

Death Perception

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Dedication

To Phyllis and Karen for reading all those early manuscripts and not telling me how really bad they were. I hope these new ones meet your expectations. Marie C., you are one of those friends I will remember for as long as I live. Say hi to Smoky for me.

Murder is born of love, and love attains the greatest intensity in murder.

Octave Mirbeau

The eyes sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.

Henri Bergson

Mind moves matter.

Virgil

Only one who can see the invisible can do the impossible.

Frank Gaines

Chapter I

I was sitting on the edge of the overpass on I35N halfway between Waco and Temple when the

DPS cruiser hit its siren and pulled over. I slowly set my backpack down and swiveled to face them, keeping my back to the drop but mindful of my balance.

The two front doors flew open and a matched pair of officers in starched uniforms and crisp straw hats under burr cuts approached me cautiously.

“Son,” the younger male drawled in a South Texas accent that reminded me of my own. “You’re not thinking of jumping, are you?”

“Down there’s where they found her,” I told him and watched as their brows creased in confusion.

“Pink Socks. That’s where they found her body,” I returned.

He looked over the edge. “Sure enough. Down in that ditch.”

“What’s your name, son?” The other asked me and I stared briefly at their name badges. V. Striker and T. Lambrecht.

“Cale Snowdon,” I answered.

“Cale---you know the FBI has a BOLO out on you? They think you’ve been kidnapped. What in Sam’s Seven Hells are you doing out here?”

“You ever wonder what it’s like to fly?” I asked dreamily, looking over my shoulder at the hundred-foot drop.

“Don’t do anything foolish, son,” the one called Lambrecht cautioned sidling closer.

I swung my legs around awkwardly; they had only come out of the casts a week earlier. My crutches were lying in the grass nearby.

“Come on, Cale,” he soothed. “Give me your hand, let’s get in the cruiser, go back home.”

“Don’t touch me,” I cried in alarm. I hated it when anyone touched me, I saw their innermost desires, hidden shames and things they denied even to themselves.

“I want to die,” I whispered quietly but he heard me and spoke softly into his mike.

“Cale, your uncle is worried about you. Come on back, now. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later.”

He turned his head and muttered something to his partner who moved to flank me.

I scooted further down the railing, my jean jacket popped open and the neck of my hospital gown showed clearly stuffed into the stolen jeans that were four sizes too big and six inches too long but they were the only ones available to me when I’d rummaged through the patient closet in the room next to mine and stolen them.

“How did you get here from Cardinal Glennon Children’s Hospital in Austin?” the older man asked.

“Hitched.”

I had; everyone wanted to stop for the lonely figure on crutches but I was particular about who I climbed in with. Some of those that stopped were sexual predators sensing an easy mark or so they thought but as soon as my hand touched the car or truck door, I knew what kind of character the driver had.

“You hitchhiked?” He was aghast. “After what happened to you and your family, you hitched? Are you nuts?”

I looked at him, in the eyes. “Yes,” I answered seriously and sadly. “I am.” And I jumped.

Of course, I didn’t get far. The other DPS officer had a lariat and roped me as soon as I pushed off and when I jumped; the noose tightened around my arms, shoulders and ribs, snugged up tight and stopped my fall some four feet over the edge. I dangled, unable to breathe as the rope compressed my lungs but he hauled me up rapidly. Both of them grabbed my jacket and hoisted me back onto the concrete apron.

I was pale, unresponsive and in shock. One of them ran back to the cruiser, dug into the trunk and came back with a blanket, which he wrapped around me.

We heard the wailing of sirens, an ambulance and more cruisers. Within minutes, a ring surrounded us of vehicles, which disgorged more uniformed personnel.

Four EMTs knelt at my side, checked me over and carefully lifted me onto a gurney.

“He tried to jump,” the DPS officer told the lead paramedic.

“Cale, how are you feeling? Any pain?”

I just stared, went away so that their touch would not affect me. I could and did wander in my own mind in a world I created to escape the horrors of the real one.

“Cale? Wake up, Cale. Someone wants to talk to you.”

Slowly, I turned my head and perused my surroundings. I was back in a hospital with cheerful cartoon characters on the walls and bright artwork everywhere.

It was not a place I remembered, though all hospitals looked generically the same. This one was not Cardinal Glennon of Austin but another in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. I was not in a private room but a large area with several beds all housing children from four to fifteen. Most of them were awake and happily playing with toys or their visitors.

Next to my bed was my uncle, my father’s twin and a man I did not know; he wore a three-piece suit that was expensive and screamed feds.

“Cale, how are you?” My uncle’s face was compassionate but he was a stranger to me. Even though he was a twin to my father and identical, I did not know him. I did not remember any of my family. They had all been murdered by a serial killer and the only reason I was still alive was because I had lied to my parents and twin brother; taken the four wheeler out to the far pasture to goof off rather than work on the fence. Machine and I both had fallen into a brand new sinkhole that went twenty feet deep.

I fell off the ATV and hit the bottom breaking both legs, and then the vehicle landed on me, broke my arm, my nose, my pelvis and crushed my skull.

I lay in that hole for three days until a neighbor came looking for the help my dad had promised in installing a well pump and he found instead, a slaughterhouse of bodies.

Someone or something, had broken in, dropped the truck on top of my dad, Tasered, raped and butchered my mom and then did the same thing to my twin sisters and my twin brothers.

My family was unique in that way; we were all sets of twins, even my mom and dad. We lived on a ranch that had been in the family for nearly 150 years and twins went back even then.

My fall had resulted in a skull fracture, severe concussion and coma; when I woke 72 days after the accident, I remembered nothing of the last ten years. My earliest memory was of a heifer calf poking its nose into my face on a porch swing around the age of three. When the nurses told me my family was dead, murdered, I asked, “Who?”

I did not remember any of them.

I spent the next three weeks in the pediatric wing. When I became somewhat mobile on crutches, I escaped one night by stealing clothes, some money and the crutches. No one came out to stop me as I hobbled down the hallways to the exits and out onto Fifth Street.

It took me several hours to reach 35S but it was more of a case of needing to rest frequently; my health was precarious after surgeries on all my breaks. I could not move fast on my own. I had made it all of 75 miles up the interstate and been compelled to stop at the lonely overpass where the murdered girl wearing only pink socks had been found.

Her violent death and lingering emotions had been overwhelming and triggered the despair I was already feeling from my own situation.

“Cale,” my uncle’s voice had the unique ability to draw me back from wherever my mind had skittered.

I looked at him from out of the corner of my eye; I did not like to see anyone full on, it made me nervous to have him or her stare at my eyes.

My family was known for their luminous, oddly colored deep violet eyes and their strange psychic powers, or so they told me. I knew that when someone touched me, I knew what they had done that they didn't want anyone to know.

If you raped your daughter, I saw it when you put me in the wheelchair. If you stole drugs from the med cabinet to feed your habit, I felt it when you stuck the needle in my arm.

When you held the stethoscope to my chest and listened to my heartbeat, I saw you steal your way through med school and perform illegal abortions that killed a young girl.

"Cale, look at me."

I could only obey that insistent voice and both sets of violet eyes looked into each other. I sighed in relief. Nothing came across from his mind to mine but love, compassion and fear. Fear for me.

"What were you thinking, Cale?" Jamison Tucker Snowdon asked quietly. "Your aunt and I have been frantic with worry. We thought he had come back and taken you from the hospital. We called the FBI. This is Dr. Jedidiah Deleon."

"Hello, Cale," the agent said and I heard Boston in his accent. He made no move to touch me; his face was narrow with dark brows, electric blue eyes and was more than a generic clone. He wore his hair short but it was styled rather than just cut; he had creases at the corners of his eyes and a frown line between his brows.

"What do you want?" I asked wearily, wanting only to go back to sleep where the constant bombardment of psychic impressions did not follow me.

"We want to make sure you're safe, Cale. Safe from whoever did that to your family and safe from yourself. Will you tell me what you're feeling?"

"Nothing. I feel nothing," I said with a depressed sigh. "Just whatever everyone else is feeling. It's like I have no emotions of my own, anymore."

"So it wasn't your idea to jump?"

I laughed shortly. "Oh, that was my idea. I thought if I jumped, I could just fly away from everything that haunts me."

"You know you can't fly, Cale? You would have smashed head first onto the concrete and died."

"There is no death," I muttered.

There was a knock on the door and a nurse with Hispanic features poked her head in.

"Time for your pills, hon," she said cheerily and I scooted back in the bed up against the wall so that cold Sheetrock touched me.

The FBI agent held his hand out and she looked startled. "He doesn't want contact with your body," Deleon explained. "Ever hear of psychometry?" The nurse shook her head, asked with a lifted eyebrow.

He explained. "It's a genuine psychic sense where the person holds an object and can read off it the last person's emotions or actions that held it. So, if you've screamed at your husband, beat your child or done something you're ashamed of, he knows it."

She handed him the cup of pills. He looked through it.

"Tegretol, Pen VK, Zoloft, Xanax, Tylenol 3. Seizure meds, antibiotics, anti-anxiety and anti-depressants," he recited. "Have to be careful of the anti-depressants. He's still only a child, just fourteen. They can make him more depressed."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes. And a Special Agent with the FBI," he showed her his badge and ID. She left my cubicle, pulling the curtain around us.

I was just thirteen. My birthday had been only a month after the massacre. One of the first things I had seen when I came out of my coma in the ICU were balloons and gifts with 'Happy

Birthday, Cale' in big letters emblazoned everywhere.

"We have a lady coming to talk to you, Cale. She's a counselor, very nice. Very intuitive," my uncle told me.

"You mean she's a shrink."

"Yes. She's that, too. She'll shrink your problems down to a manageable size."

"Why didn't you let me die?" I asked. "Why didn't I die with the rest of them?"

"We're not going to let that happen, Cale," Deleon interrupted. "You're alive for a reason. Whether you believe in God or whatever, there is a reason for your existence, why you survived. Hold on to that." He handed me the pills with a glass of water and a straw.

Cautiously, I took them, sensing nothing from his touch but a calm blankness. "I can't feel you," I said in wonder, as if I'd found a safe harbor in a storm. I reached out the weaker arm that had both bones shattered and still wore the soft cast but it was my left and dominant hand. I grasped his forearm in the blue suit with the crisp blue shirt and sighed.

Nothing. He emanated nothing but a bland shell of still waters. "Uncle Jamesy," I sighed and he started as I called him the name I'd last used when I was three. "I'm going to sleep."

"That's okay, Cale. We'll be here when you wake up. In fact, you won't be left alone for the next 78 hours."

I yawned as the pills took effect, rolled over and pulled the sheets over my head.

Chapter II

The social worker, shrink was a young woman with curly dark hair that she constantly ran her fingers through as if trying to pull the curls straight. She had pretty hazel eyes with green and amber flecks in them, dark tanned with Mediterranean features, skin tone and a magnificent Roman nose. Her teeth were white and she smiled rarely so that when she did, it was as if the sun came out. She introduced herself but did not offer to shake my hand and she had a broad New England accent. She told me her name was Connie Cavaliero.

"I know, I know," she grumbled. "My Yankee accent."

"I like it. Pak the cah," I teased and she smiled at me.

"Do you know Dr. Deleon, too?"

"No. Why?"

"You sound alike."

"He's from Boston. I'm from New Hampshire."

"Both Yankees."

"But not damned," she returned swiftly. "What's going on with you? Want to talk, play video games, role play and play with toys?" I gave her a look. "Some kids your age like to play with toys," she defended.

"Fuckups, maybe." I watched to see if she would correct me for cursing. I looked around her room, it was a big one with lots of windows, low bookshelves and small tables set with kids' stuff and carpet on the tiled floor that invited you to crawl or spread out. There were computers on the desk with flat screen monitors that went horizontal or vertical and high screen resolution.

"Tell me what you remember, Cale? May I call you Cale?"

I shrugged. "They say it's my name."

"They?"

"The doctors, the police and the man who says he's my uncle."

"It is your name. Cale. Cale Austin Snowdon, son of Parker Hurst Snowdon and Silmarra

Tremarric Snowdon, brother of Curt, Delilah and Leah, Travis and Boone. Your family was noted for being all twins, even your parents.”

“Seventh son of a seventh son for seven generations and all that hokey. People always wanted séances from my mom.”

“You remember that?” she questioned.

“No. Someone told me. I don’t remember them, the murders or the accident. I remember waking up in the ICU three weeks ago with a ton of plaster on me and a really bad headache.”

“You had two broken legs, fractured your pelvis, arm and had a severe head injury. You were in a coma for two months. You look like you’re healing well externally. How are you inside?”

“I didn’t have any internal injuries,” I said deliberately misunderstanding her.

I pushed my wheelchair over to the window and looked out at the tops of other office buildings some floors down. A perfect one-way drop to oblivion if someone hadn’t designed the windows not to open.

“Thinking about jumping?” She asked softly and I gave her a startled look. She had read my mind but then, Dr. Deleon had said she was intuitive.

“You think that would end everything, Cale? What if it just frees your mind to experience everything more openly? Ever wonder why there are so many ghosts still around? Why they don’t move on when they die?”

“I don’t see the dead,” I returned. “Just those that are going to die.”

“Does it scare you?”

“It used to.”

“Did you see your mother and father before they died?”

“I told you, I don’t remember them.”

She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a silver bowl, which she filled with water from her Oasis jug and set it down in front of me. The water rippled as if alive and I stared at it uneasily. I looked back at her but she was staring out the window, looking at the skyline of nearby Dallas/Ft. Worth.

“Tell me what you see,” she coaxed and I fell into the well like a stone down a cenote.

Images swirled through the mirror but they came so fast and fleeting, I could not decipher them and with my cry of alarm, she snatched the bowl away, splattering cold water on the desk, her arms and me.

She wrapped her hands on my shoulders and they were cold and wet but the contact warmed quickly and her mind was shielded like the SAC agent where I could not read her.

“You’re clairvoyant, a seer and a psychometric reader?” She asked in disbelief. “Were you as gifted before your head injury, Cale?”

“Don’t call it a gift,” I snapped. “It’s a curse. What good is it if I couldn’t use it to prevent my own family’s murders?”

“Do you blame them for dying and leaving you alone?”

“NO!” I yelled at her. “I blame myself. If I hadn’t been goofing off--” I paused and gave a reluctant laugh. “Didn’t see that one coming.”

“Do you think that you, as a thirteen year old boy could have stopped a grown man who’s made a career of serial murders of families? Yours wasn’t the first, Cale. Not even the second. He’s done this seven times that we know of.”

“Seven? How come nobody’s caught him?” I was horrified.

“Each one is different, different MO, different weapon, forensics. The only thing that is the same is that it is always a family and always different. Dr. Deleon is the one who has connected them all, from Florida to Maine, from California to New York, on interstates, off back roads, big cities, tiny villages, even on Indian reservations. No one knows how he picks them just that he

does.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re supposed to worry about getting better. There was nothing you could have done to prevent the murders and no way for you to stop it even if you had been there. You want to blame someone; blame the psychopathic monster that slaughtered your family.”

“I was afraid, maybe, that it was me,” I whispered into the window ledge.

“What?”

“I was afraid this thing in my head drove me crazy and I killed them. That would explain why there was no DNA or forensics.”

“You were unconscious in a sinkhole three miles away when it happened, Cale. You had a watch on; it broke when the ATV landed on you. Date and time stamped at your accident. The murders happened late in the evening. It wasn’t you.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, even though I didn’t remember any of it that had been one of my great fears---that I had gone berserk and killed them all.

“What are your hobbies, Cale? What do you like to do?”

“I don’t even know what I like to eat, lady. My past is a blank.”

“You were in the band in grade school. Art class where you did very well. You were on the archery team. Got good grades---A’s and B’s mostly. Good in computer science, both you and Curt. Only class you two shared. Did you do the twin thing---share papers, take tests for each other, drive the teachers crazy?”

I had no memories of any of that, only a blank white wall with nothing scribbled upon it, only a black spot that sucked away at everyday memories until they too, disappeared.

I felt suddenly, as if a monumental mountain sat on me, covered with a hurricane of despair whose winds lashed me flat. I gave an inarticulate sigh and laid my head down on the window ledge while slow tears oozed out of my eyes to puddle on the heater vents.

“When the sadness gets too heavy, try to remember the good things,” she suggested. “You’re healing without serious damage to your arms and legs, your head injury, although severe, has not caused any major neurological changes. You have had no seizures since you were brought in and no infections.”

“They told me my memories would probably never come back.”

“After having seen your X-rays and MRI, probably not. You had a severe crush injury; they had to remove pieces of your skull. It’s a miracle you didn’t have to relearn how to walk, talk, etcetera. You weren’t expected to survive and even the doctors had told the papers you would most likely die from your injuries. That’s what they reported and the FBI encouraged it. They didn’t want any chance of the serial killer learning you were still alive.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me about my mother?”

“You said you don’t remember her. Besides, I’m more interested in what you’re going to do, how you’re going to cope with all this?”

“I thought you were going to tell me what to do about this? Or medicate me.”

“If I give you drugs, what happens when you stop taking them? You want to kill yourself; you’ll find a hundred ways to do it where we can only find a few ways to stop you.”

I was surprised and showed it. “You wouldn’t stop me?”

“I didn’t say that,” she returned swiftly. “I just pointed out that I couldn’t prevent you. Sometimes, the pills don’t work, you vomit them up and someone finds you, pumps your stomach. Bullets miss and blow off your jaw so you eat through a tube and drink through a straw. Or you lay in bed a vegetable for years with people changing your diapers. I’ve even seen people survive jumping off bridges. They lived in constant pain from broken bodies that never healed right. Most of them regretted it afterwards. Those that lived, those that died never came back to tell me.

Sometimes, you can almost sense them hovering where they died. Do you feel their regrets, Cale?”

“I told you,” I mustered a feeble anger. “I don’t see the dead.”

“What do you want to do, Cale? You have any ideas? You want to go back to the ranch?”

“NO!” My denial was vehement and swift.

“Ah. Genuine emotion. Can’t say I blame you but you’re only thirteen. Your uncle wants you but he’s willing to relocate to Alpina if that’s what you want.”

“No,” I shivered. “I never want to go back there again. Dallas is fine.”

“You don’t mind living in the city?”

“I don’t care.” As an afterthought, I asked, “Where does he live?”

“In a nice subdivision, gated with a pool, tennis court and a mini golf course. He makes a very good living as an insurance agent. He’s married with twin daughters. Do you remember them---Ruby and Crystal?”

I shook my head. “Are they pretty?”

“Very. Blondes with blue eyes.”

“Not---violet?”

“No.”

“Then they’re safe,” I whispered but the feeling of doom persisted when I thought of them. “If I don’t go there, where can I go?”

