slit open.

Orlando anticipated her action and hit her with the fist clutching the knife, knocking her back down. "Hold her!" He ordered Hunter.

Hunter's eyes narrowed. "What *are* you doing?" He asked low.

"Just hold her." Orlando snapped. "And I'll show you." He looked at the woman. "Ready to take a gander at what you been fucking?"

Orlando's crudeness left a vile taste in Hunter's mouth. Still, he found himself uncharacteristically curious about what Orlando was getting at. He went to the sofa and grabbed the woman, sliding his arm around her throat and holding her securely.

"No!" She choked out. She struggled and kicked at him, but couldn't free herself. She screamed at Orlando, "Don't you fucking touch him! Jonathon!"

Lancaster drew away from Orlando. "Don't..." He tried to resist but he clearly had no strength left in his arms. Whatever Orlando had done to him had truly fucked him up royally.

"Time to face the music, Johnny." Orlando reached out with the knife. "Lets see how *unconditional* your bitch's love really is."

"Jonathon." Clarice was shaking and couldn't stop. The sniper's arm was like a vice around her throat. She could barely breathe. Tears drained down her face. What was he going to do to Jonathon? She didn't understand Orlando's words, he wasn't making any sense.

"Check this out." He murmured as he touched the tip of the thin bladed knife to the side of Jonathon's neck just below his ear.

"No!" Oh god, he was going to cut his throat. Clarice jerked against the sniper's grip, but she couldn't budge his arm. Jonathon had healed from the cut on his arm, but it hadn't been fatal. He'd told her he could die from a fatal wound. "Jonathon!"

Clarice's cries echoed through Jonathon's head and heart. She thought Orlando was going to kill him. And in a sense, maybe he was. Because he might as well be dead if Clarice stopped loving him, stopped looking at him the way she did when he held her in his arms and made love to her. He longed for the strength to take the knife from Orlando and end the man's miserable existence. Everything was his fault. All the hell Clarice had been through, all the torment Alec had suffered...it had all been at Orlando's hand.

But maybe what Orlando was doing now was for the best. Jonathon wasn't certain he would've ever been able to confess the truth to Clarice. And it wasn't fair to keep the truth from her. Not when the truth was as big as this. He didn't fight when he felt the sharp tip of the thin blade touch his neck. He closed his eyes, he didn't want to see Clarice's face when she saw what he really was. He couldn't bear to watch the horror fill her eyes as the love drained away. Feeling it would be painful enough, he didn't want to see it too.

The tip of the knife broke the surface of his skin but went no deeper, then slowly began to slice downward.

Chapter 14

Horror rose inside of Clarice as she watched the blood from the cut draining down Jonathon's neck and staining his shirt. Orlando cut slowly like a surgeon, not going deep, barely piercing the skin. She felt her stomach pinch and churn. Nausea overwhelmed her. A cold heat broke out on her face and she knew she was going to vomit. But somehow she fought back the nausea just enough to keep her stomach from lurching.

"Why are you doing this?" She cried softly, her own strength beginning to leave her.

Orlando didn't answer as he concentrated on the incision he was making down Jonathon's neck. Why wasn't Jonathon even trying to fight? What was wrong with him? It was like the life was already gone out of him. She squeezed her eyes shut and refused to accept that. He wouldn't give up so quickly.

"You'll want to see this." Orlando spoke low, his words tinged with an excitement Clarice didn't comprehend.

She slowly opened her eyes against her own will. Orlando laid the knife aside then carefully worked his fingertips into the incision. A frown pinched her brow as he began to slowly peel back an extremely thin, almost see-through filmy layer of Jonathon's skin. The surface beneath the filmy layer of peeled skin was gray and mottled, tough looking, woven through with tiny red and blue veins.

Clarice's throat tightened and began to close. She didn't know what she was seeing. Or maybe she did and her mind just couldn't accept it.

"Need more proof?" Orlando asked slowly as he picked up the knife again and touched it to the curve of Jonathon's jaw. "Take a look at what's *beneath* door number two."

"No." Clarice shuddered.

The tip of the knife pierced the skin of his jaw. Jonathon flinched. "Don't...please."

"Can't hide forever, Johnny." Orlando told him. "Shouldn't she know what's growing inside of her?"

He made a smooth incision along the curve of Jonathon's jaw and up over his cheek bone just past his eye.

"What the *fuck*?" Hunter breathed out low, a hard frown pinching his brow and narrowing his eyes. What kind of freaky shit was this?

He watched in both horror and fascination as Orlando laid the knife aside again and slowly peeled the filmy layer of skin away from the left side of Lancaster's face, once more revealing the veiny gray tough mottled skin beneath. As he peeled the skin up, it pulled away from Lancaster's eyelid, drawing away a wisp of covering from his eye itself.

"No fucking way." Hunter whispered as he stared in disbelief at the eye beneath the wispy layer. The white of the eye was a pale gray and the iris was a gold color with spears of black stabbing towards the center where the pupil should be. But there was no pupil, only the meeting of the black spears.

The woman was shaking in his arms and he wouldn't have expected any less. The man she loved, the man she had been sleeping with and having sex with, the man who's child she was carrying...was not a man at all.

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What the hell he truly was...Hunter couldn't begin to imagine.

He felt the woman's warm tears draining off her face and over his arm. She was clutching his forearm but no longer trying to free herself. Orlando backed away from Lancaster. The man...or whatever he was...just sat there unmoving, his unveiled face turned away. Hunter actually pitied him. Whatever the hell kind of creature he was...he had truly cared for the woman. And Orlando had just taken her away from him forever.

The woman was crying openly and shaking so bad he thought she might pass out. Without thinking, he adjusted his hold on her and wrapped both arms around her, holding her up. He could feel the despair in her and in that moment his hatred for Orlando was enough to cause Hunter to put a bullet in his head. It would be the one time he actually enjoyed killing someone. Just one more first to add to the list. One that would be a welcome addition.

If he loosened his arms, though, the woman would drop to the floor. And a compulsion he didn't understand made him hold onto her, as if the good and decent man that still lived inside him understood that she needed a man's arms around her right now, someone to hold her while her whole existence came apart piece by piece.

24...The Gorge...