“To a rehab center for a couple of months. I’m recommending that, anyway. You need extensive counseling. After that, we’ll see. You might feel differently by then.” She looked at her watch. “Want anything to drink? Are you hungry?”

“No.”

She got up and pushed my chair to the door, opened it and waited for Dr. Deleon to get up and meet me. They spoke over my head without using words but I caught the gist of their conversation. They were worried that I was going to attempt suicide if given the chance and I would.

“Bring him back in three days. 11 a.m.” she said. “We’ll see how he feels then.”

The SA pushed me back down to the elevators and to my hospital room. When we reached it, I noticed that all the mirrors had been removed and anything else I could break or was sharp was gone. No ropes, ties, shoe laces; although they had left my sheets.

There was a nurse waiting on us and she transferred me back to the bed and pulled up the rails like I was a kid. Planting her bottom in the corner, she sat in the chair making herself comfortable.

“Your dinner’s coming,” she told me and folded her arms. She didn’t look happy to be there.

“You’re not to be left alone, Cale,” the FBI agent told me. “Sorry, but it’s this or a locked room on the Psyche Ward.”

“Put me there,” I spat. “At least, I’d be alone.”

I lay back and covered my eyes, did not open them even when the dinner cart came in. Minus any real utensils, only a plastic spoon.

Chapter III

Resignation was a new emotion I had learned in the following three weeks. I had been transferred by ambulance to a rehab center in downtown Dallas; a four story square brick vaguely reminiscent of jail but the inside was obnoxiously cheerful. The grounds were pretty with masses of rhododendrons and Tyler roses, gravel paths and stone benches.

I was mobile enough on crutches and with a walking cane by then and I always had an attendant with me. They doctors changed my meds several times and though the feelings of despair

lingered; thoughts of suicide no longer dominated my waking moments.

I was distraught with visions of a dead girl dressed in school uniform and wearing pigtails even though she was older than me. Her throat was cut from ear to ear and she wore an almost puzzled look on her face. She was blonde and pretty, carried her schoolbooks in a backpack that she swung against her leg. She had been dogging me for hours and driving me crazy.

This morning I had spent in physical therapy, strengthening the muscles in my legs. The doctors had done tests on my cognitive ability and declared me sound mentally in that respect. Emotionally, I was still a mess.

I'd been going to the woman therapist but we went round and round, not getting anywhere. I did not trust her and would not open up to her. To tell the truth, I would not open up to anyone.

My uncle came to see me every day, sometimes with my aunt, sometimes with my twin cousins. I felt an instant bond with them even though I did not remember them.

They cried when they saw me, gave me hugs and handed me wrapped packages that were belated birthday presents. Before I could open them, the FBI agent took them.

"Sorry," he said briefly. "I have to check them over."

"For knives, dynamite, guns," I snorted.

"Why?" Ruby asked, curious.

"So I can't hurt myself," I returned.

"But why?" Ruby persisted, frowning. I had an instant vision of her lying on her back, naked with blood making a geometric cabala on her torso. Her eyes were open and blank, terror had etched her face.

I screamed and pushed her away, sobbing. Alarmed, people converged on me and I fought to get away from them.

Not only was I a small, thin thirteen year but I was recovering from a major accident, had no muscle tone, no stamina and no strength. My outburst lasted only minutes though it felt like hours. Sweat made me slippery and the pile of bodies got in each other's way. Finally, I was grabbed and held down until a doctor stuck a needle in my ass and everything melted like ice cream left out on the kitchen table on a hot Texas day.

They let me slide slowly down to the floor and I had several of them kneeling next to me. The doctor ordered the crowd of people out of my room and he and the orderly lifted me up to the bed. The orderly was sent out and returned minutes later and I was put into four point restraints.

Slow tears pooled from my eyes, my mouth sagged open and strange, mewling cries came from me that I had no control over. He flashed a penlight in my eyes. I blinked.

"Cale, can you hear me, understand me? You'll sleep for a while, then, someone will come in and talk to you."

I tried to explain but it was too much of an effort. Twisting my wrists, I worked at them trying to get them loose. They left me alone in the private room. The ceiling seemed to grow heavier and press down on me. I felt like it was going to crush me if I didn't escape it.

My wrists began to bleed under the cotton and fleece lined restraints. Mixing with sweat, the straps slowly stretched until I was able to slide my narrow bones out. My ankles took longer, my fingers didn't want to coordinate the strap knots and buckles; they were like fat pillows with no feeling. Once free, I slid off the bed on rubber legs and held onto the wall so I wouldn't fall on my face. The room wavered, retreated until it seemed like I was a tiny bug at the end of a telescope and looking up at the giant world.

Colored rings surrounded the lights. When I took a step towards the door, my feet moved before the rest of me, I wanted to fold over them and sink to the ground.

I fought it, fear would not let me sink into the dark I could feel hovering at the edge of my consciousness. Sound muted, and then became louder, trailed off until I was in a cocoon of muffled

noises---the slow thumping of my heart, the sloshing of my blood through my veins, the crackling of my feet on lush carpeting.

The door opened to my gentle push; there were a few people going about their business and no one paid any attention to me as I walked like a zombie past the nurses' station, to the front doors and out onto the sidewalk that led to the parking lot.

I was in jeans and a starched oxford shirt with the cuffs turned down and loose over my bleeding wrists. No one noticed, no one said a word to me as I moved relentlessly through the parking lot amidst the SUVs and small compacts. My eyes were set on the towering skyline of skyscrapers.

Most of the trip was a blur, my psychic sense told me where I needed to go without my conscious control and was probably the reason I did not get stopped or attract attention.

My destination was not a planned decision; I became aware that I was resting on a bench in the lobby of a giant building, staring at the corner of the plaza where there was a big potted plant in a courtyard of plants making an indoor garden. No one could see me but I could hear the muted murmurs of many people; the bubbling of water. I looked up to see the atrium's ceiling far overhead. Light panels let sunlight filter through making dapples on the tiled floor.

When the pretty girl in the catholic school uniform walked by me, I knew why I had come there. With a groan of pain and effort, I got up and followed her out into the lobby, through a crowd of people who stared at me oddly, talked over my head and attempted to grab at me but I adroitly avoided their grasping hands as we marched to the elevators.

I slipped in besides her as the doors closed and we traveled up in silence to the 15th floor, down the hallway, past the open atrium and around to the room numbered 1561.

There was a maid cart next door which was open and I could see inside the suite all the way to the double bed. There were couches, tables, and a large screen TV. The maid was changing the sheets. She was a Mexican woman, short, dark with pretty black hair. She looked up at me and her hands froze as she shook out the top sheet.

"Cual es el asunto?" Her voice was sharp, frightened.

I put my fingers to my lips. "Tranquilo! A despertar a los muertos."

I went into the room after the school girl and as the door closed and locked behind us, I heard the Latina woman screaming.

The hallway was short, bathroom on my left, large beds, two of them separated by nightstands with a lamp and the Bible. At the end of the beds were a long dresser and it held a phone stand and a computer station bolted to the table.

There were nicely framed prints on the walls and the curtains out to the balcony were completely closed. The phone was on the floor, torn from its jack and without a dial tone.

She was standing by the balcony doors smiling at me but she wouldn't say anything. I asked her name, memorized the weave of her plaid skirt and the emblem on her jacket.

The door pounded behind me and I turned round to watch it fly open, Security and the cops barged in. When I turned to look again, she was gone.

I sat down on the floor in the spot where they would find her several hours from now while the authorities screamed over my head. It was as if they were speaking a foreign language and I could not understand them.

No one wanted to touch me but rather ringed me, jabbered away at me until I put my hands over my ears and screamed at them to shut up and blessed silence ensued.

Slowly, clearly, I iterated, "Call Special Agent Jed Deleon of the FBI." I repeated it until it became a mantra and several of them detached and left.

To me, it seemed only light seconds later but they told me it was an hour later before the FBI agent strode into the hotel room and squatted in front of me. He pulled at his knees and I heard the

cracking of his joints. His square hands with manicured nails, lightly tanned and haired fingers took hold of my chin and lifted my face to meet his.

“Cale.”

I blinked. His voice sounded like it was low rpms, deep, slow, sonorous. Even his Brahman accent was gone. He gave me a little shake and snapped his other fingers in my space.

“Cale. Where is all the blood on you from? Are you hurt? Who’s dead?” I looked at the floor between the beds, pointed. He turned round, spoke to the policemen. “Help me get him up.”

I shrank away but the cop had blue vinyl gloves on and nothing came through as he lifted my legs while Deleon took my shoulders. They put me on the bed and I bounced on the firm mattress. Deleon pushed up my sleeves and rolled both of my wrists over. “First aid kit?” he asked.

“Should I call 911?” the cop returned.

“Yes.”

He spoke over his shoulder. “Get these people out of here,” he told the DPD and they shoed everyone out but the officers.

“Cale, tell me what happened?” Deleon’s voice was soft, but insistent.

I cleared my throat, looked at my sleeves which were red with fresh blood. I did not know where it came from, I had not felt the pain from abrading my wrists in the restraints and there was too much to be from those minor scrapes.

“She’s a silly girl, goes willingly to her death, doesn’t even fight when she sees the knife,” I said in scorn. “She just sits there and weeps while he slices her throat.”

“Who, Cale? What’s her name?”

The patrol officer’s eyes grew round and wild. He swallowed and his Adam’s apple jumped up and down.

I spoke to him. “You better not forget your vest tomorrow when you stop for Devil Dogs.”

His hand went to his shirt. I turned back to Deleon. “It’s already too late for her. I can’t stop it. He has her, he’s raping her. I can’t see his face but he’s tall and good looking, strong. He has a mind that bounces thoughts back at me. Like a mirror bounces sunlight.”

“Why does he dump her here?” he asked.

“Because he likes to taunt the police. There’s a forensics convention here.”

“What’s her name, Cale?”

I looked around the room, gestured to the desk and he brought me the writing stuff.

Concentrating, I drew the school emblem on the notepad in pencil and then the plaid uniform with a description of the colors. Green and black with a red and yellow stripe. He handed it over to the policeman with instructions to track it down.

By now, voices could be heard coming down the hallway and an EMT team burst into the room complete with stretcher and kit bags. Deleon moved out of the way so that they had access to me.

“Where are you hurt?” the woman asked. She was in white shirt, blue cargo pants with belt from which all sorts of gear hung. Her shoes were Hi Tec boots like Fire and Police wore. She started at my neck and her fingers worked down, manipulating for wounds and the source of blood. The other was a man and he slipped a blood pressure cuff on my skinny arm. Both wore gloves.

I could not keep my eyes open. I sagged, huddled into myself while they took my vitals, watched my pupils react and assessed me.

“Only injuries I can find are some minor wrist abrasions,” she pronounced, puzzled. “Has he been around any other blood source to pick up these splashes? His BP is low and he’s verging on shock, but I can’t find any real trauma.”

“He needs to go to the Rehab Center, or do you recommend the ER?” the FBI agent asked.

“Given his low BP, the presence of blood and his obvious unresponsive condition, I would recommend the ER. I’m going to insert an IV, put him on lactated Ringers, and get his system back

up. Kids crash so quickly and easily.”

They slid me onto the gurney, tightened straps around me and soon, I felt the bite of a needle and a sensation flow up my arm as fluids hit my blood stream.

We went rolling down the hallway like I was on a roller coaster ride with no brakes. Deleon stayed at my side all the way to the ambulance where he gave orders for one of the cops to drive his government sedan after the unit and meet us at the hospital. They only used the siren to go through red lights and intersections.

I was in a state of lethargy, did not respond to any of their questions, not even when they wheeled me into the emergency room and stripped my clothes off me. They gave me a shot and I faded into my dark, quiet place.

Chapter IV

The first face I saw when I rolled over was Dr. Deleon’s and he looked very disturbed. He was speaking to three other men who all looked like him.

“Jed,” the youngest said and pointed with his chin. He turned and studied me. My heart sank but it was a distant feeling, like I was disconnected from my emotions.

“Her name was Frances Panek, she was a senior at St. Catherine’s Prep School and she was having an on line affair in a chat room with a seventeen year old boy who turned out to be a 40 year old pedophile,” he said, staring at me. In his hand, he held a folder and when he opened it, I saw the same scene in digital that I’d seen in my head.

There were other photos, several of different men and I pulled out the one of the blonde with gray eyes flat and enigmatic, thin lipped and handsome in a rugged, outdoorsy way.

“That’s him.” I did not touch the face, I could feel the waves of lust, anger and evil coming off the man’s soul.

“John Peter Lusk. The Lusk Killer. We caught him dumping the body where you said and when you said.”

“So you caught him?”

“He’s in custody. We searched his place and have found evidence of six other child murders. He was a coordinator at the school bus lines, had access to bus routes and children’s names and addresses. He had a list of future victims. You might not have saved Frances but you did 12 others, Cale.”

“Twelve?” I whispered, exhausted.

“Girls, boys, all under the age of 16. Most were around 12.”

“Now what?”

“First, you have to get well, Cale. Nothing can take place until you’re healed. But we’d like you to help us solve some open cases. In return, we’ll provide you with a safe place to live, medical and psychiatric care. If you track down and bring the killers to justice, you’ll make the feelings go away.”

“Promise?”

His face softened. “I want a promise from you, too, Cale.” I looked at him sideways. “I want you to swear your most solemn oath that you won’t try to kill yourself without coming to me first and letting me talk to you.” I hesitated. He continued. “If I can’t change your mind, I won’t try to stop you.”

“Y’all swear?” I asked. He nodded. “I swear by Grandpa’s tombstone on Boot Hill.” I crossed my fingers and swore, “I promise I won’t try to kill myself unless I talk to you first or so help me, cross my heart and hope to...die.”

He grabbed my pinky with his own and we twisted. I grinned and dropped my hands to my lap, looked at the folder he still had.

“Y’all want me to look at that?”

“No. I want you to eat something, drink and do whatever thirteen year olds do when they’re happy.”

I looked at him sadly. “That ain’t gonna happen. Happy is something ain’t in my forecast. Gotta settle for content.”

He shook on that. “What do you want to eat?”

“Where am I?”

“Dallas General. Private room reserved for VIPs. There’s a guard outside your door and another at the elevators. You can’t sneak out and they know your face. You’ll find it somewhat more difficult to escape now, Cale. Besides, the hotel reported your incident to the papers and you made the news. We’re afraid that it will attract the attention of the man who took your family and he’ll come back for you.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. “Chicken fried steak. Mashed potatoes, cream gravy and corn.”

“You know its breakfast time? Might take some doing to get lunch served.”

“You’re the FBI,” I said. “Show them your gun.”

He laughed and the other agents looked startled.

My first meal was take-out from a diner down the street, chicken fried steak and all the trimmings. He ate with me and told me that he had never tried it before, had wondered what it was.

I didn’t answer him, being too busy shoveling food into my mouth and he stared in awe at the amount I put away and was looking for more. For dessert, I had a big bowl of pistachio ice cream with whipped cream, maraschino cherries and sprinkles. When I was done, I let out a long hard burp and rubbed my stomach.

“Can’t wait for lunch,” I announced and he laughed so hard he almost choked.

“They’re going to release you before then.”

“Where am I going?” I pushed the tray away and slipped out of the bed to look out the window. I was on the second floor and could see the massive Dallas/Ft. Worth overpass exchange that rose hundreds of feet into the air like a Sci-Fi movie set.

“We have a safe house out in the country. Or an apartment here in the city, in the FBI building.”

“City. I’ve had enough of the country.”

There was a knock at the door and we both turned to see who it was and another agent, one of the group that had been there when I woke up entered my room to Deleon’s ‘come in’. The agent’s eyes flickered briefly on me then he bent over Dr. Deleon and spoke into his ear. His face stilled and he looked thoughtful.

“Thank you, Mason. Will you see to it that Cale’s paperwork is expedited so he can leave as soon as possible? We have to go clothes shopping.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited until the younger man was gone. “Patrolman Jensen,” he began and at my questioning look, “The police officer you warned two days ago?”

I nodded, scratching at my stomach. I had an uncomfortable feeling where this was going.

“He took your advice. Went back to get his vest, walked in on a convenience store robbery, took two in the chest and shot the perp on the way down. Without his vest and warning, he’d be dead.”

“Is he hurt?” I asked.

“Bruised. Sore. Grateful to you, he’s told a bunch of people about it.”

"I wish everyone would heed such warnings," I muttered.

"Will you tell me how you see it?" he was curious.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, dangled my legs.

"Any clothes around?"

He pulled out my jeans and shirt from the closet and handed them to me.

"Underwear, socks, my Ropers?"

"In the closet. Aren't you wearing your shorts?"

I peeked. Sure enough, my tighty whiteys were still on me. I pulled on my Wranglers and my shirt over my head. There were still blood stains on the cuffs and my wrists had gauze wrapped around them where I had torn them getting out of the restraints. I had Band-Aids on my hands where they had removed my IVs.

"Is there anything wrong with me? I mean, besides the normal thing wrong with me."

"You have no new trauma, no wounds. You were just in shock, with a low blood pressure and a possible drug overdose. How you got out of the hospital and to that hotel is a total mystery. The doctor said he gave you enough Valium to knock out a horse."

"They come to me. Stand in front of me until I see them. They look like they do when they're dead---they wear the same thing, they have the same wounds. Sometimes, they take me to their death place. Sometimes I'm called to it, and sometimes I just find it."

"How many times have you seen them?" He asked, curious and appalled.

"Four times, now." I would not tell him about Ruby, my cousin. I could not share that with him.

"I know about Frances. Who else?"

"Pink socks, someone in the hospital in Austin. I saw them in the morgue, after but it wasn't a murder---a suicide."

"Who killed Pink Socks? Not Henry Lee Lucas?"

"He claimed to but he's lying. She was an émigré from Brazil, a student under a false visa and smuggled drugs in. She stole some money from her bosses. So they raped her and murdered her."

"Cali cartel?"

"Nothing so exotic. Local man. Owns a garage where they service city vehicles."

The doctor knocked and came in, was surprised to see that I was up and dressed. "Hi, Cale," he said and I looked at him once not staring at the large purple birthmark that covered over half his face. I knew what it was like to be stared at and although he hid his feelings on the outside, I could sense what it had done to him inside over the years.

"I'm Dr. Ross, how are you feeling?"

He checked my eyes, my pulse and my wrists. I noticed he wore vinyl gloves and he made the comment, "It's on your orders, Cale. No one is to touch you with skin to skin contact. Your vitals are good. I see you've eaten. You ready to go home?"

"I have no home," I said, sadly.

"Your paperwork is ready. I'm discharging you into the custody of Dr. Deleon. The nurse will bring things for you to sign. I'm putting you on a minor course of anti-antibiotic and some anti-anxiety drugs. You should see physical therapy; continue your exercises for your legs and arm. Eat well, get plenty of rest. You're young, you'll heal fast."

"Some things never heal," I muttered.

He went to talk to Deleon and I used the bathroom, finger combed my hair, brushed my teeth and washed my face. I could not see my face; there was no mirror inside because they had removed it, leaving a blank spot over the sink.

"Cale," I heard at the bathroom door. I came out and found myself surrounded by his agents and a nurse with a wheelchair.

“Ready to go? Sit here and we’ll take you down.”

“I can walk.”

“Hospital policy,” she said. Sitting in the blue padded chair, I put my feet up on the rests and took the clipboard and pen from her. The discharge papers required four signatures and I signed my name under Jed’s.

It was a short ride down to the first floor and out to the lobby. When we exited, there was a big black SUV with blacked out windows waiting at the curb but my attention was riveted to the big skyscrapers two blocks over where Frances had taken me. I wasn’t that far from her death scene; it no longer called to me nor had I any interest in it, it was psychically dead.

The minute I planted my skinny cheeks on the black leather seats, I could sense the undercurrents of old emotions, predominantly fear, lust and anger. I broke out in a cold sweat, pushed past the agent attempting to get in and stood on cold concrete.

Deleon wisely said nothing but opened the front passenger seat and put my palm on it.

We waited. The only thing that came through was the residue of a mundane affair between two unmarried agents and I could handle that. I nodded and climbed in; he put my seat belt on for me and sat directly behind me. The air conditioning was on and I shivered in the frigid air as the doors slammed shut and locked.

Chapter V

Jed Deleon’s office was a private one; he shared it with no one else. His team of agents had desks in an open area with a room set off to the side where they had a task force set up, currently working three other cases. One was a serial killer, another a serial bomber and suspected terrorists. They had cleared a recent kidnapping but with unhappy results. The boy’s body had been found in a field near Temple, raped, tortured and burned. I had not been drawn into his murder; did not understand why some victims came to me and not others.

His desk was Government Issue but his chair was a custom thing of leather, plump and plush. He had pictures all over his wall and commendations for shooting, bravery, his medical degrees and college diplomas. There were no pictures of a wife or children but I did see some that might have been siblings dressed in elite services gear. He had introduced me to his team, there were four men from around thirty up to forties and I felt both older and more jaded that they.

We had gone straight from the hospital to the FBI building downtown, with a planned excursion to Dillard’s for the afternoon.

“Dillard’s?” I had questioned. “What’s wrong with Wal-Mart?”

“I think you can do better than that, Cale. Do you know you bought a LOTTO ticket the day before your family was murdered?”

“No, I don’t remember that.”

“Well, it was a winning ticket,” he returned grimly.

“And?”

“It was the only winning ticket. 258 million.”

I sat down abruptly. Looked at him, attempted to speak, finally croaked, “You’re kidding, right?”

Slowly, he shook his head. “Your uncle had a million dollar policy on each of your parents, too. We’ve kept it quiet, only the Lottery officials know and your uncle, the family lawyer.

“Anyway, money’s the least of your problems.” He studied me curiously. “Anything you really, really want?”

“You mean like a Ferrari?”

He laughed. “I don’t think so. You don’t even have a license. I suppose you can drive?”

“I guess. I grew up on a ranch, probably can drive tractors, ATVs, trucks, probably skidsters. I don’t remember anything about the ranch.”

“I gather it was a rather large chunk of West Texas, raised Black Angus, some horses. You used to ride, roped some. There are trophies for archery and target shooting and horse shows, rodeo in the house. You and your twin shared a computer but it was your sisters that were big into surfing the net, Face Book, Twitter and chat rooms. We took your hard drives, found nothing untoward but we don’t know who might have seen their profiles. They did mention you and Curt extensively, more so than your other twin brothers. We think that’s how the perp found your family. Even though your town knew about your family’s gifts, it wasn’t out there for others to speculate on.”

“I’d like a laptop. One of those small ones. A cell phone, although I don’t know anyone to call.”

“I’ll get you a sat-phone. We want you connected, available at all times and everywhere. The Justice Department will give you a new identity and new papers, make an account available to you with a debit card.”

“Who found me? In the sinkhole, I mean.”

“Your neighbor. Your dad promised to help dig a new well, put in the pump. When he didn’t show up, your neighbor knew something was wrong, and came looking. Found the bodies, saw you were missing along with the ATV and tracked you. Life Flight brought you to Austin. Didn’t they tell you any of this?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t remember any of it.”

“Circuit City or Staples has a good laptop. Unless you want to order it from Dell. Most kids don’t like to wait for things.”

“You have any kids, Dr. Deleon?” Now it was my turn to be curious.

“Call me Jed. No. Never married. Spent too much time in school, and then traveling.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-five. I suppose that seems fairly old to a thirteen year old.”

“I wonder if I’ll live that long,” I mused and he gave me a startled look.

“Why? Do you know something I should be aware of?”

“No.”

“Are you ready?”

I got up and followed him out to the elevators down to the lobby and out front where his car was waiting. No big SUV this time but a small compact sedan with government plates.

“Carpool vehicle. Want to ride up front or in the back?” he asked.

I hesitated. Gingerly put my hand on the door and received muted impressions that were so vague I could not read them. I climbed in, seat belted myself and relaxed.

“Does it make a difference if they clean something?” he asked.

“Everything is new to me, Jed. This...ability, these feelings. I don’t remember any of it from before. Sometimes, it just overwhelms me, sometimes, I can’t deal with it. I can’t answer your questions cuz I just don’t know.”

He turned the corner and we hit the interstate and the dizzying overpasses that climbed the sky like greedy hands.

I did not like heights; I knew that much. I kept my eyes closed and gripped the dashboard, inciting comments from the driver.

“Haven’t had an accident in 20 years,” he told me. “Relax.”

“Can’t. Don’t like heights.”

“We’ll be down on the ground in two more minutes. The Mall’s two exits up.”

I could feel us descend and risked a peek. It only took him fifteen minutes to reach the big Mall and it was a hell of a lot bigger than anything I'd seen in San Antonio or Austin.

There were stores here I'd only heard about, never imagined I'd be able to see, let alone shop in. Like Neiman Marcus, the Sharper Image, Dell Computer.

That was the first place I dragged him to and he protested as I hurried him along. Grown-ups were so slow when it came to shopping for toys. I wasn't aware of the curious stares but Jed was and he moved protectively around me and that I noticed.

The reason why became apparent when we passed a newspaper kiosk and on the front page was a picture of me and a headline that read, 'West Texas Boy Prevents Cop's Death.'

"Where did they get my picture?" I wondered.

"School photo. They still haven't picked up on your lotto ticket. We've managed to keep that secret. It's a good thing, too. Otherwise, you'd have a million so called 'relatives' after you. Of course, you being a minor, you can't legally collect. It's in a trust with your uncle as trustee. Still, there was a million dollar policy on each of your parents. That's in trust for you, too."

I could feel their eyes on me like an itchy cockle-bur stuck in the seam of my clothes; poking, scratching till I dug at it with fingernails trying to remove it.

The clerk inside the computer store ran his eyes briefly over me and then his attention remained on the Special Agent. "May I help you?"

I waited patiently, standing at his side nearly touching him, deriving comfort from the close warmth given off by his body. He smelled of expensive cologne and coconut shampoo.

"Laptop," Jed said. "Small enough to stick in a backpack, Wi-Fi ready, 4 gigabyte memory."

We followed him to the display and I was torn between the mini 10in. Acer and the slightly larger HP and settled for the HP. I was surprised when Dr. Deleon pulled out his wallet and put the purchases on his credit card.

Crowds of people passed by the front entrance, several stared in at the tall figure in the fine suit. The sensation of being stared at and assessed grew so strong that I whipped around and studied the crowd. No one started or jumped. I took his hand and pulled; he looked astounded at my contact and I could feel the uneasiness communicate itself to him through that touch.

"What's wrong?" His face remained unchanged but his pupils narrowed and made his eyes hard and dangerous.

"Someone's watching me. Someone bad," I whispered.

"Can you see him?"

I shook my head slowly, felt the hairs lift on the back of my neck. "Can't sense him other than his dirty eyes crawling on me, like a slug."

"Don't let him make you feel that way." He grasped my hand, took the carton with the laptop and exited the store. We walked briskly towards the Dillard's and into the customer service area where he spoke quietly to the service rep and she took us back to Security where he flashed his badge. We were allowed into the room where closed circuit TVs covered every inch of their particular store and the avenue leading up to it.

"See anyone, Cale?"

I scanned the faces, touched the screens but felt nothing other than the pulse of electricity that went through the unit. I sighed with frustration.

"Nothing. It's like a door closed. I can't *FEEL* anything." I looked at the security guard and before I could think about it, I said, "Don't go home tonight. Not before 7:27 p.m."

"Why?"

"Gas explosion. City ruptured the main while working."

"Warn them!"

"Won't do any good. Those that are going to die have already started the process. You have a

choice because I saw you and warned you. If I met all of them, I could warn them, too. Of course, most of them won't believe me. Choice is yours."

He stared at my eyes and shivered. "I believe you. Still, I'm going to call." He did so and no one took him seriously. He turned to the SAC. "What do you want to do, sir?"

"Cale?"

I shrugged. "I can't see anything when I'm involved. I don't feel him from in here. Besides, I'm with a genuine Special Agent in Charge F.B.I. if I'm not safe with you, who would I be with?"

"Stay close to me, don't get out of my sight, don't go to the restroom or changing room without me," he ordered. "You'll keep an eye on us? Notify your house detectives?" He asked of the security man who agreed.

He escorted us to the boys' department where he and the clerk tried to make me into a little federal clone but I stuck to my Wranglers, Polos, Henleys and t-shirts. My new Ropers were navy blue. My last pair had been black, sorely scuffed and worked to death but broken in and as comfortable as an old hound dog. I settled for boot socks not tube and he threw in a pair of sneakers, some shorts and new underwear.

I looked at him from under lowered lids, pursed my lips. "You look like the boxer type." And snickered.

"Uh-uh," he smiled. "Hanes all the way. Me and Michael Jordan." I snickered some more and he looked startled, raised a hand towards my head and stilled it. "Ice cream?"

"Double dip cone?" I asked, hopeful. I was hungry and dragged him to the food court where we polished off a Chic-fill-a meal and a triple scoop of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia. He had a small soft serve cone of chocolate.

I helped carry some of the bags. He would not tell me the total of what he had spent, just kept repeating that the trust would reimburse him. We visited the Verizon store, checked out the iPhones and Blackberries but none were as cool as his SAT-phone.

I did not give the arcade a second glance when we went by, such things as video games had never held my interest. I preferred outdoor activities.

The restrooms were next to it down a service corridor and when I indicated I needed to go, Jed led me inside, checked all the stalls and waited outside my door until I was through. I half expected him to tell me to wash my hands but he said nothing.

I stared at myself in the mirror over the sink. Sometimes, I did not recognize the face with its round cheeks, delicate jaw line and those startling violet eyes fringed with sooty black lashes.

I thought I looked too pretty, like a girl and some people had told me I was as pretty as photos of my sisters. Not something a thirteen year old boy wants to hear.

I checked my teeth; they were all still there in line and looking like they should, no gaps or chips. The deep dimples in my cheeks annoyed me but no matter how hard I frowned or puffed out my cheeks, they remained. At least I still had two eyes that worked, a nose not obviously broken, all my teeth and no visible scars.

I could feel scar tissue and raised welts on my head but they were hidden under my thick, slightly curly black hair. I had a sudden urge to put on a baseball cap or a Stetson. When I dried off my hands, I asked if we could go by a place where I could get either.

"You up for it? This is a long excursion, first time out of rehab. How are your legs?"

They ached but I wasn't going to complain, I was enjoying the freedom too much. "I have your pills if you need something."

"Maybe when we're done. Is there a store here where I can get Western stuff?"

"Sheplers. Next level. I think I saw the escalator by Saks."

We changed direction and headed for the department store of the rich and famous.

Chapter VI

I wandered through hundreds of shelves stacked with boots, hats by the handfuls and western wear suitable for rodeos and two-stepping.

The hats ranged from 4X to 20X Black Gold, felts and straws and the store had a man who could shape them for you.

I tried on a black George Strait crease and felt foolish. "Guess I'm more the baseball cap type," I muttered. I picked out a navy blue with gold trim.

"You should have said something. I could have given you a FBI cap."

"That would be cool," I admitted but I bought another, anyway. We came out a different entrance, on the far side of the Mall and walked around the parking lot looking for his car.

"Section J-orange," I told him.

"I know. I wanted to leave a different way in case your itchy feeling was waiting for us."

His eyes were never still, scanning the lot, parked cars and individuals who passed us coming and going although he let no one sneak up behind us. I breathed a sigh of relief when his car came in sight yet he restrained me from bolting to what I considered safe territory.

First, he perused the vehicles on both sides, observing that neither was a van, then he bent low and checked underneath to see if anyone was hidden below. Once satisfied no one was loitering or lying in wait, he checked inside the car and only then, unlocked it, letting me get in, locking the doors. When the knock came on the window, both of us jumped but he opened it when he saw the young woman's face. She was in tears.

"Can you help me?" she sobbed. "My little girl is gone! I turned round and she was just gone!"

"Did you call 911?" he asked, pushing the door open. "Cale, stay here. Lock the doors," he turned and told me. I pulled my legs back in and nodded.

I scanned her; her terror was genuine, her story true, because I had attracted the attention of a pedophile, he had been frustrated and taken another victim.

"She's alive," I murmured, pushing open the door, listening to my inner voices.

"It's dark where I'm at. I can't see over the top of these big gray boxes. They hum, with red stickers. Mommy says be careful of red and white stickers, says DANGER. Will hurt me. The ugly man says he'll hurt me, he likes to hurt things. He's mad cuz he likes boys better. Mommy! Mommy!"

The woman fell to the ground screaming as I did and Deleon hugged my shoulders.

"Cale!" he yelled. "Stop! You're scaring her! Where is she?" He shook me until I no longer felt what the little girl felt, sat up on my haunches and rocked while tears streamed down my face. When I could, I looked up, not at the Mall but at the building of low gray cinder-block that sat in the parking lot and housed the massive electrical transformers that powered the Mall.

"Stay here," Jed told the woman and parked her in his front seat. "Tell the officers when they get here where we are."

I ran that way before he could tell me to stop and he followed, cursing, drawing out his weapon from the back of his trousers.

The door was huge, blue painted metal with a padlock that looked locked yet when I jiggled it, the hasp revolved completely away from the jamb and the door swung open. I heard his faint order to stop but the compulsion was too strong and I twisted my way through the hundreds of feet of pipe and conduit in which an all pervasive humming drilled into your bones and vibrated in your teeth.

The air grew chillier; the floor of concrete sloped downwards and became a sub-basement

where water mains came in from the lake to feed the massive pipes into the mall.

There was lighting down here, fluorescent bulbs of the energy saver type; their illumination was feeble and they hissed and sputtered with electricity different from the rest I sensed.

I could see fields of energy crackling all around with a small purple blob that pulsed strongly just out of reach and throbbed like the beating of a frightened rabbit. Or a terrified child.

“I’m coming, Penny,” I whispered and she heard me, calling out my name.

She was lying on the floor behind a sub-transformer, without clothes; a little girl no more than five years old with blood on her thighs, semen spewed on her stomach and bluish blotches on her skinny arms and legs where hands had gripped her. Red fingerprints darkened on her neck and there was blood on her mouth.

I knelt down, carefully picked her up and tucked her into my chest. “Help is coming, Penny,” I told her and she hugged me tightly.

“Bit him. Bit him bad,” she said and let go. Her eyes rolled up and her mouth sagged open. I could feel the reassuring thump of her heart against mine and knew she was only unconscious.

When the hand reached my shoulder, I was on the way up, staggering under the slight weight of the little girl. I turned round, expecting to see Jed and saw instead, the face of a young man in his early thirties. He was dressed in brown shorts and shirt like a Fed X driver but the cloth in his hand reeking of chemical was not part of the uniform. As I opened my mouth to scream, he slapped it over my teeth and I bit cold cloth. I tried to struggle but I did not want to drop Penny.

He held me against his chest until I had to breathe and my head exploded into a kaleidoscope of colors and sensations. I felt myself sagging with Penny slowly sliding out of my grasp; don’t remember hitting the ground, warning the FBI agent or anything. I woke several times, sick to my stomach with a blinding headache. Each time, the man pulled my eyelids open and stared at my eyes, ran his hands over my body despite my feeble protests. Each awakening was in a different vehicle.

I was aware enough to know I was in a car, in the front seat, belted in with a lap harness and tied hand and foot with flex ties. He had pulled off my shirt and had my jeans down around my ankles.

I tried to scream and found that he had wrapped duct tape around my mouth, below my nose and pinned my ears to my head. I needed to vomit, and knew if I did, I would probably suffocate. I was sitting in piss, I’d wet myself in terror and the smell was awful. I couldn’t kick him, bite him or fight in any way; it was obvious that he’d done this before and had it down to an art. I wailed behind the tape and he laughed at my futile attempts.

“I took you right out from under the FBI’s nose, Mr. Cale Snowdon. They’re tearing apart the place looking for you. Of course, you’re now in Arkansas.”

He reached for my underwear, stuck his hand in and fondled me. I screamed, twisted and went somewhere else in my head where I could pretend nothing happened.

My eyes were open and I was hanging upside down. Blood dripped a slow rhythm over my head, splattered on my face from another source that wasn’t mine.

I was in a car that hung upside down and the driver was halfway in, half out, stuck on the window and pinned under. The smell of gasoline was strong and I could hear the ticking of the engine as it cooled.

Gurgling noises came from the man, he was still alive although I doubted for long from the massive amount of blood he was losing on me.

Screaming brakes sounded, then the pounding of feet on pavement. The first face peering in the window was a State Trooper with his flat topped straw and his face reflected shock as he took in my nearly naked, and tied form.

“Jesus Christ!” he burst out he ripped the tape off my mouth. I could not stop screaming and

he spoke into his shoulder mike calling for an ambulance, tow truck, paramedics and life flight. “Are you hurt, son?” he checked what he could but did not move me.

Either they had a highly efficient emergency service unit or we were close to one for the spot where the car had flipped was surrounded in five minutes by a parade of men and machines.

Carefully, they cut me out of the car, placed me on a backboard and gurney as they checked me over. I could not respond to their questions until finally, one of the EMTs gave me a shot that wound me down and I lay limp and quiet while they rolled me, looking for signs of sexual trauma and injury.

“Your name? Can you tell me your name?”

“There’s another in the wheel well,” I heard another cop say. “Little girl. She’s dead. Throat cut.”