Her head was spinning. Or was it the room? If it hadn't been for the sniper's arms holding her up, she would be laying on the floor. His arm was no longer around her throat, he was actually *holding* her, hugging her to him. She didn't understand it, but at this moment she didn't understand anything. Her mind couldn't process what she was seeing. She squeezed her eyes shut as the spinning intensified and she felt her legs weakening as dizziness overwhelmed her. The sniper's arms tightened around her, keeping her on her feet. Why didn't he just let her fall to the floor?

"Huh?" She heard Orlando's voice through the hazy fog. It had a self satisfied tone to it. "Do you see now? Do you *see*?"

"Knock it off." It was the sniper speaking now, his voice low and dangerous, so much so that a new shudder rippled through her.

"Excuse me?" Orlando said quietly, a cold, hard edge to his voice. "You work for me or have you forgotten? You don't give the orders."

Clarice didn't know what was going on between the sniper and Orlando, and she didn't care. She opened her eyes slowly. The room was still spinning but it was gradually slowing down. Her eyes began to clear and Jonathon came into focus. She stared at him, at the exposed alien skin. The thin filmy outer layer must meld somehow with his true skin to create the illusion of human skin. But when she touched him...it felt so real.

"Yeah? Well not anymore." The sniper lowered Clarice to the sofa then straightened up, his weapon still gripped firmly in his hand. "I quit."

Orlando glared at the sniper. "You were paid to do a job." He said coldly. "And that job isn't finished yet."

"You paid me to kill her." The sniper spoke low and calm, but with a deadly tone. "When you altered the plan, my job ended. You can have your money back."

"I don't want the fucking money back." Orlando hissed. Clarice could feel his eyes boring into her as she sagged against the back of the sofa, just a couple feet away from Jonathon. "I want you to kill her after all."

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Clarice heard the words but she couldn't react. She could only stare at Jonathon. He seemed to barely be breathing. He almost looked dead. The thought stabbed her through with fear. She tried to speak his name but her throat felt swollen, thick. The word couldn't find its way out. Jonathon kept his face turned away. Clarice wanted to reach out to him but her hands wouldn't obey. Was she frightened of him now? Repulsed? One of her hands rested against her stomach. She waited for the revulsion to hit her with the reality that the baby growing inside her wasn't entirely human. But it never came. She barely heard the other men's voices until Orlando spoke the words that filled her with terror.

"I don't need her." He told the sniper. "I only need the baby...and I can cut that out of her."

Clarice's head snapped around Orlando was serious. And by the wild look in his eyes, insane as well. She looked back at Jonathon, panic swelling in her like a rising tidal wave. Jonathon's head had turned towards her a bit and the alien eye stared back at her, the black spears pulsing against the gold, resonating a deep fear. A single word exploded through her head.

Run.

Hunter stared at Orlando with horror and disgust. "You twisted motherfucker." He breathed out slow.

"Shoot her." Orlando said without a shred of human emotion. Hunter had to wonder who here was the real monster.

Hunter shook his head slowly. "No."

In a burst of rage, Orlando lunged forward, grabbing for Hunter's weapon. The sudden action caught Hunter off guard and he took a step back as Orlando hurled into him, knocking him back further. Hunter's grip on the weapon tightened, unwilling to let the other man tear it from his grasp. But the man's sudden psychotic break had given him strength Hunter wasn't prepared for. Orlando ripped the gun away and smashed the butt of the handle against Hunter's temple, laying him out.

Hunter went down hard. He laid with his face pressed against the cool wood floor, dazed, his head spinning and a blackness at the edge of his vision, threatening to consume him. He waited for the gunshot that would take the woman's life and put the final touch on this insane job. But rather than a gunshot, he heard a roar of rage erupt from deep inside Orlando.

"Where is she?"

The room swam and spun around Hunter but still he smiled. The woman had run. She was still alive...for now.

The icy air swept into Clarice's lungs, stealing her breath as she climbed upward along the trail that would take her to the gorge. It felt like her heart had crawled into her head and was now pounding forcefully from the center of her brain, making her temples and forehead throb. Her whole body seemed to grow heavier with each step she took up the dirt path. The hard frozen ground was causing the bottoms of her feet to ache as if she'd been on them for a straight twenty-four hours.

She could see Jonathon sitting there on the sofa, his strange gold eye staring at her, his voice in her head telling her to run. There had been more than just fear for her and the baby in that look. He had been viciously

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and intimately exposed right before her eyes. His mask ripped off and his true identity revealed without mercy. A part of her mind was still in shock. She had yet to fully comprehend what she had seen. But there was another part of her looking it in the face.

Jonathon wasn't human. Not even partially, as Alec was. He was an alien. *Alien*. Not from this world. Another species altogether. How had she looked in his eyes and made love to him without seeing it? Without even suspecting the mind blowing difference between them? She'd held him without suspicion or reserve, welcomed him into her body, willingly accepted his seed. Her hand touched her stomach. His baby was growing inside her.

Our baby. Tears burned and spilled over. Was she really prepared for this? Prepared to accept the reality that her baby was half...*alien*? She couldn't wrap her mind around that word. What did it even mean, really? Foreign. Unfamiliar. Even *repugnant*. How did any of those words describe Jonathon? Or their baby? She recalled the smug, self satisfied tone in Orlando's voice after he'd shown her the true origin of the man she'd been sleeping with. He'd exposed Jonathon in hopes of taking her away from him. Surely convinced that once she saw what Jonathon truly was, that she would willingly give up the baby to him, repulsed at the thought of what was growing inside her.

A strangled laugh squeezed out through her tight throat as more tears fell. "Well guess what, Dr. Orlando?" She spoke out loud, her voice rising to a shout. "You can *kiss my ass!*" Fuck him. He wasn't going to win so easily. If he thought she was going to just hand over everything she had left in this world, he had another *think* coming.

She climbed the path, never letting her pace lag. She wasn't sure why she was running away. Even if she managed to escape Orlando, Alec was still out there somewhere and she didn't have a gun. Despite her almost paralyzing fear of the brother she'd never known existed, her heart ached for him, for all he'd went through at the hand of Victor Orlando. Just one more reason to hate the bastard's guts. If she had to die today, she would rather it be at Alec's hands than Orlando's. Somehow Alec's misguided reasons for wanting her dead made more sense to her than Orlando's twisted purpose.