I could not stand it. I shut down, went away where nothing could reach me, touch me, or hurt me. Voices spoke over my head and seeped into my consciousness. I understood them but did not recognize any of them.

“He was delivering him? We found a list in the car with orders---twelve year old, blonde with green eyes. Anything with violet eyes---standing orders. Seems like this guy was the delivery driver for Special Orders for pedophiles. There are directions to a rendezvous and set prices. This boy was worth \$50K. There are photos of him and others.”

“Do you know his name?”

“We took fingerprints, are checking the BOLOs. He’s only been here about an hour and they’re burning up the internet checking on him.”

“He’s under police guard?”

“One’s outside in the waiting room, right outside the ER.”

“Hey! We just found out who he is!”

“And?”

“Some kid from Texas. Named Cale Snowdon. He was snatched right out of FBI custody. They’re sending senior agents over here on a Lear jet. He’s to be kept guarded 24/7, line of sight. Seems like someone wants him bad enough to pay big bucks for him.”

“Cale? Cale Snowdon? Open your eyes,” the voice was female and sweet.

“I’m Dr. Trish Brown, Cale. Can you open your eyes and talk to me?”

“Go ‘way,” I mumbled, reached up my hands to push the figures away. She caught hold of me and restrained my movement.

“Easy, Cale. You have IVs in you. Your name is Cale? Cale Snowdon?”

“Penny,” I moaned and cried. “He killed her! He killed her!”

“Easy, Cale. Let’s worry about you,” she soothed and I shuddered. I felt myself; I was dressed in something light and covered with warm blankets.

I spread my eyes wide and the lights burned, made halos around everything in colors like the rainbow. Moon faces loomed over me, doctors, nurses and uniformed cops. I could not help it; I shrank back from them and batted at anyone who tried to touch me. I cried inconsolably for the little girl I had not managed to save.

Chapter VII

“Cale,” said a woman who sounded vaguely familiar. Cautiously, I opened one eye and saw the young woman who was Penny’s mom.

“I’m sorry,” I moaned. “Sorry. I tried to save her. I really did try.”

“Hush, Cale. She’s still alive. The Paramedics managed to save her. You saved her. She’s hurt but alive. He left her there to take you.”

“But the girl in the car---”

“It wasn’t Penny. Another child, someone else’s baby. But not Penny. She wants to see you. We can only visit with you for 15 minutes but she wants to see you.”

I struggled to wake up, to rejoin the world, step back through the curtain I’d drawn around my mind. I could see her face smiling through her tears and her eyes widened as she saw mine.

“Your eyes. Your eyes are so beautiful,” she admired in wonder. “You’re awake. They said you were catatonic, might never return.”

“Where’s Penny?” My voice was hoarse, low. I cleared my throat, tried again. “Where am I? He said I was in Arkansas. I thought Penny was in Dallas?”

“They flew us both up here, figured it would be safer for both of you.

“The doctor said your throat would be sore. You bruised it when the car flipped. I can give you ice, let it melt.”

I nodded and she picked up a cup. She blushed. “I’m sorry. I’m Josie Lynch, Penny’s mom.”

“I know. Where am I?”

“Little Rock, Arkansas. Your friend Dr. Deleon flew us up here when they found you. The man who hurt Penny and took you was named Wilson Penzies. He worked as a delivery man, delivered stolen kids on the side. I can’t say much, your friend will explain everything. It’s his turn next. And your uncle is here, too.”

I swallowed the ice chips, chewed on some and the crunch sounded loud and artificial in my ears. My room was private with the curtain pulled round; I had two IVs in my arms and was tucked under a mound of blankets. I kicked several of them off until I could see under the sheet and my legs. I felt around surreptitiously and couldn’t feel anything sore besides my belly, and across my chest. Penny’s mom interrupted my unvoiced fears and took my wrists.

“It’s okay, Cale. He didn’t touch you that way. They checked. He might have...fondled you but he didn’t...rape you.” Her voice broke and I knew she realized that wasn’t so for her little girl.

“She’s okay. She says she doesn’t remember, that you came into her head and took away the bad memories.”

“I did?”

“My time is up, Cale. I’ll come back later. I love you for what you did for my little girl.” She kissed me softly on the cheek and left me alone. Next in was the doctor, the woman from the ER.

“Cale. How are you feeling?”

Her hands were cold on my throat, wrist, and the stethoscope on my chest and back. “Throat’s sore,” I rasped.

“It will be for a few days. You bruised it pretty hard in the car crash, seat belt slipped across your neck, snapped against your belly and chest. What do you remember?”

“The little girl, man with a rag over my mouth, tied up in the car.”

“He used diesel starting fluid to knock you out. The main ingredient is ether. It made you pretty sick, gave you chemical pneumonia. He didn’t sexually assault you and he is dead. He was crushed to death when the car flipped.”

“How did it wreck?”

“People behind you saw someone transfer you to the front seat from a van and followed. They hit the rear of the car, caused it to flip, and called it in on their cell phone. We don’t know who they were, they didn’t leave a name and the number is no good anymore. They didn’t stick around. State Troopers saw the car and found you.”

“Little girl? Not Penny?”

“We don’t know her name yet. She was three or so. Dead for several days. Died about a day

before he took you. You've been here three days. You were hysterical when they brought you in, and then unresponsive, catatonic. The doctors wanted to try ECT but I vetoed it. I knew you'd responded to me in the ER. I hoped you would come back on your own." She paused and her eyes were kind and full of wonder. "How did you know, Cale? How did you see her, find her, and know the things you do?"

"Please," I shivered. "Don't. It's not some...gift like a birthday present. It haunts me, the only place I'm safe is in my sleep, buried deep in my unconscious brain. I know what it feels like to be raped and sodomized, to be stabbed, choked to death, burnt alive, electrocuted, crushed, beaten by someone who's supposed to love you. Do you want to exist that way?"

She didn't know what to say.

"What's wrong with me? Anything broken?"

"You have chemical pneumonia from the ether. Severe hematomas on your chest, belly and upper thighs, neck from the lap belts. No broken bones, no internal injuries, no damage to your anus or genitals. He didn't sexually penetrate you. We found no traces of semen on you. The FBI agent believes the...buyer wanted you delivered intact for the contract."

The knock on my door was loud and the person didn't wait for her to call enter but came in first. The hand that pulled back the curtain was square with neatly trimmed nails, wearing a large signet ring and French cuffs in the delicate gray pin stripe with lime sherbet shirt.

Jed looked like he'd slept in the suit, even his hair was awry. He came in, stood over me and then gathered me in his arms and hugged me close. I felt the stubble on his cheeks and smelled his cologne and it struck a familiar chord in my memory. I could almost remember my father.

"Don't you ever run off without me again, Cale," he threatened into my hair. "I thought you were dead."

"I hoped for that when he took me."

He ignored that. "The doctor says you can be discharged and recover at home. You ready to see your uncle?"

"Are the girls with him?" I asked, uneasily, remembering the last incident.

"No. We only flew him up."

"Maybe later. I'm tired. I want to sleep."

I pushed away from him and lay back down. "I want to see Penny."

He turned to the doctor and she nodded. "I'll bring a wheelchair; disconnect your IV so you can see her. She's in the PIC Unit. Be right back."

She unhooked me from the lines and pulled out the needle, slapped gauze and a Band-Aid on both sites, smiled and closed the curtain. Returning scant minutes later with an orderly, they helped me up, put slippers on my feet and transferred me to the chair.

I was sore, felt the bruises on my chest and belly, and was uneasy when the man touched me. I had an instant urge to scream and hit at him and it took extreme will power to stifle the urge. Only the desire to see the little girl overrode the fear. We went rolling down the corridor and as we passed the uniformed policeman in the vinyl chair, he rose and came with us like a caravan.

Jed was at my side and when I reached for his hand, he grabbed mine; the contact was warm and steadying, kept me grounded and pushed back some of the fear.

"He can't get me, right?" I asked.

"He's dead, Cale. Car crushed him," the FBI agent replied.

"No. The man who stole me."

He stopped and stared at me, the entire group paused. I explained, "The man who took me was young, thirties, in a brown shirt and shorts. The man in the cars was older with dark hair and eyes. He was just the delivery guy. I can remember being transferred from car to car. Three times I woke, three different cars, drivers. Don't remember their faces but knew they were different than the guy

that died.”

“What kind of vehicles?”

“First was a SUV of some kind, then a small boxy thing, then the car that flipped---a four door sedan. I can’t remember anything else about it.”

“I’ll get this out to the authorities before he can take another child. Will you excuse me, Cale? I’ll return as soon as I make a phone call. You go on and visit with Penny. Officer Garret will be right outside the door.” They went on, turned the corner and went through the doors marked ‘Authorized Personnel Only.’”

We were greeted by a bevy of nurses in cheerful scrubs who took us over to a bed with the rail pulled up and a small mound under bright sheets with cartoon characters.

She opened her eyes and the contact was electric. I understood why there was such a bond between us, she could almost read my mind and I, hers. We spoke without words and I gently erased all the bad memories not that she would ever forget them but so that it was like it had happened to a little girl she used to know. Her smile was wide and genuine; although she couldn’t speak above a whisper, we all heard her say my name and thank me. She took my hand in her two little ones and patted me, consoled me, whispered that she wished she could make the bad things go away for me and a certain portion of the heavy despair lifted.

I sighed deeply, breathed to the bottom of my lungs and felt...lighter. I yawned. I was suddenly exhausted, could not keep my eyes open, laid my head near her chest and fell into a dreamless sleep.

She would not let them move me so they put me in the bed next to her and she curled herself against me and followed me into dreams where we shared a landscape that was so remarkable; I could never explain or describe it.

Chapter VIII

Penny and I were in the gardens on the 5th floor and I was wheeling her around. We had our escorts, her mom, armed police and Jed had barely left my side.

The hospital wanted to keep me a couple of extra days to run some kind of tests on my head. I could hear them talking in hushed tones about the two of us.

“Watch them,” a doctor murmured. “She knows what he’s going to do before he does it. He anticipates her moves, too. It’s like they’re tuned into each other. We had them both on a heart monitor and their heart beats are synchronized. There are orders to do an MRI and bets are on their being on the same wave lengths.”

“Newspaper reported he’s psychic. He warned a cop about a shoot-out, told him to get his vest and saved his life, warned a security guard about a gas explosion and saved him, too.

“I heard the mother. She said the boy went into the little girl’s head and took away the bad memories. She certainly doesn’t act traumatized like she was sexually assaulted but I did the original assessment and I know she was, not to mention the lacerated throat. That knife missed her superior jugular by an inch.”

“Any damage to her vocal cords?”

“Yes, but they are healing, too. I expect more miracles where he’s concerned,” the doctor laughed. “I believe in miracles, now. You have only to look at those two and see one.”

I squeezed her hand and we both looked up at the sky to watch the clouds form animals over our heads.

She liked dragons and Pegasus; I saw lions and tigers, woolly sheep and clown faces. Neither one of us spoke, we had no need for words nor when the sadness hit me, Penny was the one who

patted my face and stroked me with compassion. She wanted to give me her new teddy bear but such things had never been my comfort.

I wondered if I'd had a dog or ever wanted one. Penny had one at home, a non-descript mutt she had rescued from the pound and was waiting for her to come home.

Home was out in the country, in a nice subdivision with neighborhood watch and neighbors with guns that would defend her with their lives. She would go back to safety and the arms of her mom and community. Her fears were not for herself but for me.

"Cale, it's time to go in," the nurse called to us and I pivoted her chair and returned her to the room. Masses of flowers, toys and stuffed animals, balloons with Get Well wishes filled the area from family, friends and the community who had taken the little girl to their hearts. She had tried to give them to me but I wanted no recognition, wanted anonymity.

My uncle was waiting on me and we walked comfortably down to the cafeteria where we shared a root beer float and a chili cheese dog. "Your aunt and I went to the ranch over the week end," he offered. "Grass is coming up good. Especially over the graves. The sink holes have been filled in before any of the cattle fell in. Good calf crop this year. I expect they'll bring a good price at market."

"Uncle Jamesy, did I have a dog?"

He looked at me oddly. "You have a blue Heeler name Zak. He was off hunting when the intruder broke in. We think he tried to follow you. The other dogs were killed. We buried them in the cemetery, too. They tried to defend the girls."

"Who's taking care of the ranch now?"

"I hired a family to run it while I'm in Dallas. Unless you want to live there, that's what I'll do. Fly down on the weekends, check on things."

"No. Don't want to go there," I was vehement.

"Are you afraid he'll come back?"

"Not that. Well, maybe. I heard the police talking. They said I'm on a list for someone to buy me. What's to stop them from trying again?"

"Dr. Deleon will put you in protective custody. You'll live in a safe house, go to school under a false name, and have a bodyguard." He looked at me with those unusual family eyes and I could see myself in them. "Cale, did you use your talent to pick the Lotto ticket? You know how your parents thought about using it for personal gain, that it brought bad luck."

"Truthfully, Uncle James, I don't remember. I don't think so. None of the numbers mean anything and I didn't even know about winning until Dr. Deleon told me."

"It's in trust for you. You'll be able to access the principle at age 18, the interest earlier. Or I can set up an allowance for you with a debit card. You've always been a sensible kid, I remember you saving your allowance for a year to get a new compound bow you wanted. I don't think you'll go out and buy a sports car."

"Maybe a pickup truck," I grinned.

"Finished? You have a 3 p.m. appointment for a cat scan and a MRI. Not afraid of closed in places, if I remember. You and Curt used to go caving all the time."

"What else did I like?" I was curious. On the way back to the day room, he told me who I used to be.

Chapter IX

I was lying in the tube with electrodes planted on my head while the machine banged away with

a noise that penetrated my skull and made my teeth ache.

A voice came over the intercom and told me to think about Penny, then gave me other images to ponder on while they scanned my brain. I had already had a cat scan earlier and had actually fallen asleep in the tube. It hadn't seemed to matter to them, not the doctors or the scientists that had gathered in the amphitheater above us.

Jed was there, too, observing the proceedings. He told me he and his team had been assigned as my primary case officers and they were busy tracking down perverts involved in the sex kidnapping ring.

His agents had traced the last man to a house in Tennessee. He wanted me to go with them to the place and scope it out but the hospital wanted to do their test first. I had another day here, and then we were leaving.

My uncle was opposed but I had agreed. I felt it was safe and Penny was on her way to recovery, no longer needed me. I was afraid that there might be more victims like her; wanted both to save them and run away from the idea.

I drifted into a haze; my senses didn't shut down but simply stopped working. I knew my eyes were open but all I could see was a formless white mist that shimmered all around me. I could smell only the sharp ozone after a lightning storm even though I brought my arm up to my nose and stuck in into the flesh. I couldn't feel it or the coldness of the table under my thin bones. Sound was a thin crackling like cellophane being ripped from a package of cigarettes. The taste of stale smoke was in my mouth, like steel wool, tinny, coppery. I couldn't even feel my teeth grating against each other. Thoughts raced across my mind that I had no idea from whence they came, things I had never thought of nor knew of, prompted by questions I didn't hear but somehow sensed. Abruptly, like a door slamming shut, I was rudely jerked out of that place and blinked as the bright lights speared my eyes.

"All done, Cale," said the cheerful voice of the tech that had strapped me in. She pulled loose the tie that held my head still and sat me up. I was stiff from not moving, and was surprised that I'd been in there for three hours.

My police guard was standing in the doorway waiting for me. "Hey, Cale," he said and gave me a high five. He was one of the few men I felt comfortable around. He escorted me to the outpatient lounge and I was met by Jed and his team.

Everyone came to see me off but the only one I would let hug me goodbye was Dr. Trish. I'd already said my goodbyes to Penny and her mom. I knew that they would be fine and more than fine; I'd whispered some numbers into Penny's ear and she'd memorized them. We both knew that they were a winning ticket and her mom would put the money to good use taking care of her. Being a single parent with a child, she needed the help and Penny promised she'd use it to help other kids like her. I knew she'd make good on that promise.

She told me to be careful, I had a long way to go and it was fraught with danger, dark dragon clouds she called them.

"Cale?" Jed's voice brought me back from my reverie.

"Excuse me?"

"We've got your things packed. Ready?"

I looked around at the crowd of people come to see me off, had nothing to say except thank you and followed him out to the waiting government SUV.

"It's brand new," one of the agents said. "Check it out for yourself."

I put my hand on the door; felt the impression of the auto worker who'd built the car, the anger of the driver who'd transported it along with seven others, fleeting glimpses of the car dealership and the government procurement office. Last and strongest was the personality of the agent who'd driven it here to pick me up. He was a little afraid of me but he'd never experienced anything

traumatic enough to scar his psyche so he left only innocuous sensations for me to read.

We were headed out of town on the interstate towards the airport. I was sitting in the middle seat on the window, lap belted in and watching the scenery go by.

It was very flat with large trees on both sides and sloughs of dirty brown water on my right. Swarms of mosquitoes hovered in clouds above the open patches.

Traffic was heavy, lots of tractor trailers passed us, double cargo haulers, car carriers and a lot of those metal containers off of loading ships. Every time one passed, a frisson of cold shot up my spine and made me uneasy. So sensitive to my moods, Dr. Deleon noticed and asked me what was wrong from his seat in the front next to the driver.

“What’s up, Cale?”

“Something. Not sure what. Something with those cargo containers,” I responded but we arrived at the airport without incident and pulled up right on the apron where the FBI Lear jet was parked. The pilot and another agent met us at the steps and led us inside.

Curious eyes followed me as I walked down the narrow aisle to a seat on the window. There was room for twelve and several desks set up with laptops and files spread out.

I saw pictures of me and Penny; the nearest agent closed them hastily as my shocked face took in images of me in the ER naked and bruised and of Penny in worse condition.

“Sorry,” he said to Deleon and flushed. I looked like I was dead, with blood all over me, pale, eyes wide and blank, and my mouth open in a silent scream. I had remembered screaming being unable to stop until they had drugged me.

I spent the whole flight looking out the window with my face pressed against the cool glass.

“Cale,” Jed walked down the aisle with a glass of water and a paper cup. “Pills. You hungry?”

“When am I not?” I looked in the cup, saw a bevy of drugs and swallowed them obediently.

“It’s amoxicillin, vitamins, iron and an anti-depressant. If you’re in pain, I can give you a pain pill.”

“My legs are fine, bruises don’t hurt anymore and my throat is okay I do have a slight headache,” I admitted. “Could be cus I’m hungry.”

“Sandwiches or microwave meal?”

“Microwave.”

“We have meatloaf, turkey, and chicken fried steak.”

“Chicken fried? Mashed taters and cream gravy?”

“Ordered them for you,” he grinned. “Vanilla coke and ice cream.”

“Alright.”