Was Jonathon still alive? Or had Orlando, in his madness, killed him too? He'd said Orlando was his father. She understood now that Orlando wasn't really his father, but simply the one who had been in charge of him. And by saying he was all Orlando had left...what he'd meant was that he was the last of the pure alien source. That's why Orlando had said he was irreplaceable.

She realized that Jonathon was irreplaceable to her as well...and not because of his genetic origins. He was irreplaceable because he was the love of her life, the father of her child, her sole reason for even wanting to be alive.

"Come on back, girl, there's nowhere to run."

The words suddenly echoed up the trail behind her, freezing her blood. She spun around. Orlando was following her and he was close.

"Come on, honey, I'm not gonna hurt you."

Panic tried to grab her as his words catapulted her back twenty years to the dark hallway of her childhood home. She fought the panic and ran up the trail. Inside, she was again running from the Hispanic intruder as he called out to her. Only this time, Jonathon wasn't waiting up around the corner to save her. Her childhood fear overwhelmed and her stubborn bravery of a moment ago vanished as the child in her took over. A part of her wanted to cry out for her dad and mom to save her, the two people who were always there to wrap their

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arms around her, keep her safe.

Tears chilled against her wet face as she gasped and ran harder. Aaron's face rose in her mind and she cried harder, cried for the brother who had been her lifeline, the other half of her existence. His face transformed into Alec, the same exact features but so different inside. She cried for her lost brother too, who had never had the chance to know the love of his family, who had felt abandoned and left behind.

Clarice stumbled and went down, cracking her knee on a rock. She cried out fiercely, more out of the unfairness of it all than from the pain snapping through her knee. She considered just staying there, waiting for Orlando. What if she did die? Who cared? There was no way out of this. Orlando had them. Crazy or not, he had them. Jonathon was weakened, and she couldn't win this fight on her own. She couldn't save herself, much less Jonathon or their baby.

Her body wilted and she cried uncontrollably, her tears hitting the frozen ground. The oncoming night was drawing in closer and closer. She just wanted to lay down and be done with it. God, she was so tired. She just wanted to...

Get off your ass and move!

Clarice flinched and twisted around, the words so clear in her head that she thought someone had spoken them from right behind her.

Fuck it if you're gonna give up now! Run, dammit!

Clarice was on her feet and running before she even realized she had moved. A surge of energy swept through her and she bolted up the trail. She emerged from the trees at a sprint and found herself in a grassy clearing. Across the clearing, everything dropped away into oblivion. She ran across the clearing then slowed as she approached the edge of the gorge. A wave of dizziness threatened her as she peered down into the deep gorge.

To her left, a short plank walk with hand rails gave access to the rope bridge Jonathon had told her about. The rope bridge. She stared at it. Her heart shuddered. A single large rope stretched across the gorge, the siding a mere weave of smaller ropes V-ing up and outward to the other two large ropes meant for hand rails. She swallowed tightly. "No freaking way." She whispered. This was where she would face her fate. There was no way she could go out on those ropes. No way.

"There's nowhere to run, girl."

The sudden voice spun her around. Orlando was standing a few hundred yards away, the sniper's gold handgun gripped tightly in his fist. Had he killed him too? His own guy?

Don't fear the reaper. That's what Jonathon had told her. Would he have helped them? That didn't make sense, he was a hired killer. Hired to kill *her* no less. And yet, when Orlando had ordered him to shoot her...he'd refused. What had he called Orlando? A twisted motherfucker? Then said he quit.

She stared fearfully at Orlando. Had he just eliminated the man? Even that thought made her throat tighten with tears, though she wasn't sure why. There was just something about the man, the tenderness in the way he'd held her when she was falling apart, like he was trying to comfort her somehow. But whether or not he was a good guy at heart didn't matter now. She was alone here with Orlando, and he had the gun.

25...Journey's End...

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Somewhere along the line, Hunter had passed out. Apparently Orlando had hit him harder than he realized. But through the fog, he felt hands grabbing at him, trying to wake him up, lift him off the floor. He opened his eyes slowly and his head swam again, but the dizziness began to abate and his vision cleared.

Lancaster was kneeling beside him. "Wake up, dammit." There was fear and desperation in the man's - or whatever he was - voice. Hunter could still feel the weakness in him as he tugged at his arm.

Groaning, Hunter pushed up on his hands and knees then dropped back on his rear, sitting up right on the floor. He touched his temple where Orlando had hit him with the gun. "Motherfucker." He spit out, a painful knot swelling in the spot. He raised his eyes and Lancaster was staring at him. One human eye and one...very *non* human eye bore into him. Hunter figured if the guy wanted to kill him, he'd be waking up dead right about now.

"Are you all right?" Lancaster asked stiffly. "Can you get up?"

"Yeah." Hunter coughed then crawled to his feet, expecting the dizziness to grab him again, but he stood steady on his feet. "Where did..." he looked around. There was no Orlando. No woman.

"He went after her." Lancaster said. "Up the trail to the gorge. He's...going to kill her."

Hunter looked at him. Even with his face half peeled and that rather creepy alien eye staring back at him, he saw more humanity in Lancaster than he'd ever seen in Orlando. "Do you have more weapons?" Hunter asked.

"In the basement." Lancaster motioned towards the pantry.

Hunter moved quickly and went to the basement. He grabbed a Luger 9mm, checked the clip then took the concrete steps two at a time back up through the pantry. He stuffed the handgun in the back of his jeans and covered it with his jacket. "This way?" He pointed towards the back door.

Jonathon nodded, then asked, "Why are you helping us?"

"Let's just say I've seen the error of my ways." He offered no more as he sprinted out the back door, spotted the head of the trail and took off up towards the gorge.

Chapter 15

Clarice moved slowly towards the plank walk as if invisible hands were moving her feet. She didn't believe she could actually go out on the bridge, but she couldn't just stand still and let him shoot her. She stepped up on the walk.

"There's no place left to run." His voice carried easily across the frosty air. "I don't want to harm you. I apologize for my lack of control back at the house, but I realize now that you're as necessary to me as your child. If I had harmed you, the child would not have survived."