I unsnapped my belt and scooted towards the galley, watched him as he popped two meals into the microwave. He pulled out two cups, ice cubes and set down two cans of vanilla coke in front of me. We ate in silence and the agents joined us.

The plane landed not in Tennessee like I expected but at a small airstrip on a base where the uniforms were marine issue and we disembarked down the four steps; were met by uniformed men in green camouflage that looked no older than 18. All of us got into the Hummer parked there and were driven to the big white building that bore no insignia yet I knew it was the FBI HQ at Quantico.

“The Director wants to meet you, Cale. Talk to you before we go any further. Your uncle is there with his lawyer. You okay with this?” Jed asked me as I tested my sense in the back seat of the Hummer.

So many personalities had been inside that all I got was a jumble of muted emotions so diluted that nothing came through strongly.

“Don’t have any choice. If I want this man who wants to buy me to leave me alone, I have to find him, bring him down or kill him.”

“Leave that part to us,” he said calmly. “You’ll be staying here until we find a safe place to house you in Tennessee. That’s where the rendezvous was to take place. In Memphis.

“The price for you has now climbed to \$150K, Cale. That means someone has a real powerful need for you. They actually have your name listed, not just your physical description and your eyes.”

The Humvee pulled up in front of the drive under a portico where more guards armed with M16s escorted us into the building like we deserved Secret Service protection.

I knew these corridors we walked down, narrow, white walled with many doors and bulletin boards on the right. I had seen this place in my dreams and pushed past them to open the next door on my left to stand in front of the windows and look out over the woods where athletic young men and woman jogged in shorts and t-shirts.

“This is your office, Jed,” I said and he nodded, not surprised.

“Come on, we have to meet with the Director in the Conference room.”

That room I did not know; it had a view of the track and the barracks. It was a large room with a long table and padded leather chairs that swiveled and was behind double doors that unlocked with a coded key badge. Folders were laid out at the table; three men stood when we entered and my uncle came forward and hugged me. I stood stiffly under his embrace.

“Thank God, you’re alright,” he murmured. “Evil has a strange penchant for you, Cale Austin Snowden.” He turned to the man in the suit jacket with jeans underneath, boots and a Stetson. “This is Jarrett Lee Emmons, our lawyer.”

He was South Texas with a hometown drawl, curly gray hair and faded green eyes that had squinted through many a Texas summer. His face was a road map of sun and wind; I felt comfortable around him, extended my hand and shook his.

The tall man in the blue suit was slightly overweight, reddish complexion with brown eyes and hair. His forehead was high and he had the longest earlobes I’d ever seen. A faint sheen of sweat was on his face. He put out his hand and I took it, held it and turned to Jed.

“Aspirin. Can I have two aspirin?” I dropped his hand and wiped mine against my jeans.

“You have a headache?”

I pursed my lips, went to the phone and dialed 911. Jed stood back and watched me with a bland face. The operator asked me what the emergency was and I spoke quietly, “Heart attack. Come quickly.”

She wanted to know who, was the person conscious, breathing, and had a pulse. I just said to come quick, or it would be too late.

“What’s going on?” they asked me in alarm and Jed handed me two aspirin.

I held them out to the Director, said simply, “Here.”

He swallowed them dry, looked from me to Dr. Deleon who moved close and picked up the man’s wrist, feeling for his pulse.

“Feeling indigestion, Director Kelstrom?” he asked grimly, setting the man down.

EMTs from the base burst into the room and took over. His face blanched and he turned white as the first irregular beat hit him. Sweat broke out in greasy beads as he grabbed his arm.

“Feels like an elephant’s sitting on my chest,” he gasped. Within minutes, they had him hooked up to a heart monitor, IVs, O2 and were wheeling him out to Walter Reed. The last thing I saw were his wide, frightened eyes on me.

“You’ll be okay,” I told him and he closed them in grateful surrender as the morphine kicked in.

“You are a different boy to hang around with, son,” Mr. Emmons shook his head. “How’d you know he was gonna crash?”

“I felt it when I touched him,” I said wearily. I sat down on the chair nearest me and leaned my head back. “Uncle Jamison, if I don’t stay and help them, I’ll be dead or insane within the year.”

I looked at the lawyer. "I want to become an emancipated minor. Can you do that?"

The lawyer nodded, looked at my uncle. "That okay with you, Jamison?"

"If that's what he needs," my uncle said slowly. "We would have liked for you to live with us, Cale. But you do what you have to."

"Uncle James, don't take the girls to the ranch. Ever. Promise me."

"I promise." He understood and was afraid.

"If they don't go, nothing happens," I said quickly. "Remember that. I need to sleep now. I'm sorry. I can't handle anymore tonight."

"Alright, Cale," Jed Deleon spoke quietly and took my hand, pulled me up out of the chair and to the nearest elevator.

I remember stumbling towards a bed in a room built like a dorm with two beds both neatly made.

"Cale, I've put you in with trainee Hailey. She's at dinner, will be in later. I'll come back to introduce you, take you to dinner if you're awake."

I climbed onto the bed, shut him out, shut everything off, and didn't hear the door close.

Chapter X

There were six of us crouched against the corner of the building watching the corporal throw the dice. No one was betting, they had already fleeced each other bone dry before I'd arrived but we were having just as much fun as the die came up to my stated calls.

Private Raines asked, "Are you predicting it or making them come up what you're calling?"

"Huh," I said. "Never thought about that. I just see the next couple of rolls before you throw them."

"You'd be great to take to Atlantic City," he sighed and Corporal Steinberger pushed him.

"They'd think you rigged it, Raines. Or was cheating. Can you do it with cards?"

Private Ames pulled out his pack, shuffled and held up the first card hidden.

"Two of clubs, nine of spades, Ace of spades, three of diamonds," I recited the next ten cards and he flipped them over to show every one I'd called. Their faces grew serious.

"I'm shipping out next week for Afghanistan," Jacobs drawled in his Arkansas accent and I hesitated. I'd not wanted to know which of these newly made men were not coming back but maybe, if I told them, I could keep them safe or at least not dying if I warned them.

I picked up his hand, removed my glove and our skin met with an electric shock that both of us felt. I dropped the contact quickly and rubbed at my hand.

"You save your squad, Jacobs. You receive a Purple Heart but if you don't shoot the kid, you'll lose both your legs above the knees." I took a deep breath and tried to dismiss the feeling of a bomb exploding my legs off.

His face blanched. "What kid?"

"Look for the kid in the red hat. When you see him, shoot. Don't hesitate, don't think, just do it. He's wired with Semtex. Make sure you fasten your helmet and drop."

"I'll remember," he said grimly and the others crowded around me, wanting to know their futures but I couldn't, cried out when they badgered me and they stood in confusion when I bawled.

I tried to explain what it did to me to tell someone they were going to die, when, where and how terribly. As yet, I hadn't learned to lie; not everyone wanted to know or would believe me.

"Cale, we're sorry," they said and attempted to pat me but I shrank from their touch.

The sergeant came around the corner and his swift perusal took in the cards and dice lay on the

ground, my crying form and his barked questions caused the men to jump to attention.

“What the hell is going on here?”

“Nothing, sir!” Corporal Jacobs shouted.

“Then, why is the FBI’s VIP guest crying?”

“Homesick,” I blurted out. “His accent reminded me of home.”

“Pick up your...toys and go find something to do before I find a use for those new toothbrushes that came in,” he snapped.

“Sir. Yes, sir.” All six of them snapped a salute and trotted off, several gave me backward glances with worried frowns.

“I hope you weren’t gambling with my men,” he told me.

“No,” I denied. “I don’t gamble.”

How could it be gambling when I always knew the outcome? Besides, what did I need money for; I had over 260 million sitting in trust for me.

“The Acting Director sent me to find you, Mr. Snowdon,” he added.

I sniffled, wiped my eyes on the long sleeved FBI shirt and stood up.

He made no move to touch me, just stepped aside so I could precede him onto the graveled paths that circled the barracks.

It was a short walk back to the FBI building and the trainee whose room I had been assigned to share was waiting in the lobby.

There was a formal handing over of my body from one to the other and she passed me the official badge with my photo on it that let me in and out without an escort.

I’d had the run of the base since I’d sent Director Kelstrom to the hospital with his heart attack. He was doing well, between the aspirin he’d swallowed to thin his blood and the care the EMT’s had given him as it had started, no damage had been done to the heart muscle. If I hadn’t been there, he would have died on his floor and not been found until it was too late. He would retire and live a long time after.

Today was the first time I’d seen my roommate in daylight. Usually, she came in after dark and left before daylight. She was in classes all morning, P.E. in the afternoons and training exercises after that. Her goal was to work in the Crimes against Children Unit and her specialty was Psychiatry. She had carefully refrained from questioning me, just said hi and goodnight, made sure my clothes were laid out, clean and my bed made even though I told her I could do it myself.

I was taken to the Director’s office; the AD had taken it over until the new one was appointed. It was a large room behind glass partitions with a nice desk and chair, computer and several phones, one of which was a fax. A picture of President Bush was on the wall next to the last Director of the FBI and J. Edgar Hoover. He wasn’t alone; there were three other men with him. I looked for Jed, he wasn’t there.

I was introduced to the head of Behavioral Science, another doctor and the special agent in charge of some task force. This AD was named McCormick; he was from the NYC office.

“Please sit down, Cale,” the AD asked and I felt an instant chill. I did not like these men and as I hesitated, one of them actually pushed me into a chair.

“Where’s Jed?” I asked, afraid.

“He’s on his way to Tennessee. I’m afraid you’ll have to deal with us till he returns.”

He placed a box on the table and pulled out evidence bags that he carefully opened and set each item in front of me.

There were eight objects, from a baseball cap to a set of keys, a knife whose point whispered to me with deadly fascination; bloody clothes, one shoe and a fingernail.

They forced me to touch them one by one and the impressions I got off each one drove me deeper and deeper into despair until I shrank in the chair and did nothing but cry.

“It’s enough,” the SAC said uneasily. “He can’t take any more.”

“Take him to his room, feed him. We’ll continue in the morning,” the AD decided.

Images of dead and dying children, tortured women deluged my mind; I could not shut them out. I tore at my head trying to get them out and they reacted by restraining me. I fought that, kicking, biting and screaming until the entire floor crowded into the room and spilled out into the hallway observing me.

Eventually, he called the on-site doctor who gave me a shot of Valium and I melted in their arms, hung limp, my mouth open and mewling. I was brought to the infirmary, stripped, tied down behind the rails of the hospital bed. I could not sleep; the images continued to race across my mind’s eye, I saw each and every murder behind all eight objects, repeated endlessly. The doctor fussed over me, checked on me every fifteen minutes, and seemed surprised when he found me semi-awake.

“Go to sleep,” he told me. “Stop fighting the drug. I can’t give you another shot.”

When morning came, the nurse was not happy to see me wide awake, my eyes staring at nothing.

“Didn’t you sleep?” she asked me and the doctor came out of his office, shaking his head.

I could hear everything but it was like I was on the other side of a plate glass window listening in on someone else’s conversation.

“No. He’s been like that all night. Won’t eat, either. What did they do to him? He was hysterical when they brought him in; I had to sedate him with Valium and then Ativan.”

“And he didn’t sleep? Cale, honey, want to sit up and eat?” She lifted my bed, sometime during the night, the man had removed my restraints but I had not noticed.

“He’s withdrawn, non-responsive. Cale, look at me.” Her tone was sharp, commanding.

Slowly, I turned my head, not making eye contact, not even when she grasped my chin and pulled my face around.

“The AD wants him in his office at 8:45 a.m.,” she said. “But I don’t think he’ll get far with him. Whatever they did, it shouldn’t be repeated.”

She took my vitals and he did not look pleased. “He’s got a low grade temp, I’m going to keep him in bed, tell the AD he’s sick and can’t be released,” the man decided. “Put him on an IV of lactated Ringers, set up a Pen drip.”

He flashed a penlight in my eyes and pushed me gently on my chest until I was lying flat. I offered no resistance; I was a silent observer in a tiny corner of my brain that was still plugged in.

“I don’t know how to deal with this. Maybe someone from Behavioral Science---a Psyche Specialist. Cale? Can you hear me? You need to wake up, Cale.”

He snapped his fingers in front of my eyes and I blinked slowly until his face receded to a tiny circle at the end of a tunnel and popped like a child’s soap bubble.

I could still hear; it almost sounded like a foreign language, snatches of conversations that sometimes made sense and others not. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Won’t sleep, won’t eat, and won’t respond. You move his arm, it stays there.”

“We’re putting in a feeding tube today, transferring him to a private hospital in Maryland where they can deal with his kind of care.”

“Schizophrenic?”

“Catatonic withdrawal. “Hello, Mr. Cale Snowdon. I’m the Paramedic that will be transporting you to the Potomac Rehab Center. It’s a couple of hours but you’ll be nice and comfy in our big ambulance.

“Patient’s name?”

“Cale Austin Snowdon. Age 13, date of birth, 5-12-95. Federal Bureau of Investigation Guarantor. Huh.’

“Cale, can you tell me your name, DOB?”

“Forget it, he’s catatonic. Hasn’t moved or talked on his own in two weeks.”

“Oh. Poor kid. Those eyes, they see right through you. Kind of creepy with nobody home behind them. At least, he’s going to a really ritzy place, they treat everyone there like gold.”

“This one’s on the government payroll. Goes under an assumed name, has 24 hour guards, best of everything. I hear the NSA is interested in him, too.”

“Wonder why?”

“You need to watch the news more. He’s some kind of psychic genius.”

“Some kind of psychotic, you mean. Hey, brain boy, anybody home?”

“Good morning, Cale. It’s sunny, temps in the eighties, a lovely day. Want to go outside for your breakfast? We can sit in the gardens.

“I’m going to give you a sponge bath, then get you dressed and up, here we go. Doesn’t that feel good? Warm and clean. Put your arm in the sleeve. Now your feet in these cushy slippers. Hold on to me while I transfer you to the chair. Oops, got your lines caught under your elbow. There, all straightened out. We won’t take a blanket, it’s really warm out.

“Hi, Pete. We’re going out for breakfast. This is Pete, Cale. Remember him? He’s your physical therapist.”

“Any change, Chrissie?”

“No. But I never give up, you know me, I love lost causes.”

“Has he eaten anything?”

“No. Just his stomach tube feedings. I’ve tried to get him to eat but it just sits in his mouth till it dissolves. Poor kid, he’s thin as a stick. We’re worried about pressure sores.”

“I’ll walk with you. The gardens are so pretty this time of year.”

“Any change, Doctor?”

“No, Director McCormick. No response to stimuli, drugs or psychotherapy. Only thing we haven’t tried is ECT and that’s not legal under the age of 18.”

“You don’t think he’s faking it?”

“No! Whatever brought him to this was so traumatic, so severe that he refuses to face reality. There are cases you know, where the mind simply snaps. He may never recover. What happened to him? If I knew, I might be able to reverse it.”

“I doubt that. Not unless you’re a mind reader.”

There was a pause. “He had a special bond with two people. I wonder if they could reach him.”

“Who?”

“A little girl he saved from a rapist and the SAC agent who rescued him. Cale, Jed Deleon has been reassigned but I can transfer him back to your case. And I can bring Penny here to see you. Do you hear me?”

“Penny?” it was a thin whisper that made their voices rise in anticipation.

“Cale?”

“His eyes are still blank, no response. Try again. Penny. Penny’s here to see you. Wake up.”

“If there’s no change by the end of the week, I’m ordering ECT.”

“You’ll have to get a court order.”

“You want one from your local Podunk judge or the AG of the Supreme Court?”

Chapter XI

“God damn you, McCormick,” the voice hissed in anger. “What did you do to him? Cale, can you hear me? It’s Jed. Jed Deleon. Come back from wherever you are, Cale. What’s been done for him?”

“For him or to him?” was the bitter reply. “I vetoed ECT but your Director went over my head to the Attorney General and brought a court order releasing it.

“He’s had four sessions. You ever see what electro convulsive shock therapy does to an adult, let alone a thirteen year old skinny, malnourished boy? He’s lucky he didn’t break any bones, let alone tear muscles. For God’s sake, his brain is still growing. Who knows what damage it will do?”

“I’m going to Director Kelstrom and get him to take over Cale’s case. He’s still the Director of the FBI. He owes Cale his life.”

“You better hurry. He’s scheduled for another two sessions this week.”

“Cale, hang in there. I’ll get you out of here, I promise.”

“Can you keep an eye on him for me? I have to go pick up some blood tubes. I’m out of the violet caps.”

“Sure. Park him here. How long will you be?”

“No more than fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. I have an ultrasound in twenty.”

“Oh, I’ll be back way before then. Besides, he’s no problem. He just sits there.”

“Damn it! Where is she? I have to go to that ultrasound. You won’t move, will you, Cale? I’ll check on you in five minutes. Sit here, don’t move and be quiet.”

Quiet reigned; no one heard the drawer open and a small hand searched through the equipment nor grasp around the sterile wrapped scalpel. The first cut was a cold slash that burned icy, and then the warmth as blood gushed into his lap. The second was more difficult because of the damage to the tendons.

He dropped the wet blade into his lap and let his hands dangle in the pool that slowly filled his lap and spewed onto the floor towards the doorway.

Coldness crept up his limbs and his head grew too heavy to hold up. He slumped in the chair, was too far gone when the X-ray Tech returned, saw the spreading pool of blood and screamed.

“Code Red!” he yelled into the phone. “X-ray Lab! Code RED!”

Alarms went ballistic, footsteps raced down the hall and doctors pushed their way into the room.

“I need a BP! Does he have pulse?”

“I thought you said he was catatonic? Get me five units of B+. Call Walter Reed; get a chopper here to airlift him once we get him stabilized! Somebody call that FBI agent, the doctor.”

“Cale, can you hear me? Why did you do this?”

“Pupils are fixed, no blink response. BP is 40/20. Pulse is thready, very weak. He’s bleeding out. Get a large bore into his jugular and push everything you’ve got into him! Get those veins tied off!”

“He’ll need micro-surgery to repair the veins and tendons. His BP is coming up; color coming back into his lips and nails, and who the hell left him alone? He was not to be left unattended, not even for thirty seconds.”

“I had to go get blood tubes. I left him with X-ray.”

“I left to do an ultrasound. I waited for twenty five minutes but you didn’t come back.”

“I got caught up in a choking. Had to do the Heimlich on a patient.”

“Quiet! We’ll discuss this later. He’s taken in four units of blood; his BP is 80/60. No response to the light. How long was his brain without oxygen?”

“I left him for five minutes,” the tech protested.

“Chopper’s here. Is he stable enough to leave?”

“Where’s the patient?” the paramedic and flight nurse jogged in carrying her gear and a gurney. They exchanged vitals and medical data, picked up the boy and transported him to the Life Flight helicopter.

“The FBI will meet you there; A Dr. Deleon is on his way. No one but he or Director Kelstrom is to have access to him after surgery. Understood?”

“Just who is this kid?”

“His name is John Doe. He’s some kind of FBI asset, a thirteen year old kid pushed to this. Take care of him, he’s special.”

“Kid’s lives are all special.”

“Not like this one.”

The doors slid shut on the helio pad and the team watched as the chopper lifted off and dipped as it banked towards the big hospital that catered to VIPs and the military.

The ER team was waiting to take the boy into surgery; they met them on the cement pad and whisked him straight into the OR. The FBI agent waited in the room set aside for family as the surgical team did microsurgery on the boy’s wrists.

Hours passed. The surgeon came out and walked unerringly to the weary man in the chair.

“Special Agent?” At his nod, he continued, “We’ve sutured both wrists; there should be no damage to the tendons or ligaments. This was no attention seeking behavior, he meant to kill himself. The cuts were deep and with no hesitation slices.

“He’s stable, his BP is almost normal. We’ll be taking him to recovery, then to ICU. You can see him, then.” He paused. “We don’t know how long he went without blood flow to his brain and O2 depletion. If it was long enough, he could have brain damage.”

“Frankly, that would be a blessing. He’s been catatonic; his brain was basically shut down, anyway.”

“I hope you have a good psychiatrist handy. He’s liable to try again. We’ll keep him on suicide watch but he more than likely won’t wake up for several hours. The nurses will come out and get you when you can come see him.”

He hesitated. “He looks bad, he’s critical but in stable condition. We don’t know what he can hear or see, so please don’t say anything about his condition.” Jed nodded. “Any questions?”

“None. Thank you.”

“Wish I could do more. Wish I could take it all away. I had a thirteen year old son. He did the same thing only I couldn’t save him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The warning signs were all there, the depression, alienation, mood swings, acting out. I just ignored them. Don’t make the same mistake I made. Pay attention to them. You’ve been given a second chance.”

“He’s not my son,” Deleon sighed. “I wish he was. I wish I could have known him before.”

“Before?”

“Before a serial killer tracked his entire family down and murdered them. The boy was found unconscious in a sinkhole.”

“No wonder he’s depressed. Survivor’s guilt? Did he find his family?”

“He suffered a brain injury. Doesn’t remember any of it or them. No, his problems stem from something worse.”

“Worse? What could be worse than losing your family to a murderer?”

“Experiencing murders, rapes and evil every time someone touches you or you touch something.”

The surgeon opened and closed his mouth. “Poor kid,” he said, finally. “I’ll come and get you myself when he wakes in recovery. Another hour or so.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Cale, can you hear me? You’re okay, Cale. I thought you had promised me you’d come talk to me before you would do anything like this. You need to talk to me, Cale. You promised. I talked to Penny and she is coming to see you. You’ve made her very sad; she doesn’t want you to solve your problems this way. Cale, open your eyes and look at me.”

The boy’s eyelids fluttered and the great wounded violet of his unusual eyes gazed blankly up at the lights. From his open mouth issued an exhalation that was almost a sigh.

His arms moved restlessly in the restraints but the massive bandages on his wrists prevented him from moving much. He was still hooked up to a unit of blood and IVs in his neck and elbows. He was on a morphine drip and oxygen mask.

“I’m taking you out of here, Cale. I’m taking a leave of absence and you’re coming with me. I just need to make arrangements, Cale. You hang tight, we’ll get you through this, I promise.”

“I’m here to transfer this patient, John Doe,” the FBI agent handed over the paperwork signed by the DO Kelstrom. The nurse looked at him in agitation.

“We can’t find him.”

“What do you mean, you can’t find him?” he screamed.

She turned red, then white. “We went in this morning to change his dressings and he was gone. We had cameras on the unit and no one saw him leave or anyone take him out. We instituted a Code Adam but there’s no sign of him.”

“How long has he been missing?” Kelstrom demanded as the other agents flipped open his phone and began the process of reporting a missing child.

“We don’t know,” she admitted. “Last check was thirty minutes ago. He was there, then. I saw him myself.”

“Jed, go,” Kelstrom shot out and the man took off, yelling into his phone.

Chapter XII

Granny Elkins straightened up from her bent over position and studied the boy seated against the concrete and iron of the old bridge above the cut off to Sprig’s Hollow, Tennessee. She saw that he was a wild, skittish thing with great wounded eyes and not quite right. “Tetched in the head,” the old ones called them. She spoke to him gently, putting her basket of herbs down at her feet.

“Where did you hie from, boy? Are you hurt? I’m Cassie Elkins, folks call me Granny,” she prattled away at him like a skittish foal and slowly approached him. He wore only an old, dirty coat over a hospital gown with his bare legs hanging out. Old sneakers were on his feet, minus laces or socks. Both of his wrists were tightly bandaged with some blood seeping through.

She reached out her hand and after some hesitation, the boy took it. She felt the instant electricity and knew he was one of those with sight and what afflicted him.

“Ah,” she sighed, reading his torment. “You was sent to me to learn to shield your mind. Think of a shiny glass ball that thoughts bounce off of. Nothing can enter the mirror, it bounces off.”

She pulled gently and the boy got up with a grunt of effort and walked with her like an old man.

Trucks and neighbors passed by the odd couple as they traveled slowly down the gravel lane to her house in the Hollow. Long before they reached her wooden porch, the entire Hollow knew she had taken in a stray.

She sat him down in the rocker in the kitchen and put him to shelling black-eyed peas with an ease that said he had done it before.

“Huh. You’re a country boy,” she grunted. They worked in a comfortable silence; the only noise in the old maple kitchen was the sound of the peas hitting the bottom of the ceramic bowl and the ticking of the Grandfather clock.

When it banged 4 o’clock, it was she that jumped, the boy sat placidly, not making any eye contact. “UPS will be here soon,” she said and that’s when she noticed the white band on the boy’s arm. He let her look at it as she read his name, birth date and the person responsible for him. Pulling a sharp pair of shears from her pocket, she cut the thing off and put it away where it was hidden.

The honk from the delivery driver did not startle either one, she reached around behind and picked up two butcher paper wrapped parcels and went out to meet the driver. He came in for his customary ice tea with mint sprig and eyed curiously, the silent boy.

“Miz Elkins. Got more Ginseng for that store in NYC? This your grandson come to visit?”

“No.” She didn’t elaborate and he picked up the package and handed her the clipboard to sign.

“See you in a few days,” he said cheerfully and handed her the empty glass. He left and the boy seemed to relax although he had not moved a muscle and she sensed the fear that the boy felt.

“He’s okay,” she said gruffly. “Known him all his life, read his life lines when he was twelve. You hungry?”

She didn’t wait for an answer but busied herself making sandwiches and ice teas for both of them. She put pimento loaf on homemade potato bread with lettuce, tomato and mayo on a plate, added a kosher pickle spear and sliced everything into quarters. She gave him a straw in his ice tea, sat down at the table and blessed their food. She did not wait for him but ate her sandwich neatly, crunching on the crisp pickle between bites. Finishing, she frowned as she looked at the untouched plate in front of the boy.

“You’ve forgotten how?”

She picked up a quarter and held it in front of his face. He leaned over, opened his mouth and she placed the small piece inside. He chewed slowly, not a flicker of emotion crossed his countenance, and he kept his eyes off to the distance.

“I know your name, boy. I know what happened to you so I hid your name band. I won’t call you by that name. How does Mark sound? Well, Mark, you need something to wear. Eat some more.”

It took an hour but she had infinite patience and she saw that he cleaned his plate, drank the entire glass. She took him to the bathroom, pottied him like a baby and washed his face and hands.

He was drooping by that time and she led him up the narrow stairs to the small bedroom with its high, twin iron bedstead, down comforter and crisp cotton sheets.

Digging through the old cherry dresser, she found a set of child’s long johns and put them on his skinny body, lifted him into the bed and covered him.

“Go to sleep, Mark,” she said gruffly. “Remember, in your sleep, the feelings can’t hurt you.”

Fear flickered across his face but then smoothed out. His bandaged hands lay atop the blanket and he seemed lost under the mound of linen. Obediently, he closed his eyes and sank into a dreamless sleep.

Midnight came before she fell asleep in the big bedroom at the back of the house. Moonlight streamed through the big windows as she settled under the quilt she used year round. Mist hugged the bottoms and most times of the year, a chill settled in these low hollows and the older she got, the worse she felt the cold.

She slept only a few hours; it was the sensation of eyes on her that woke her and she sat up to stare at the boy's silent figure standing at the foot of her bed.

"Can't sleep?" she asked. "Or nightmares?" She smelled urine and comprehension dawned.

"Ahh," she sighed. She remembered being so frightened that she'd wet her bed. Throwing back the covers, she got up and took care of the boy and his sheets. She soothed him, made no fuss, knowing that the slightest hint of condemnation would shatter the fragile personality trying to emerge.

He was warm and clean when she was done. His eyes gleamed feral in the dark but she was not afraid of him only for him.

They developed a set routine. Every morning, she woke to find him standing at the foot of her bed; most times dry. If he was not, she knew he'd had a nightmare but in his silent world, he did not scream his terror but endured it quietly which made it worse, she knew.

They ate breakfast, usually an egg from her free range chickens, and then spent the morning feeding the hens, gathering eggs. Lunch was a sandwich and after, long, rambling walks in the woods where she dug for ginseng, morels, fiddle heads and other herbs.

Most of her neighbors were aware that she made a living as an herb woman but would have been surprised to learn that she made a more than comfortable living at it. Her herbs sold as far away as Asia, her ginseng alone was as expensive as \$800.00 a pound, known for its potency and extra kick.

Afternoons were reserved for the locals who came by for arthritis remedies, headache powders and tonics. She no longer did the palm readings and love potions; the power she felt when she used her sense awed her yet she knew the boy's far outweighed her own.

He'd been there two weeks when she decided to walk into town for a treat for him. She didn't get far up the gravel road before a battered pickup truck stopped and waved.

"Hello, Miz Elkins," said the grandson of the postman. She'd known him since he was born and he worked at the grocery store. "Need a ride into town?"

"Me and the boy. Won't be no trouble?"

"Nope. Climb on in."

She picked up the boy's hand and gently tugged him forward. When she grabbed the door handle, she received the same impressions that the boy did.

"Picture a mirror, Mark. Bounce the pictures off it."

She showed him how, touched delicately the outer skin of his mind and helped him build the first fragile barrier.

"Danny Byrd, don't go out tonight with your friends," she said abruptly. "If you do, you won't come home. You die."

He looked taken aback, swallowed. "How, Granny Elkins?"

"Hit and run, out on Crane Hill Road. Stay home."

"Yes, ma'am." He pushed the door open and she put the skinny child next to the window and seat belted him in.

"How's your stray doing, Miz Elkins?" He put in the clutch and drove off slowly as if he sensed he carried precious cargo.

"He's eating three meals a day, putting some weight back on. Still won't talk, won't make eye contact. He's learning to be at peace. Somebody done him a powerful bad thing and he's hunkered down in his head afraid to pull himself out of the hole."

"If anybody can cure him, Granny, it'll be you. He's a pretty boy. Got real unusual eyes. Never seen them that color before, like them purple gemstones. You know his name or where he comes from? Maybe his folks miss him."

"He ain't got any folks. And he can't tell me his name," she retorted tartly. "You never mind

poking your nose into his business or I'll hex you, Danny Byrd."

He swallowed. "Didn't mean nothing, Miz Elkins. Was just curious where he comes from, finding him sitting on the bridge on Sprigs Hollow Rd. in the middle of nowhere."

"He was sent to me, Danny. He'll leave when he's ready."

She put out her hand to brace against the dashboard as they took Dead Man's Curve and down the long hill into town.

Set in a scenic valley with a crystal clear trout stream running through the center of the valley was the pretty little town of Sprig's Hollow. Its stores were eclectic, in well-kept Victorians, its economy firmly based on Tourism not coal mining or forestry like a lot of other towns in Tennessee. Overflow from Memphis and Dollywood stayed in her charming Bed and Breakfasts and Granny sold a lot of herbs and canned goods to the tourist shops.

There were even bus tours out to her place on rare occasions. She enjoyed dressing and acting the part of their preconceived image of the wise old witch woman of the mountains.

Danny let them out at the library and the pair climbed the marble steps to enter the dim wooden hallways. The hush seemed to fold around the boy with welcome arms and she caught his evident interest in the books. On his own volition, he left her side and stroked the leather bindings of the oldest books as if they were old friends.

She left him to find the computer terminals, swiped her library card and went on the Internet to search Google for the boy. What she read startled and amazed her and frightened her. There were many powerful, important and dangerous people searching for the child.

"Mark," she called and he was there at her side.

"Come on, we need to get you some decent clothes." She exited the screen and took him to Tigger Blue's, a unique one of a kind clothing store that featured locally made outfits from fabrics created on home looms, produced by home raised sheep, cashmere and cotton.

He wouldn't let the clerk touch him but stood nearly naked in the changing room while Cassie Elkins tried on a small wardrobe of shorts, t-shirts and jeans. She brought him everything from socks to underwear, loose comfortable stuff that he could play in and get dirty. She paid the enormous bill with a debit card.

"Ready for some ice cream, Mark?" She murmured and they walked out with delivery arranged for the purchases save for the outfit he now wore.

The ice cream parlor had a line nearly out the door to the sidewalk and she was careful not to let anyone touch or come near to the boy. "Double dip chocolate mint for me," she announced. "Double dip chocolate heavenly hash. With sprinkles, the rainbow kind."

The girl behind the counter smiled. "Sugar cone or waffle?"

"Sugar," she decided. The boy actually reached up to grasp the cone and hold it tightly. Granny gently pushed him past the crowd and to an outside table where they sat under an umbrella with yellow sunflowers and slowly licked their treats. Chocolate dripped down his hands and smeared his face, she watched with silent glee as he made the first attempt to rejoin the world that he had shut out. His face bore a look of enjoyment and a faint contentment that lasted until he licked his fingers and the woman at the next table made a rude comment over his lack of manners and obvious mental state. Granny fumed as the shutter slammed on his face and he retreated behind his mask.

"No wonder your children hate you," she snapped to the woman and saw her shrink back in her chair. She rose hurriedly and left without giving a backwards glance or other comment. Granny Elkins stroked her hand across the boy's face and they both stepped onto the sidewalk to start the long walk back home.

Chapter XIII

Baltimore Orioles flittered around them on the walk through the tree-lined lane. They hadn't gone very far when the police chief pulled up beside them in his SUV. "Howdy, Granny," said Chief Billy Trask. "I see you've been to town shoppin'. Want a ride back?"

She kept an eye on the boy, Sheriff Trask was one of those she could not read and when the boy hid behind her, she shook her head and smiled. "No, thanks. We're enjoying the walk. Gonna stop and check out the blackberries on the way home."

"Been checking on runaways and missing kids, Cass. Figured somebody's missing a boy like that, you reckon? Social Services should be notified." His eyes scanned the bandages on the boy's wrists. "Looks like he hurt himself. You capable of dealing with a suicidal teen?"

"How do you know it was suicide? Coulda been an accident," she returned. "He hasn't done anything but eat, sleep and help me. You put him in foster care, and it'll kill him."

"Ain't your call, Miz Elkins. Soon as I find out who he is, I'll be out to get him."

"You better come back with a court order, Billy Trask," she said tartly and marched off pushing the boy in front of her. She noticed that he was wringing his hands and had worried the bandages to rags. They reached her porch an hour later and she took him into her still room to carefully snip away the gauze shreds and study the exquisite work of microsurgery. He was agitated, worried his lip and plucked her sleeve with the hand she hadn't touched yet.

"Hush, baby," she soothed. "I won't let them take you. I've kin all through these mountains them and they'll hide you until it's safe, if need be. You nearly cut your wrists off." She tried to look into his eyes but his slid away at every attempt. "You know if you die like that, your soul will be in torment? You can't escape that way."

She went into his mind and showed him how to build the barrier, brick by brick and hold it. The first time he could only carry it for 15 minutes before he tired and the bricks came crashing down. In those 15 minutes however, she could not breach his wall.

His new bandages were neat, flat and covered with a pair of her cotton gloves that blunted his sense of touch. He was tired, both from the gentle walk and the excitement of his excursion into town. Granny put him to bed in the downstairs bedroom and went into the kitchen. Her landline was on the wall, down here in the hollows and mountain corpses, cell phones did not work.

"Kyle, this is Cassie," she said. "How are you? Got a little problem here and might need your help."

She went on to explain and her kin made arrangements, the least of which was a patrol around her place so that the sheriff could not approach without advanced warning. Not only was she the nominal head of her clan, her powers as a witch woman was both well known and feared. And as a last resort, she was going to call the man whose name had been on his hospital ID band.

"How did you get from Bethesda, Maryland to Sprig's Hollow, Tennessee, Cale Snowdon?" She mused.

That night, a trembling hand woke her with a soft shake and she sat up swiftly wide-awake in seconds. The boys anxious face stared at her directly and pulled her covers down, handed over her clothes and her shoes. She stared at him and saw the fear in his riveted gaze as she dressed.

He'd made an attempt to dress himself but he'd tied knots in his laces and misaligned his buttons. She took his hand, grabbed her phone, backpack and a few necessities before they slipped out the back door and into the woods.

The grass was cold and damp on their feet and the headlights of several vehicles came up the lane and cut off before the approach to her house. She held her finger to her lips, turned the boy around and they hurried down the narrow trail into the Gap.

Moonshine stills were a garage industry out in the country, especially with the economy so bad and the trails that led to them were convoluted, hidden and well-guarded. Within a mile of their entry into the woods, someone knew she was headed their way and shadowy figures holding rifles and sawed-off shotguns blanketed them.

“Miz Elkins,” came the surprised whisper and she paused with her hand on the child’s shoulder. Moonlight lit the face of her great-nephew, Barton Lewis Beebe Junior, all of 17, a moonshiner, illegal smuggler and family provider now that his daddy was incarcerated for dope dealing. Marijuana farming and meth labs with the other big industries down South, not that she had much truck with that.

“There’s folks after the boy,” she explained. “Not good people. Federal people and others. I believe Sheriff Trask called them, or called someone. I didn’t get a long look. He woke me, warned me before they got close. They’re sneaking up to the place now.”

“Best we take you to the Knob, then.” He handed her his rifle and reached for the boy.

“He don’t like to be handled, Bart,” she explained and was shocked when he let the teenager pick him up and toss him onto his shoulders. He gripped the nephew’s head with both hands as they jogged off. People met them in relays, one handing the pair off to another for even she did not know all the trails in and out.