Backing slowly down the plank walk, Clarice stared back at him incredulously. Was this supposed to be some form of pep talk to convince her to come with him? Let him experiment on her and her baby? He may have regained his composure but he was still clearly out of his fucking mind.

"You're not taking my child." Clarice spoke with determination but she couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice. The tears flowed freely, but she had no control over them. "You're not gonna fuck him up the way you did Alec."

"Alec was a special case." Orlando slowly approached the plank walk, the gun held non-threateningly in his hand. But the threat remained nonetheless. "He was damaged goods right from the start because of his connection to you. I tried several different ways to sever that link but..." He shrugged. "It didn't work. I even thought that maybe if you were dead it might finally free his mind. Make him more useful to me." He chuckled as if telling a joke. "That didn't quite work out the way I had planned...thanks to Johnny."

What the hell was he saying? Clarice frowned as she continued to take one slow step backwards at a time.

"Did you think you and your family were just random victims of a violent crime?" Orlando asked. He stepped up on the end of the walk. "That those two young men - Jorge and Sean - had chosen your home by random chance?"

Clarice was shaking. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I hired them." Orlando admitted. "I hired them to kill you and your family, and make it look like a random home invasion. And I put Alec in an observation room and watched him to see if there would be any change in him the moment your life slipped away." He shook his head. "It was going to be my ultimate test." He took a step towards her. "Until Johnny interfered." He raised the gun, but he was motioning rather than pointing. "Do you know he traveled through time to save you? How is that for devotion? I didn't even realize what exactly had happened that saved you and your family, I didn't know Johnny was even capable of such feats...until *you* told me."

Clarice swallowed tightly. "What...what do you mean I told you?" She breathed.

Orlando smiled and paused for the moment, standing where he was. He seemed to be enjoying telling her this story. "Twenty years ago, I sat on a sofa next to a frightened and confused ten year old little girl who no one believed when she told them her rescuer had vanished into thin air." His smile widened. "But I believed her. Especially when she described to me what her rescuer looked like."

It came together suddenly. Orlando was the officer who had taken their statements after the attack. She remembered feeling like he was the only one who didn't think she was crazy. When he'd left, he had leaned down and whispered to her that he believed her. It had made her feel good, that an adult believed her. And a

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cop at that. But he hadn't really been a cop at all.

Orlando swam in her vision. "You bastard." She whispered.

"I know. I'm sorry, Clarice." He said without any remorse. "But look at it this way...you opened my eyes to the potential of Johnny's species. There was so much more to tap into than I had ever realized. And even though Alec remained rather useless to me in the respect of the Hybrid project, he proved to be a very valuable...well, test dummy, I guess you'd call it."

Clarice stared at the man, horrified. She suddenly wished that she, too, was from a different planet, of a separate species as the monster in front of her.

"Sadly, Alec had to endure much pain and torture. But it wasn't all for naught. In fact, he helped me plenty. In fact, that little device I used on Johnny? I had to test it extensively on Alec first. He was never much of a talker, but he could surely scream. Especially as a child. He learned to stifle his screams as he got older, but as a child - wow, he had a set of lungs on him."

"Shut up." Clarice choked out. "You sick sadistic motherfucker!" She was crying openly. "How could you do something like that to him? How..." Her sobs overwhelmed her. He was enjoying this. It was like he was getting off on describing the torture and torment he'd inflicted.

"You know." He spoke low, thoughtful. "He even screamed your name once. It was the only time he ever spoke an actual whole word. He was actually crying out for *you* to help him. I found that rather fascinating."

"*Shut up you sick fuck!*" Clarice screamed and sank down to the plank walk as she came to the end of it. She leaned against the wooden rail and hugged herself tightly, shaking badly. Images of Aaron's face on Alec stabbed through her mind, images of the child being tortured, his mind ripped apart piece by piece, and all the time crying out for the only person in the world he felt any real connection to.

Orlando sighed and stared at her. "Don't you see, Clarice. Your family has always belonged to me. I've been the driving force behind it since your mother came to my college. I may have been young then, but I was still the brains behind it all." He stepped closer. "Now it's time to continue the legacy. Your child won't go through what Alec went through. Your child is special, one of a kind. And I have high hopes for him. He will be greatly cared for. I give you my word."

"Your word?" Clarice looked up at him slowly. "Your *word*? Are you serious? Are you so far out of your fucking mind that you really think your *word* means shit to me?" She pulled herself to her feet and looked over her shoulder down into the gorge, then returned her attention to Orlando. "I would take my child's life before I put it into your hands."

"You would never kill your baby." Orlando said with confidence. "Even though it's father is...well, an alien...you still love him. And that child means everything to you. Am I wrong?"

"No." She whispered. "He does mean everything to me...which is why I would never let you anywhere near him. Even if it means taking him out of this world."

"You would do that to Johnny?" He wondered. "Kill his child?"

His words cut at her sharp and fierce. This baby meant the world to her. It was physical evidence of her and Jonathon's love for one another. The thought of harming their child was more than she could take...but how could she allow his innocent life to fall into this man's hands?

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Orlando held out his hand to her. "Come away from the edge, Clarice. I promise, you will be with your child and with Jonathon. You will all be together. Doesn't that seem a more logical choice than murdering your child?"

He was trying to manipulate her, fill her with guilt for even thinking of harming her baby. And it was working. Yet she couldn't reach out to him. Feeling guilty or not, she couldn't make herself go to him. She closed her eyes. *Please, God, help me. Please just make this nightmare end. Please!*

"It's over, Clarice." Orlando said softly. "It's time to come home."

That's when she felt it. Felt *him*. She opened her eyes to see Alec right behind Orlando. Where had he come from? She didn't know, but Orlando's focus on her left him oblivious to the sudden threat. Clarice didn't know if Alec had any capability to read her mind as she was sure Jonathon could, but she put all her force into one thought directed at him.

Please help me, Alec. I'm so sorry I couldn't help you when you needed me but please don't let him hurt my baby the way he hurt you.

"Clarice." Orlando stretched his hand out closer, motioning for her to come to him.