The Knob was like Robber’s Roost, a hidden cabin tucked into a knob jutting out of the mountain in a valley between a swamp and a deadfall where trees had blown down from high winds. Only a dedicated and determined man could make his way through the mess of falling trunks and branches. Unless you knew the way in.

The cabin had been built in the 1700s and lovingly maintained by outlaws, moonshiners and fugitives from the hills ever since. There was a graveyard outback where those who had displeased the clan were buried along with a few government men who had thought to run in the Elkins or the Beebes. The inside was customized, it had a generator, oil lamps, Ben Franklin stove, fridge, freezer and microwave. Granny was always amazed at the stuff they carried in and had gotten to work. They had even bootlegged DirecTV and had a large screen HD TV on one wall. Their only problem, he told her was getting in the gasoline to run the generator.

The last person to carry the boy was a second cousin near her own age, thin and whipcord tough as she was. He kicked open the steel door and placed him gently down on the overstuffed leather couch, covering him with one of her Granny’s homemade quilts. The boy was sound asleep as she stood over him.

“He saved our lives tonight. I know they would’ve killed me and taken him. His name is Cale Snowdon, from Alpina, Texas. There’s 150 K bounty on him and that’s why Billy Trask is after him. Any of you get tempted, hear me now. I’ll curse you and witch you to death, you harm one hair on this boy’s head. That’s my oath as an herb woman.”

“Now, Granny. You know your kin won’t go agin you. Sides, they know I’d kill them first.” The old man chided. “Made you some hot tea. Boy’s out like a light. Drink your tea and go to sleep. We’ll keep watch.”

“He’s a special one, Kyle. Got a mind so strong, I can’t reach him. I’m teaching him to block out the other voices but he’s so young and frightened, he can’t hold it for long.” She shook her head. “I can’t reach him, he’s locked his inner core away in a dark, little strong room with a massive lock that even he doesn’t know how to open. He’s trying; he gave me eye contact twice now. If I could get it in, I could reach him. If I force my way in, I’d do worse damage.”

“Leave him,” he spoke roughly tucking the quilt around him. “He’ll come out when he’s ready. How long you gonna stay? You got a plan in mind? Beebe Junior will feed yore stock but that Trask is a bloodhound, won’t give up. They say he runs some kind of mail-order porn business on the Internet.”

“You reckon that’s why the FBI’s nosing around Memphis and his place there?”

“I’ve got contacts there. I can make things really hot for him with the FBI and the ATF, Cassie.” He whipped out a cell phone and she saw that it was one of those highly expensive satellite phones that never lost the signal and could call from anywhere. “Waterproof, too,” he grinned. “I kept dropping mine in the toilet and ruining them. It’s encrypted, too.”

“You some kind of secret spy, Kyle?” she teased, wrapping her hands around the coffee mug filled with steaming chamomile tea.

“Nope, just an enterprising businessman. You know where the bedroom is. Don’t have to lock your door, we’re all kin here. Night, Cassie.”

She grunted, found the bed with clean fresh linens and sank down on top taking only the time to kick off her shoes. Sleep was slow in coming but deep and uneventful.

Chapter XIV

The smell of fresh brewed coffee and cinnamon woke her. Cassie came up knowing where she was and in full possession of her senses, not half asleep and logy like some people dragged themselves out of bed in the morning. She awakened early ready to tackle the day and whatever it brought her.

The kitchen was crammed full of kinfolk, all of them wore unhappy faces and she caught the whiff of smoke on some of them. She knew without being told what had happened.

“That bastard burned down my house, didn’t he?” she hissed. “One hundred eighty two years that house stood there. I curse his bones.”

“Didn’t burn all the way down, Miz Elkins. We got it put out before it got too far. ‘Fraid he killed your chickens, and your goats. The cats, too. Shot ‘em all and then burned the barn. Went through your things, found something and then left the others to burn the place. We educated ‘em.”

“He’s gone back for the K-9 team and his bloodhounds. We got to get you out of this area. Bart Junior will take you all over the mountain. Can the boy ride?”

“He won ribbons and rodeos, I reckon,” she was tart.

“Good, cause the trail ain’t for tenderfoots. You’ll need jackets. Gets cold on top of Old Smoky.” The old man relayed orders and a pair of saddlebags were packed with things from her backpack and additional gear. Last in was a handgun, a smaller version of the Federal Sig Sauer made for a woman’s hand. “That’s for you, Cassie,” he told her quietly. “Use it if you have to, damn the consequences.”

She gave him a hug and he grinned self-consciously, and then said, “All you knuckleheads, get outta my kitchen. I got breakfast to make.”

“Sourdough flapjacks?” Was the hopeful question.

“For Cassie and her boy. Rest of you, go on and git McDonald’s.” They laughed and filtered out, leaving the old man, Cassie and Bart Junior.

“I checked on him, Aunt Cassie,” he said. “Still sound asleep.”

“Can’t see why he’d let you touch him, Junior,” she snapped. “I’ve known you all your life and I don’t like to touch you.”

“Our minds run on the same track,” he explained. “I can dampen his sense of touch and he can amp up my own. We’re sort of like positive and negative that cancel each other out. Besides, he’s only a kid and I like kids.”

“Was a man likes kids got him into this mess. Go on, then. Wake him up and bring him in to

eat. You'll have to help him. Sometimes, he seems to forget how to do it."

He nodded, returned in a few minutes with the boy tucked under his arms. He was yawning, his hair was sticking up everywhere and his face had crease lines on it from the welts on the couch. They saw him take a sniff at the aroma of cooking pancakes and his eyes darted to the table of scarred pine, as he saw the butter, syrups and plates stacked there.

"I suspect you're hungry, Mark?" She asked.

"Thought his name was Cale?"

"Is. But I've called him that for nigh on two weeks. He answers to it and it's safer."

He seated himself and waited. Cassie sat next to him, passed the first round of pancakes and busied herself fixing them as she liked them, four to a stack, butter between and on top, syrup drizzled over the stack until evenly coated the pile and welled up around the base. He took one at a time, rolled it up, dipped it into the syrup on his plate and chewed it slowly like a burrito until it was gone. She had tea and after some hesitation, he chose the glass of milk over the OJ and coffee. When he was done, he burped and look surprised. The expression on his face made her laugh.

"Good job, Mark," she praised. "Neatly, too. Ready to get dressed and ride out of here? On the horse, not an ATV." She knew he'd been in an accident with his and sustained major injuries. "Let me see your wrists," she said suddenly and he held out his hands. She unwrapped them to inspect the stitches. They looked clean with no redness or infection but they were pulling, being long past the ten-day mark for removal.

"Glory be," Beebe Junior whistled. "He wasn't foolin' when he did that."

The boy looked up briefly and unhappiness flickered across his face. "You tell me who made you do that, Mark and I'll introduce them to my knife."

"Need a field kit, Cassie? I got one, got a couple instruments in it will remove those stitches. Never seen such fine work."

"Was microsurgery, I think. Mark, honey. I'm going to take out the stitches. Might pinch a bit." She laid a clean towel on the table, washed and scrubbed her hands with alcohol, and opened the sterile packet that Kyle handed her. Inside were latex gloves, scalpels, scissors, hemostats and a needle with sutures attached. Everything an Army medic might need for emergency bullet removal in the field. She kept her eye on him and the scalpel but he showed no interest in it so she relaxed and picked up the scissors. The pair had a tiny, sharp point that let her slip it under the pulling sutures and snip them. When it she had cut them all, she pulled them out counting them. Each wrist had 48 tiny stitches, there were more underneath that she could feel but assumed those would dissolve on their own. "Probably won't even leave a scar," she wondered.

"And Cassie, did someone...?" Beebe Junior was horrified.

"Rape him? Probably. Why else would he be like this? Imagine a young, delicate mind that can reach your innermost thoughts and desires, can experience those things by touching you. Imagine seeing rapes, murders in your head and as the victim over and over again. What would that do to you? Then, those government people found out and made him do it more. He broke, when into his head to escape and now, he can't get out."

"So that's what the big door is," Beebe Junior whispered.

"What?" Her tone was sharp and urgent.

"I see a big brass door with a hundred locks on it. It's the size of a museum door, 10 feet high with dragons and demons carved on it. He stands in front but he can't push it open or find the right key, even if he had the key. Behind him is a black pit that gibbers and inches closer. On the other side of the door is a little girl calling his name. He knows he can't stay but he can't open the door, either."

"You got the sight, Bart Junior?"

"No. I got a sense but only around him. You reckon I might be able to help him open the

door?”

“Why else would he show it to you?” She replied tartly. She wrapped his wrist loosely after applying triple antibiotic ointment and took him back into the bedroom where she helped him dress in jeans, long-sleeved shirt, boots and a washed out Carhartt jacket that was 10 years old. It was worn soft as silk. Last on was a baseball that was marked Deliverance, Arkansas. She dressed alike with clothes taken from her backpack throwing the dirty things into a hamper. “Ready to go, Mark?” He reached for her hand and she noticed the slight trembling as he grasped tightly. “Come on, then.” She gave a last look at the bedroom knowing that she would never see it again. Together, they walked out to the porch where a score of family waited.

Horses couldn’t make it to the Knob, the trail up was too hard for anything other than a mule but a mile farther down the trail held a small corral where three horses waited tacked out in Western gear. Two were chocolate chestnuts with flaxen manes and tails, the third a buckskin Walking horse all three were gaited and smooth riding.

Bart Junior put the boy up in the saddle, adjusted his stirrups and handed him the reins. He helped his great aunt with a leg up and waited until she was settled before hopping on himself. His horse wore a rifle scabbard loaded with a 30-30 bush gun with a laser sight. He nudged his gelding with his boot heels and they ambled off down the rocky trail that skirted the edge of the mountain. The boy looked at everything, handled the reins with an ease that said he was well used to the saddle.

“Be about four hours across country. Let me know when you need a break. Bathroom or otherwise.”

“Won’t be me,” she said. “Keep an eye on him. He broke both legs only months ago in a four wheeler accident. He still tires easily and he’s still too thin. He wouldn’t eat, they had him on a stomach tube.”

“How do you know about that, Aunt Cassie?” He was curious.

“He has the scar on his belly that was sutured in. Still partly open. Read about him on the Internet, too. He solved a couple of open murders for the FBI in Texas, saved several people from dying and saved a little girl from a serial rapist. He also saved a squad of soldiers from a suicide bomber.”

“Is it true that someone out there will pay 150K for him?”

“I suspect they figure rapping his mind is worth a lot more than his skinny little ass.”

“Aunt Cassie!”

“Your dad’s in jail, Beebe Junior. What do you think happens in there? Best you stay away from situations that’ll put you in, you got a family to take care of.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

In an hour’s time they had reached the bottoms over the Ridge and were deep into the Cumberland Gap. It was rare that anyone made it that far into the woods, even hunters rarely ventured into the backwoods Piney section. There were still remnants of old cabins that had last seen occupants when the Cherokee lived there, silent reminders of life when it was harsh and unforgiving.

Grass grew as high as their knees in the meadows. The smell of honeysuckle and mountain laurel permeated the air. Bullfrogs croaked in the distance where there must be a sizable pond. She saw wild roses, crape myrtle and sarsaparilla, Jack in the pulpits and blackberries the size of her thumb.

When the black bear rose up on her hind legs out of the thicket, she gasped and Bart Junior went for his rifle but the boy gently pushed the barrel down as he stared at the bear. She coughed, grunted and dropped to all fours, shuffling off like they were neighbors and she had made her obligatory morning call.

“Well, I’ll be,” Cassie drawled as they stared at the retreating rear end.

“Woof,” said the boy and giggled. He pushed his horse past them, patting his horse on the neck and left them with their mouths hanging open.

Chapter XV

The horses splashed across the creek, the bottom was crystal clear with flat rocks and fat trout lying somnolent in deep pools. Willows hung over the banks with pine trees behind them in quiet groves. Birds hummed lazily in the crisp air.

They were coming onto the boundary of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. It skirted the perimeter fence that stated it was Parkland and not open to hunting or trapping.

“We’ve got to be careful here,” he warned them. “We’re close to a town and other people. There are always campers out this way but we got to go through the Gap to Lilacville. Kyle’s got a car and will meet us there.”

“What about the horses?”

“We’ll leave them at the Park stables. The Ranger is a cousin of ours.” He followed the fence and found a gate within a few yards and they rode through onto a park road that was well maintained and well used. They heard the boy’s horse bolt forward and Beebe Junior twisted, thinking that his horse had taken off but the boy was leaning forward digging in his heels and kicking the gelding into a gallop. He aimed for Junior’s horse and knocked him right out of the saddle, and then pulled up. He looked down at Beebe sprawled on the ground, his face wore a puzzled look that slowly changed to one of shock. Beebe stood up and stared. A foot and a half of arrow stuck out of the boy’s chest and back, a thin trickle of blood ran from his mouth.

“Cassie!” He yelled, threw himself up onto the boy’s horse and took off. He reached around and grabbed the reins running flat out. “Cale, you saved my life, you took that arrow that was meant for me. Hang on, we’ll get you help.”

“Barton,” she yelled, riding next to him. She tried to see but they were twisting and ducking through the woods attempting to put distance between them and the shooter. The boy sagged in Barton’s arms, coughing up blood and gasping for breath.

“Aunt Cassie, we have to stop!” He cried. “We need to take care of him!”

“How far to the stables?”

“Another mile!”

“Go on! Head for it!” An arrow whistled past them and they saw the figure with the bow on the four wheeler.

“You shot the wrong one, you bastard!” She yelled. The horses’ hooves clattered on the wooden bridge as they galloped into the courtyard of the stable complex and Beebe pulled up the horse so hard that it left its feet in the air as the gelding slid to a stop. Cassie wasn’t far behind and the two pulled off the unconscious child. They laid him on the ground, and tore off his shirt to expose the arrow through his chest and lung.

“Give me your knife,” she said tersely and he handed over the wickedly sharp blade. “Hold the shaft,” she ordered and he gripped the fiberglass rod. She sawed on the piece a couple of inches from the exit wound, rolled him over on his side and did the same in the back. She threw the bloody pieces to the side. In her backpack, she dug out the med kit and wrapped gauze around the boy, padding the arrow with extra gauze and stabilizing it. She injected him with morphine, pulled back his eyelids and checked his breathing which was labored. “Lungs are filling with blood, probably lungs collapsed. Best to get your rifle, Bart. They’ll be coming for us.”

“Uncle Kyle gave me his sat-phone. We can call for help.”

“Pick him up. Let’s get him inside.” They carried him into the barn and inside the tack room, placing him on the couch. He was cold and clammy, breathing in obvious distress.

“Aunt Cassie, he pushed me out of the way to take that arrow for me.”

“I know. He probably saw it happen in a vision before it did, Bart.”

He picked up the Sig Sauer, pulled back the clip and checked that it was fully loaded with two extra clips. He handed her the gun and took the rifle and a box of shells.

“Cassie!” A voice shouted. “Come out! We’ll take care of the boy!”

“Is that you, Billy Trask?” She yelled back out the door into the aisle. “Come on in. I got a 2 ounce piece of copper and steel with your name on it!”

“Cassie, don’t let the boy die,” he begged. “Bring him out and let us take him to the doctor.”

“Bart, give me the phone,” she decided and the teenager passed it over. She dialed the number she had memorized from the boy’s wristband and spoke quickly. “I’m Cassie Elkins of Sprig’s Hollow, Tennessee. I found Cale Snowdon and he’s been with me for two weeks. This isn’t a hoax, I’ve removed stitches from his wrists, and there were 48 on each one. We’re at the Ranger stables in Smoky Mountain National Park near Lilacville. Cale is hurt. We need you. Now.”

“We’re on the way,” he tersely replied.

“How long?”

“Within a half-hour,” he promised. He hesitated. “Do you have that long?”

“No. Get here as fast as you can.”

“How bad is he?”

“He has an arrow through his lungs.”

“And the people who shot him, they are there?”

“Right outside the door.”

“Can you hold until we get there?”

“For a while. Probably longer than Cale has.”

“We’re on the way, I’ve got a Marine chopper.” He hung up. She turned to Barton Junior.

“Help me sit him up and go keep watch on the driveway. They won’t rush us, he’ll be afraid to hit Cale again. We got to hold them off till help gets here. They’ll kill us both, nephew but what they’ll do to him, he’ll never recover.”

“First, he has to survive this.”

“Yes,” she sighed, looking at him. They pulled him up into a sitting position and the bluish tint left his face. “He needs a drain tube in his lung but I’m afraid to try that,” she said. “But if I don’t, he’ll drown in his own blood.”

She went to the med kit and pulled on the latex gloves, scrubbed his side with Betadine and tore off the wrapping from the scalpel. She counted down to his third rib, worked the blade between the bones and stuck her fingers into the hole. “Look for a stomach tube, you know, one they used to worm a horse,” she said. “Something we can stick in here.”

He got up and searched through the tack room, found a box labeled vet supplies and pulled out an 8 foot coil of stiff plastic hose used to insert oil and medicine through the horse’s nose and into the gut. She cut off a foot-long piece, flattened and notched the end, and then scrubbed it with alcohol and Betadine. The boy jerked when she inserted it into the hole in his side and she pushed until she felt the mushiness of slight resistance. Blood pulsed down and his breathing eased, the blue left his lips and nails. She found Vet-wrap and tucked it around him, holding the drain tube in place. Shivers wracked his skinny frame. “He’s going into shock. We need to get him warm and raise up his feet.”

Beebe Junior grabbed an armful of horse blankets and made a mound under his feet, raising them above his head. Others he tucked atop him. The smell of horse was strong.

“We’ll worry about hair and dirt later,” Cassie said. “Right now it’s more important to keep him warm. Best go check on our guests. Take the rifle, better range.”

“Yes’m,” he hesitated. “Aunt Cassie...”

“I know, Barton Lewis. I love you, too. Be careful.” He slipped out the sliding door and climbed aloft to the hay door where he could see the approach down the drive to the barn. If they came through the woods, he would not be able to see them once they were close.

“Miz Cassie, come on out. You ain’t got a lot of time to dicker with. If the boy dies, you ain’t got no leverage and I’m going to be plumb pissed at losing \$150,000,” Trask yelled.

“Billy Trask, you’re lowlife scum. Trafficking in human lives is bad enough but children?”

“It’s a whole new marketplace, Cassie. People pay big bucks to have their fantasies fulfilled. A million kids disappear every year. No one misses half of them.”

“I hope you rot in hell,” she muttered and the first of the shots went off. She heard the flat report of the 30-30 and then Beebe’s surprised cry of pain, the noise as his body fell from the loft to the ground outside.

She stood at the double Dutch doors with the Sig Sauer, shot two of them and then retreated to the stall. She picked up the boy and ran with him down the aisle and out the back towards the corrals.