Clarice looked past Orlando's head and into Alec's eyes. For a split second she saw the brother he could've been; her, Aaron and Alec, three happy kids, running, playing, laughing, bonded by love and their unique connection. Tears spilled over. "Please...Alec."

A frown creased Orlando's brow as he cocked his head a fraction. "What did you..." He turned suddenly, realizing the presence behind him. "No." He tried to move but it was too late for him. A sudden, startled cry wrenched free of Orlando's throat as Alec's left hand sank into his hair, his fingertips gouging into his scalp. Blood began to trickle down Orlando's forehead. A strange gurgling rose in his throat as his knees buckled and he sank to the wooden planks. Alec's face was expressionless, emotionless, his ice blue eyes holding Clarice's stare as he slowly crushed Orlando's skull in his palm.

Clarice waited for the revulsion to hit her but it never came as she watched Alec take Orlando's life right before her eyes. She felt nothing, and she wondered if that should worry her. But it didn't matter, because Alec's state of mind wouldn't allow him to let her live. Whether she'd pleaded with him in her mind or not, he would've still killed Orlando. She had no way of knowing if he had heard her or if somewhere inside he knew how sorry she was that she hadn't been able to help him when he needed her the most.

When he stepped up on the walk, she sank back down and hugged her stomach tightly, crying softly. She would never hold their baby in her arms, never see the pride and joy in Jonathon's eyes as he gazed at the evidence of their unconditional, undying love. She would never feel Jonathon's arms around her again as they made love and made more babies together. She wondered how she could lose so much in such a short period of time. Maybe when she got to the other side, God would explain to her what right now felt like a grave injustice on His part.

The soles of Alec's boots scraped across the wood planks as he came closer. Why are you just sitting there waiting to die? The thought hit her hard and she looked up. At the end of the walk, behind Alec, the golden 9mm lay still beside Orlando's lifeless body. She'd told herself she would fight to the death for Jonathon, for their child, and yet here she was just waiting for Alec to take her life and that of her child.

A sudden burst of courage propelled her out of her crouched position and sideways towards the railing. She slipped through the open area beneath the rail and stumbled out onto the grass, losing her footing, hitting the

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ground. She quickly crawled back to her feet and looked back. Alec still stood on the plank walk, watching her. She gasped and ran for the end of the walk. Alec turned slowly, following her movement. She raced up to the walk as Alec was coming back towards her. She fell across Orlando's corpse and grabbed the gold handgun then stumbled back, holding the weapon out in front of her, her hands shaking badly.

Alec moved back down to the end of the walk and stood next to Orlando's body. He looked down at the dead man as if studying him. He raised his eyes slowly to Clarice. The gun rattled in her hands as her whole body trembled. Orlando's story of Alec's torment rang through her head, his screams of pain and torture, crying out for her in his moment of greatest anguish.

She could barely see him through her watery eyes. Her legs felt weak. "I'm so sorry, Alec." She cried. She expected him to come off the walk, perhaps lunge off there after her, but he just stood there, watching her. She had to do it, she had to shoot him but her hands wouldn't stop shaking and her finger wouldn't pull the trigger. She could've shot Orlando without thinking, but Alec was an innocent victim. He didn't deserve this. She cried harder. Dammit! He didn't fucking deserve this!

Someone was behind her. She looked quickly. The sniper stood a few feet away, holding a handgun at his side. A pity she wouldn't have thought he was capable of reflected in his eyes. "I can do it." He said gently, bring up the gun. "You don't have to do this."

Clarice looked back at Alec. He still stood on the end of the walk. Why wasn't he moving? He could escape...or kill them. But he just looked at her, lowered his eyes to Orlando then looked up at her again. His tormentor was dead, she realized. Somehow...it had brought him some level of peace. She closed her eyes for a moment and reached for him with her mind. What she felt brought more tears, but not bad tears. He wasn't in pain anymore...he just wanted to go and be with his family.

She watched him sink slowly to his knees, like a weary traveler who's finally come to his journey's end. And she knew it had to be her. He wanted it to be her. "I have to do it." She whispered to the sniper, her voice thick. "He wants me to do it."

The man lowered his gun. She could feel him looking at her uncertainly as she moved a little closer to Alec. He followed, his weapon ready in case Alec suddenly sprang into action. But he wouldn't. He was done. He just wanted to go home.

She stopped a few feet away from Alec. He stared at her. His eyes didn't seem so empty anymore. He looked like Aaron. Just like him. Clarice cried as she slowly raised the gun and aimed it at his forehead. Her hands were still shaking badly. She looked at the sniper and pleaded through her tears, "Please...help me...I can't hold it steady."

The man stuffed his own weapon in the back of his jeans and moved up close behind her, covering her hands with his. His mouth was close to her ear as he whispered, "He's going to a better place."

Clarice cried and trembled inside the man's arms as his hands steadied the gun and his finger curled around hers. Alec looked at her one last time and slowly closed his eyes. "Close your eyes too." The man said quietly. She did. His finger tightened around hers and she felt the recoil of the gun before she heard the shot. Just one shot. She kept her eyes closed.

I'm sorry. The words floated through her mind. Were they her words to Alec...or his words to her? She couldn't tell.

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"We should get you back down to the cabin." The man spoke softly as he took the gun from her hands and stepped back.

Clarice turned slowly and looked at him. "Why did you come up here?" She whispered thickly.

He gazed at her for a long moment, then asked quietly, sincerely, "Do you believe a man can be redeemed from his sins?" There a note of fear in his voice that she believed was very unaccustomed for him.

"Yes." She said softly. "I do believe that."

He nodded slowly. "So do I."

When they finally returned to the cabin and climbed the back porch steps, he stopped her at the back door and looked at her sincerely, "Orlando - and Orlando alone - was the only one in all this...who lacked humanity." He stared deep into her eyes and spoke low, soft. "I hope you understand that."

Warm tears filled her eyes. "I do."

26...Only Skin Deep...

Jonathon stood at the bathroom sink and stared at his reflection. His hands were unsteady as he slowly folded the thin wispy piece of skin back over his face and watched it meld back into place, giving him the appearance of a human once more. He fixed the skin on his neck then just stood there, staring at himself. His mind and body felt numb, but not from the effects of Orlando's device. The sniper had been gone a long time. Had he gotten there in time to save Clarice? Jonathon was afraid to reach out with his mind, afraid he wouldn't feel her there, that there would just be a hollow emptiness. His mind was still weak, it might not work anyway, but he was afraid to try.

He left the bathroom and went into the bedroom and stood at the same window through which the sniper had lined up his shot with Clarice as she and Jonathon had been making love. What if he had shot her and she had died right there in his arms? He would have died with her. He stared out the window. It was dark out there. And cold. Bitterly cold. But not nearly as cold as the chunk of ice forming in the pit of his heart. She had seen what he was. *Really* seen it. Even if she had survived, how could she...

He gripped the edge of the window frame and hung his head, closing his eyes. Orlando should have killed him. Death would be better than this-

Arms slid around his waist from behind and held him tight. He shuddered at the feel of her touch, wondering if he was imagining it. He turned slowly, still suffering the worst fear he'd ever felt. She was real, and standing right there, unharmed. He wanted to look in her eyes, but he couldn't. He closed his eyes and whispered, "Clarice..."

"Don't." She spoke low and soft. Her hands touched his face, caressed his skin. "Open your eyes, Jonathon. Look at me."

His eyes opened slowly and met her warm gaze. "I'm so sorry." He whispered thickly.

"For what?" She asked softly, sincerely. "For loving me like I've never been loved before? For saving my life over and over again? For giving me a reason to go on, a reason to embrace life? Tell me, baby...just what is it you're sorry for?"

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Her beautiful face swam before him.

"I love you, Jonathon." She whispered. "And nothing - *nothing* - will ever make me stop loving you." She traced her fingertip over his face where the skin had been peeled away. "It's just skin, baby." She smiled. "None of us would look too pretty without it."

He kissed her, pulling her tight into his arms. Was the nightmare over? Really over? It seemed he'd lived his whole life inside that nightmare...had he finally awakened to a bright and beautiful morning? He hugged Clarice tighter, wondering if it would be possible to ever let go of her again.

"So what now?" Jonathon Lancaster looked at Hunter across the top of the counter. Hunter read the questions loud and clear; was Hunter going to reveal his identity to an unsuspecting world?

Hunter reached over and held out his hand as Lancaster shook it cautiously. "We're good." Hunter said and squeezed Lancaster's hand firmly. The other man nodded and smiled. Hunter turned towards the front door. "Good luck and God speed. It's been...unusual."

Lancaster chuckled. "To say the least." He stepped around the end of the counter. "We don't even know your name."

A slow, thoughtful smile spread across Hunter's lips. "Bob."

"Thank you, Bob." Lancaster said. "For everything." Clarice slipped her arm through Lancaster's and smiled affectionately at Hunter, nodding softly.

Hunter looked at the two. Did they have any idea that they had helped him more than he had helped them? He didn't think so. The amazing love and devotion they shared had revealed a side of humanity he'd never really witnessed before. Ironic that it took a being from another world to prove to him there was humanity in this one. Hunter smiled. "Thank you." He shook his head then and tapped his temple. "By the way, that was one hell of a mind trick out there." He lightly rubbed his finger beneath his nose. "I was zeroed in on Orlando and ready to pull the trigger. Would've done it too." He cast them one last nod and wave and walked out before Jonathon could respond.

"Did you..." Clarice started.

Shaking his head slowly, Jonathon murmured, "It wasn't me."

"Then who?" Her brows pinched. "Could it have been...Alec?"

"Or someone else." Jonathon said as he slipped his arms around her and rubbed his hands down over her stomach.

"The baby?" She whispered. "How is that even possible?"

He laughed softly. "After all that you've been through, all you've seen and learned in the last few days...you can still ask how that is possible?"

She smiled and leaned back against him. "My bad."

27...Hope For Tomorrow...

It wasn't an easy thing to watch Jonathon insert the long needle into the base of Alec's skull and inject the solution that would extinguish Alec's life once and for all. But as the fluid in the syringe disappeared, she felt a peace come over her. Not relief. She no longer feared Alec. But peace of mind that Alec was finally free. That he would finally be with his family and feel their love, and understand at last that the lies Orlando had tormented him with were just that - lies.

She watched Jonathon lay him down in the grave and fold his arms across his chest. His eyes were closed, his face relaxed. He looked peaceful. Tears filled her eyes. He looked exactly like Aaron, and yet he had something all his own as well. Had they all grown up together, she knew she would have been able to tell them apart with ease.

Jonathon came to her and slid his arm around her shoulders as they looked down at Alec's peaceful form. There were tears in Jonathon's eyes also. "He spoke to me." He whispered thickly. He looked at Clarice with his beautiful, unique eyes. "Just before I...injected the solution." A tear broke free and slid down his face. "He said... You did it, Johnny, you saved her."

Clarice leaned against Jonathon and cried softly. "How did he still know I ever needed to be saved?" She looked up at him. "After you made the jump...weren't you the only one who remembered what had happened the first time? How did he know?"

Jonathon shrugged. "I don't know." He said quietly. "Maybe...where I come from...our minds function differently. I don't know. I never knew my home." His strange eyes grew distant. "I don't even know how I got here, or where my home is. My life, as far as I knew, began in Victor's lab." He lowered his gaze to Clarice. "But it doesn't matter anymore, because my life is with you now."

"Everyone should know where they came from."

Jonathon and Clarice turned quickly at the new voice. Leland stood a few feet away. "Uncle Lee." Jonathon breathed then went to him and hugged him. Leland hugged him back fiercely.

"It's good to see you in such good health, Johnny." Leland smiled.

"Victor said that you were..."

Leland shrugged. "Never underestimate the value of a good old fashioned bullet proof vest." He rubbed his chest and winced. "But even so, those bullets pack one hell of a punch."

"Well it's good to know you're still in one piece." Jonathon grinned. He turned to Clarice and held out his hand. She came to him and he slipped his arm around her shoulder. "Clarice...meet Uncle Lee."

Leland took Clarice's hand and smiled warmly. "The lady of the hour." He kissed her hand lightly. "It's a pleasure and an honor."

"And for me." She smiled and stepped up, hugging him. "Thank you." She whispered in his ear. "For everything you tried to do for Alec. And all you've done for Jonathon, and me." She kissed his cheek and stepped back. "You are forever a part of our family."

"Family?" Leland raised one eyebrow.

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Jonathon slid his arms around Clarice's waist and flattened his hands on her stomach. "Family." He nodded.

"Yeah?" Leland smiled big, then he laughed and stepped forward, hugging both of them at once.

That evening, after dinner, as the three of them sat in the living room before a warm fire, Clarice looked up from her cup of hot cider. "What did you mean?" She asked Leland softly. "When you said everyone should know where they came from?"

The older man smiled and looked at Jonathon. "Victor led you to believe that he had created you from an alternate source of your same genetic material. That your life literally began with him." Leland shook his head slowly. "But that was a lie. The original source was your mother."

Jonathon frowned, his body tensing. "My mother?" He whispered. "I had...a mother?"

"I don't know where she came from." Leland admitted. "Or how they got her in their possession...but when they brought her in, she was dying." A sadness filled his eyes. "I only saw her once while she was still alive. She was..." He smiled with tears in his eyes as he looked at Jonathon. "Beautiful. I held her hand as she slipped away." The tears swelled and slipped free. "In my mind I heard her voice whisper to me...please take care of my son...he's all alone now."

Clarice's throat tightened as her tears flowed freely. "She was pregnant?" She whispered unsteadily. "With...Jonathon?" She looked at Jonathon. He gazed distantly at the fire, his face wet with tears.

Leland nodded slowly. "In the last moments of her life." He told Jonathon softly. "Her only concern was that you would be cared for. And I promised her...that I would take care of you." he wiped his eyes. "And I tried my best."

Jonathon looked at him the way a son looks at the father he adores. "You made good your promise." He whispered thickly. "You were my lifeline. If it hadn't been for you...who knows what Victor would have turned me into."

"He could've never turned you into something bad." Leland said. "You come from too good of stock."

Clarice gazed at the older man. "You loved her."

The older man smiled. "I did." He admitted softly. "Like I've never loved another woman."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around Jonathon. "It's amazing." She whispered. "How far love with travel...just to find a home."

Leland smiled and leaned back in his chair as Jonathon kissed Clarice on the lips. "Indeed." He murmured and sipped at his cider.

Laying in one another's arms that first night after the nightmare was finally over, a new kind of peace settled over Jonathon and Clarice. The future no longer seemed so uncertain and frightening. But as Clarice lay close to Jonathon's warm body, still damp from their love making, she asked him quietly, "Are there others still out there?"

"Others?"

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"Like my mom." She whispered. "Women who were inseminated. Are there more out there like Alec?"

A silence hung over them for a long moment before Jonathon said softly, "I don't know. I suppose there must be."

"Do you think it's really over?" She asked. "Or will others eventually come after us?"

He pulled her closer and hugged her tight. "It's over." He assured. "Victor was the driving force behind the project. The higher powers were already systematically shutting it all down. Victor was the only one trying to keep it going."

"What do you think will happen to the other ones out there?" She wondered. "What kind of abilities will they have?" Her voice lowered as she huddled closer. "How will they use them?"

Jonathon stared at the dark ceiling. "I think it will be a case by case situation. Like everyone else, there will be the good...and the bad."

A low sigh escaped her and she pressed her face against his chest, listened to his heart beating. It didn't sound any different than her own. But she supposed all hearts sounded the same when they beat with love.

"What do you think became of Bob?" She asked suddenly, quietly. "Do you think a hired killer can really turn over a new leaf?"

"Well, he changed his name to Bob." Jonathon smiled and looked down at her. "That was a start."

She met his eyes. The gold flecks glowed in the dark of the bedroom. "Changed his name?"

"Seriously, baby." He stroked his fingers through her hair. "Did he really look like a *Bob* to you?"

Chapter 16

28...Islands In The Sun...

Snow was falling heavily outside the window. Charlie set aside the waxing cloth and skis and went to watch it. The mountain was coated and all she could see was white. Nausea pinched at her stomach but it wasn't as bad as when she woke up that morning. It had been hitting her every morning for the past few days. She kept telling herself it was just the stomach flu, but no one else was sick. A little voice in her head tried to make her face reality but she had yet to stop and really listen. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

She traced her fingertip across the surface of the cool window, drawing in the condensation that had settled on the glass. She stared at the window and the name she had written on it. Her throat tightened and she bit her lower lip. For the first few days after he left her there at the motel, she'd kept expecting him to show up at the ski lodge. She knew it wasn't a realistic expectation, but one she couldn't resist. Not at first. But it had been nearly two weeks now and she knew he wasn't coming back. But then, he'd told her he wasn't.

A breeze swirled through the falling snow outside and flicked it against the glass. Charlie felt the icy air whirl through the hole in her heart as well. Tears stung her eyes but she blinked them back. Crying wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't bring him back. It was way past time for her to face reality; she was on her own, and soon there would be another who looked to her for love and care.

Her hand flattened on her stomach and she closed her eyes. Though she fought them, a tear managed to escape and slide down her cheek. She didn't feel anything bad towards Bob. He had wanted to stay, it was in his eyes when he'd left her. Perhaps that was why she'd clung to the hope that he would come back. But that hope was gone now, buried deep beneath the Colorado snow and put to its final rest at the base of the majestic Rocky Mountains.

I love you, Bob...please don't forget me. The words fluttered from her heart on delicate wings and she prayed they had the strength to seek him out wherever he was in this vast, cold world. That they would somehow bring him a sense of love and belonging. She had sensed he needed a little of that in his life the moment she had looked into his eyes. Such captivating eyes. The way he had left her, the things he had implied...it possessed all the signs of a bad guy. But she would let nothing and no one depict him as a *bad guy* to their child. For Charlie, he would always be the White Knight of her story...and the Hero of their child's fantasies.

"God speed." She whispered, her throat tight with tears. "Please be safe."

Behind her, a coin rattled down into the jukebox, and then...

'Aruba, Jamaica, ooh I wanna take ya to Bermuda, Bahama, come on pretty mama...'

Charlie stiffened as the words to the Beach Boys' song *Kokomo* drifted across the room like a warm, tropical breeze. Her heart shuddered as she slowly turned around.

Leaning casually on the jukebox, Bob flashed her the smile that had made her fall in love with him at first sight. She couldn't move. Surely she was imagining him there. But then he was moving, walking towards her, casually and with that powerful confidence that assured him he was the one person in all the world she wanted to see most.

Her pulse quavered erratically when his hands touched her, drew her into the embrace she thought she would never feel again. When his lips brushed hers, she couldn't respond, still in shock. But as the heat of his mouth

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began to warm her from the heart out...a low moaning sob shuddered up her throat and she accepted his presence there as sweet reality.

Charlie clung to him as his arms tightened fiercely and their kiss deepened. When he finally drew back, Charlie gasped softly then pressed her face to his throat and finally let the tears flow. He stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head.

"So...Aruba?"

EPILOGUE

The wipers swished rapidly as the fierce downpour beat relentlessly at the windshield of the white Sedan. Emmy Harris turned the wipers up to the last notch but it still did very little to help clear her view of the road ahead. She wasn't exactly sure where she was now. Somewhere along the line she'd taken a wrong turn and now she was lost along a Michigan back road.

The Sedan's headlights stabbed into the darkness but all she could see in the beams was more rain. She slowed the car a bit more, barely able to make out the white line to her right. She was so intent on keeping it in sight, she almost rolled upon the man walking on the shoulder of the road.

"Shit!" She gasped and swerved out a hair away from the edge and towards the center of the road. She passed him by and glanced in her rear view mirror as she touched the brakes. The rain glimmered red and reminded Emmy of blood. The thought chilled her. She tried to get a closer look at the man. He walked with his head down against the driving rain and wore a heavy military jacket. She wondered what kinds of weapons he had concealed beneath that jacket, then instantly felt guilty. She was stereotyping, a result of watching too many movies.

She started to press on the gas and leave him behind when the storm outside surged more violently. It was like the ocean itself was being dumped down on them. She glanced in the rear view mirror again. She could barely even see the man. "Dammit." She groaned and anxiously tapped the steering wheel with her fingertips. She pulled the Sedan to the shoulder and pressed on the brake, bringing it to a full stop.

The man approached the rear of the car, his head ducked low. He didn't seem to realize the car was even there till he was about to walk into the bumper. He stopped and stood motionless, his head still down. Clarice frowned. She knew the smart money was on getting the hell out of there, but for reasons she had yet to figure out, she popped open her door and stepped out. She was instantly drenched and didn't bother with grabbing her jacket as she moved to the rear of the car.

"Hey!" She yelled through the downpour. "Get in! I'll give you a ride!" She thought he hadn't heard her because he just stood there, unresponsive. When she started to holler again, he slowly looked up. She pointed towards the car. "Come on, man! You'll drown out here! Let me give you a lift!"

He just looked at her. She wondered what had made her get out of the car in the first place to offer a stranger on a dark highway a ride. But whatever it was, she couldn't force him to accept. She turned and hurried back to the driver door, slipping inside and out of the downpour. "You want to drown." She whispered as she started the car. "Then drown. I was just trying to be nice."

The passenger door opened suddenly, making her jump. The man got in and closed the door. He looked like a drowned rat. Probably much the way she herself looked, she mused. She held out her hand tentatively, "I'm Emmy."

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He didn't acknowledge, just stared out the front windshield.

She raised her eyebrows and cocked her head. "Okay then." She murmured as she withdrew her hand and put the Sedan into gear.

"Stefan." He said low, his voice deep and course, but not in an unattractive way. In fact, it raked her skin in that pleasing way a man's beard stubble feels when he's kissing all over a woman's body.

Emmy flinched inwardly. Where the hell had that come from? She looked at the man and her previous thoughts resurfaced as her eyes moved over his beard stubbled face. Despite his drowned rat persona, he was rather attractive. He stared at her with piercing eyes, much more intense and clear than she had expected.

"It's nice to meet you." She offered her hand again. "Stefan."

Stefan looked at the woman's outstretched hand. He shouldn't touch her. Not at all. But the quiet invitation in her eyes, an invitation he was sure she wasn't even aware was there, pulled at him like a flint of steel to a magnet.

He reached out slowly and slid his strong masculine hand into her soft slender feminine grasp. His hand closed around hers as an instant wave of heat rushed through him. He held her eyes as the fire raged inside him. So much hotter than ever before. It startled him, even frightened him. He drew his hand back quickly.

"It's nice...to meet you, too." He swallowed tightly. "Emmy." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He shouldn't have gotten in the car. He shouldn't be here with this woman now. She had a gentle innocence about her that he didn't want to damage...and yet was the very thing he craved.

He turned his face away from her as the Sedan pulled back onto the road and picked up speed. He stared at her reflection in the passenger window.

Do you know what you just let into your car?

The End

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- **Just a note for clarity - "Stefan" is one of the Hybrid experiments that Jonathon and Clarice were speaking of.**

To My Readers: I want to thank all of you so much for taking the time to read this story. It is my first "complete" novel and my "baby" :) This story was actually developed over many years, beginning as a novella and going through many transformations before finally coming to rest in the novel you just read. I love my characters and may some day continue their stories. I've considered writing a story based on Hunter (Bob) and Charlie. For a character who sort of inserted himself into my story, I got a bit attached to "Bob" :) And of course, Jonathon and Clarice. Their love and relationship is too unique and beautiful to just "end" right here :)

I wrote the epilogue as an opening to possibly continue the larger aspect of the story based on new characters with the same link to the lab Jonathon and Alec were associated with. I'll just have to wait and see if that develops.

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If you liked this story, I would suggest you check out my other novel (a work in progress) "Safe Haven". It isn't listed under erotica but it is filled with much of the same level of passion between the characters, as well as suspense. I find it much easier to stay interested in a story when there are others wanting to read what happens next :) So, if you check it out, great! If not, that's okay too.

So again - Thank you so much for reading and finding this story worth reading all the way through to the end. I hope there was nothing that left any reader feeling cheated or unfulfilled by the end of it all. But if there was, please let me know. Thank you for your all your wonderful and encouraging comments - they were greatly appreciated! And I hope to see you all around the "neighborhood" of my other stories :) You guys are great! God bless.

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