The bullet hit her between the shoulder blades and through the heart. They saw her stop, turn around to stare at the sheriff. She laid the boy down tenderly and then cursed them all in ringing tones. She fell over like a giant tree collapses in the woods after a storm, slowly at first and then with growing momentum.

They all knew that a dead woman had cursed them, that it was a spirit that had put the boy down and faced them. She had died the instant the rifle bullet had shattered her heart but her body did not know it. Several of the men crossed themselves and made the sign against the evil eye.

Sheriff Trask ignored her, bent over the boy and checked his pulse. “Barely there. Got to get him to doc. Jerry, go roust out the van, and bring it up here. Have the ambulance crew meet us at the junction. She done what we could have for him. Speed’s what we need now.”

He picked the boy up and they headed back down across the bridge to meet with the vehicles, loaded the child in the back and held him as the driver pushed the van on the dirt roads as fast as he dared.

They heard helicopters in the distance. The Sheriff’s lips thinned but he said nothing. He looked at the boy, pulled back his eyelids but all he could see were the whites, bluish and streaked with swollen veins. He kept his hand on the boy’s pulse and barely felt the weak and thready fluttering.

“Don’t you goddamn die, boy. Got a man will pay anything for you. Name your price, he said. Money’s no object.”

“Shouldn’t you take it out?” One of the men asked staring at the obscene objects through the pale flesh.

“No! It plugs the hole, remove it and he bleeds to death, loses the ability to breathe. Never remove an impaled object.” He braced himself as they rounded a corner and came out on blacktop at 85 mph.

In four minutes, they were at the junction of SR 35 and 46 when the ambulance crew from Sprigg’s Hollow met them and took over. They had the boy on IVs, oxygen, took his vitals and re-did his chest tube. “He needs immediate surgery, Chief. Memphis General or Charity?”

“Take us to the doc.”

“But—” They looked at his face and nodded. He rode with them in the ambulance and had his men follow to the retired surgeon’s house on the outskirts of town. They carried him into the small clinic where the Doctor had set up a free clinic to treat the locals who couldn’t afford insurance.

They woke the older man out of a deep sleep.

In his late 70s, he was still tall and straight with dexterous hands and a gentle bedside manner. He also liked little boys which is why he made no demur when Trask explained the situation. “His blood type is B+,” the sheriff said. “So is Burns’. If you need any, take it from him.”

“Of course we need blood. Go get some from the bank in town. At least 12 units. Get your ass back here STAT. Alice, Simon,” he addressed the two EMTs. “Scrub up in the bathroom, I’ll need you to assist. The rest of you, get out.”

They laid the boy on the table and transferred the IV to the hanging pole as the Doctor prepped for surgery. He put him under with anesthetic and had the female EMT monitor his heart rate and respirations while he carefully scrubbed the boy down with Betadine, exposing the foot of arrow still left inside. He took x-rays and they showed exactly where the shaft hit into the pleural cavity, just missing the heart and the great veins. “Another inch and we wouldn’t be here,” he muttered. He was at it for two hours before he sutured the twin hole shut and tied off the last stitch on the drain tube. “Blood pressure is still low. He lost about a third of his blood volume. The lung collapsed.” He looked up. “These are suicide attempts on his wrists.”

“You got to watch him for that,” the sheriff said from the doorway. “He will die before he lets you use him.”

“He won’t be doing much of anything for a while. Watch him here until he recovers.”

“He won’t speak a word or acknowledge you when he does wake. He’s...”

“Autistic?”

“Catatonic.”

“Huh.” He looked thoughtful and the look in his eye turned lustful.

“Doc, you touch him in any way like that and I’ll cut off your balls. He ain’t for you. Not unless you got \$150,000?”

“Be about two hours coming out of anesthesia,” he said gruffly, pulling off his gloves. “Monitor his vitals. Any problems, call me. I’m going to get coffee.” They watched him leave.

Chapter XVI

The paramedics stared at the sheriff. “Now what?”

“We wait. See if he survives. When he wakes from the anesthesia, we will transport him to the cargo container and on to Jersey. I have a house there the FBI don’t know about. He can recover there.” He paused. “What do you think?”

She looked at the boy, now bandaged and hooked up to oxygen, IVs and blood. His pulse was fast but stronger, his blood pressure hovering at 110/52. “His vitals aren’t bad. If he remains stable, he should be okay. You move him too soon and he could still bleed out internally. His lungs are keeping up but with the one collapsed and re-inflated—he’s not breathing too well. Kids are so fragile and they crash so quickly. I wouldn’t move him for a couple of days.”

“We may not have that option. We have the FBI on our tails. Load him up in the ambulance once he wakes up.” He went outside, and spoke to his men as they went in search of the Doctor and found him in his kitchen. They took care of that loose end, leaving incriminating evidence of his child porno leanings scattered around the house. The ticking of the clock was an annoying repeat until the Sheriff’s mike buzzed and he listened intently to the dispatcher.

“Send two patrol cars out,” he told them. “I’m tied up at a crime scene. It may be hours before I can get there. Sorry to hear about Granny Elkins and Beebe Junior. What were they doing out there, anyway?”

He went out to his patrol car and scanned the computer terminal for news of the raid and then dialed up an Internet connection through back door sites until he accessed the middleman in charge of special orders.

Baby Blue in custody, he typed. Somewhat damaged. Will need extensive medical coverage. Still interested? He waited, knowing the site was monitored 24/7 and the answer wasn't long in coming.

How damaged? Mentally or physically?

Surgical intervention. One of my men shot at the boy's keeper and missed. Arrow went through his lung and had surgery to remove it. His serious but stable. Mental condition unchanged.

Is Baby Blue intact?

How so? He typed back, confused.

Untouched. Not sodomized, was the swift reply.

No one fucked him. At least, not in the last two weeks.

His values lessened should he be...used.

How much is the client willing to go now?

Alive and well, 250 K. Dead, zero dollars. Wounded -?

Delivery at Port J6 hours.

Will be there.

Bring the cash, he typed but there was no further reply and he logged off. 20 minutes later, Alice the paramedic called him. "He's coming up and out of the anesthesia, Sheriff. Where's the doctor?" He exited the patrol car and came into the house to stare at the boy. Those great violet eyes opened and steered blearily around the room and his free hand plucked at his chest. He tried to cough but the mask over his face muffled it and he could not seem to draw deep enough of a breath.

"Don't move, Cale. You've had surgery and must stay quiet." The woman urged, holding his shoulders.

He looked, it was obvious that he was searching for his friends and when he did not see them, there was a lessening of his intensity. He seemed to deflate and sink lower onto the cot.

"What's so special about you, anyway?" Trask wondered. "You're just a skinny little kid with weird eyes. What makes you worth so much money? You're not even that pretty. Personally, I'd rather hump a big old blonde with melon boobs and a big ass."

The paramedic looked shocked. "You're involved in child prostitution?"

"What do you think I do with all these kids, Alice Freeman?"

"I thought you sold them to adoptive parents."

"You are naïve," he wondered. "I sell them for sex and sadism and whatever their buyers want them for and for good money, too." He waited, hand on his pistol but she swallowed and nodded for the sheriff had his hooks into her, too.

The first ones out of the chopper were the Marine SWAT team and they rappelled down, secured the scene and let the HRT teams descend. DeLeon was in that group. They searched the barn, found the two bodies and checked them for signs of life.

"The boy's alive. Gunshot to the head but just creased him. The woman's dead. Shattered the heart with a large caliber rifle. There's blood in front of her but not hers. A good amount, and looks like aspirated lung," the agent reported. They went to the tack room and found where they had apparently holed up. "More blood," he noted. "Looks like they did a drain tube. Sawed off an arrow shaft. How old did you say this kid is?"

"13. A skinny 13."

"It's a lot of blood for a little kid, Jed."

"I know," he whispered. "Get the other boy airlifted to the nearest trauma center. Let me know when he wakes. Call this in to the locals. Her name was Cassie Elkins. See if she's got family."

“What makes these people willing to die for the boy?” HRT agent asked.

“Because they know he’d die for them,” he returned.

“Any idea where they’re taking him?”

“He’s still alive or they would have left his body here. We know the group has a transfer house in Memphis. Trouble is they know we know.”

“Special Agent Deleon?” It was the leader of the SWAT team. “We have the teenager stabilized and ready to go. Local police are on the way, along with the Park Rangers. There’s supposed to be one on duty here but all we found was his empty truck with blood on the seat and there were tire marks where a large van skidded to a stop and three loose horses.”

“They were escaping, came here to rendezvous with the Ranger and walked into a trap. They’ll have to arrange for medical help, I doubt they’ll risk taking him to a hospital. Mount up; let’s go looking for an ambulance in the wrong place.”

“Yes, sir.”

They had transferred the boy complete with his IV, oxygen mask and tank into the waiting cargo container stacked on the refrigerated 18 Wheeler. The inside was equipped with a semi-sterile lab with bunks along one wall complete with restraints. The other wall had a pullout examination table with gynecological stirrups. Girls as young as two had been on it and the atmosphere inside stank of misery and fear even though it was bright and spotlessly clean. The two ambulance people put the boy onto the table, strapped him in and hooked him up to the heart monitors.

“We going with him, Sheriff?” They asked.

“One of you is. The other needs to drive the ambulance over to the Park.”

“You stay, Alice. I’ll go,” the man offered. It was apparent he thought both of them were going to meet the same fate as the doctor.

Trask laughed. “You don’t know anything, Bubba. And I need you to take care of the kid. There’s a closed circuit TV in here. You can communicate with the driver by intercom and I can see you on my laptop. Keep him alive and get him to speak and you’ll get a bonus. \$10,000.”

“Why? Is he schizophrenic?”

“No. Withdrawn and catatonic but there’s been some response. Acts more as if he’s autistic. He won’t speak, and won’t make eye contact. Cassie Elkins had him and was treating him like a baby.”

“I have an autistic brother,” she said.

“I know. That’s why *you’re* here. Because you know how to deal with him.” He leaned into the boy’s face and no matter where he looked; the boy did not meet his eyes. He put out his hands and grabbed the boy’s face, forcing him to look at him and watched as he literally shut down and went away.

Cale’s eyes darkened, turned reddish black and he spoke not in his childish boy’s voice but that of an old woman with a broad southern accent. “Billy Trask, you’re gonna die in blood for what you done to me and my kin and all them children.”

The paramedics and the sheriff both turned white, as he let him go and stepped back in shock. “Cassie? Miz Elkins?”

“I curse you, Billy Trask,” said the low hissing voice. “Demons gonna eat your soul.” The eyes closed and when they reopened, they were pale lavender and unfocused.

A cold frisson raced up his spine and he bolted out of the cargo container with the male driver following. He locked it behind them. She went to the door and found no way out, sat down to study the boy. “Who are you?” She murmured. “Just what makes *you* so different?”

She felt the motion of the road under her feet and knew they had entered the interstate, were tooling down the blacktop at speeds of over 70 mph. She heard the peculiar humming of the tires on the tar, and the *whoosh* as they passed other vehicles. Traffic built up as they approached Memphis

and Interstate 95.

A peculiar whine arose and she discovered to her surprise that it was coming from the youngster, a low ululating wail that she eventually deciphered as words. He was crying in a monotone, “don’t take me, don’t take me, don’t take me,” until it made her grit her teeth and hold her hands over her ears.

“Cale,” she said quietly, urgently, knowing that if she yelled he would only escalate. “Cale, take you where?”

He gasped and pushed away his mask. “The cargo boxes. We all die there. You die. They cut off your head. I die, inside. Don’t let them kill me. Kill me here. Or let me do it.”

“Are you...back?” But he would not meet her gaze and he continued his mewling cries.

Chapter XVII

The truck took the I-295 bypass around the city and she kept busy by taking his BP and vitals, his blood pressure was shaky and his heart raced like a trip hammer. He was in the throes of a full-blown panic attack. She examined the drugs on hand and gave him a shot of Ativan into his IV. The results were immediate, he calmed and his BP dropped along with his pulse rate. His O2 levels hovered around 84%, which alarmed her but other than the IV of fluids and oxygen, there wasn’t much else she could do for him. She had morphine but that was a respiratory depressant and she didn’t want to compromise his breathing any worse than it already was. She found the intercom, and clicked it, jumped when the voice snapped, “What do you want?”

“Who is this?”

“The driver. You don’t need to know my name. How is the cargo?”

“Having trouble breathing. I don’t have the equipment or the knowledge to deal with respiratory failure.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“How much longer will we be in transit?”

“Another hour and then we switch drivers but we keep going. Say four more hours to our destination.”

“I’m not sure he has four hours.” She studied the youngster’s face and nails and noted that they looked cyanotic. “He needs to be in a hospital. He’s cyanotic.”

“That ain’t gonna happen.”

Now she got angry. “This is a 13, 14-year-old kid with an arrow hole through his lungs not some manikin you can throw away. Do something or I will.”

He laughed derisively. “This cargo crate was designed to hold screaming kids. You think you can do anything to stop it or me? Go ahead, try your damndest. In the meantime, I’ll call the Sheriff and let him know your concerns.”

She heard wheezing, looked up and was astonished to note that he was awake. The intelligence in his previously blank eyes was unnerving. He removed his mask and the difference it made in his respirations and color was alarming. “O2 tank,” he wheezed. “It’s a bomb. Compressed air, explosive. Blow the doors open.” He coughed and a thin trickle of blood marred his lip, he wiped at it with his chin against a shoulder leaving a bloody smear on the gown.

“Don’t try to talk, Cale. You need to keep breathing that oxygen, your lungs are not working correctly.”

“Can’t be helped. Besides, Granny Elkins is in here with me, helping me to breathe and holding me here. I’ve lost my ability to escape.” He gave a little sob. “I’m so scared of what they’ll do to me.”

I can't make myself wake up.”

She pulled the O2 cylinder to the floor, found something heavy to wedge it up against and whacked the valve as she pointed it towards the door. “Ready?”

“Wait,” he said. There are cars behind us, don't want to hurt them.”

“How do you know?”

“I know. I see it.” They felt the truck shift gears.

“Now. He's turned into another lane. No one's behind us.”

She hit the valve with the fire extinguisher and the canister flew forward, hit the doors and exploded outward. She braced herself as the truck skidded to a stop and slowly jackknifed across the lanes of traffic. Cars tried to get out of the way or slid to a stop.

She was the first to recover and unhooked him from the restraints and his lines. His color had paled and he was in obvious respiratory distress. She had to pick him up and half carry him out of the container. Cars honked all around them, a crowd rapidly formed of rubberneckers as she pushed her way through and they busied themselves with the driver of the cab. When she looked again, she could see that the overturned rig had crushed the cab and no one was getting out. Overhead, she heard the beating blades of helicopters and she ducked her head as she checked out their surroundings.

He had chosen a spot where there was enough going on to hide them, they had wrecked right across from a TA truck stop.

“Hey!” She heard behind her. “Didn't you come from that truck?”

She ran for the restrooms inside the truck stop and carried him into the ladies room where she set him down on the commode in a handicap stall, placing his arms on the rails. She smiled at his worn and pain drawn face. “You hold onto that, Cale. I'm going to call the police. You okay?”

“No,” he whispered with an effort and she felt for the pulse in his neck. It was frighteningly fast and weak. “Call the FBI. Ask for Jed Deleon.” He recited the number and she wrote it down on her palm with a magic marker from the pockets on her uniform pants. Her cell phone didn't work inside the restrooms. She locked the stall door and scooted underneath.

“I'll be right back. Don't make a sound, don't let anyone in but me.”

“Alice,” he whispered painfully. “Wait.” However, she had already reached the door back in the restaurant gift shop. “Alice,” he spoke and closed in his eyes. “He's here. Sheriff's here. Following. Look out.” He slumped against the wall unconscious, his arms tucked into the rails were the only thing keeping him from falling to the floor.

She stood just outside the door to the gift shop, kept her eyes scanning the crowd gawking at the wreck as she dialed the number on her palm. The voice that answered was clear enough although there was a great deal of background noise from a helicopter's engine.

“Hello?”

“My name is Alice Freeman,” she started to explain. Before she got out more than a few words, she was interrupted.

“We're on the way. Don't leave him.”

She looked up to stare into the cherub face of the Hollow's Sheriff and barely had time to register his anger before he slammed his fist into her stomach. She gasped for air and folded into his arms as he snatched her phone out of her hands and dragged her to his car, tossing her into the back seat. He handcuffed her hands behind her back and pointed the pistol in her face. “Where is he, Alice? Is he still alive?” Anger made the veins in his face stand up and his breath smelled of Fritos. She gagged and tried to catch her breath, vomited to the side on the backseat that already smelled of vomit and urine.

“They're coming for you, Trask,” she wheezed. “Let us go.”

“I don't think so, Alice. Only place you could have left him would be the restrooms, showers,

or overnight rooms. Overnight rooms require a sign in to register. The clerk will give me access since I'm the Sheriff."

"Go to hell!" She spat. She pulled up her legs, kicked him in the gut with her tech boots, and scrambled out of the backseat climbing over the top of him. She gave him another kick in the face and ran, keeping her balance by sheer determination. Overhead, she could hear the helicopters getting louder and closer.

Running out onto the highway, she dodged cars barely staying on her feet with her hands cuffed behind her. She headed for the truck wreck and the other paramedics hoping to blend in. She heard the boy's faint voice reverberate in her head and without hesitation, she obeyed as he screamed for her to drop. She did so instantly, falling and rolling as the bullets went over in a complete miss. Rising up before her was a man dressed in black tactical gear and he dragged her forward, let off a burst from his rifle that blew Trask off his feet and into bloody doll rags. More men repelled from the hovering choppers and the downdraft nearly knocked them all off their feet.

"Ma'am? Are you okay?"

"Restroom," she gasped. "Wheelchair stalls. Go get him!"

The team appeared behind her and took off the gift shop. The SWAT member picked her up and dug out a cuff key, unlocked and checked her over. "You okay?"

"He punched me in the gut, knocked all the air out but I'm okay, it's the boy I'm worried about. He's in respiratory failure. Go!" They took off at a run after the team and Alice jumped over the Sheriff's body without a second glance.

They had the boy laid out on blankets on the floor and were bagging him, they had inserted an airway. His color was an alarming blue and his breaths were whistles as blood stained his lips. A good-looking man with electric blue eyes was squeezing his hands and talking low and urgently to him. He looked up at her. "Alice?"

She nodded and watched as they took his vitals, the numbers were scary. "He needs immediate ER care."

"We have the helicopter. Louisville is the closest?"

"Go to Crowley Trauma. Maryland's not far from here and it's the best Trauma Center on the East Coast."

"I'm SAIC Jed Deleon. Cale's friend."

"Where were you when he needed you?"

"Looking for him in three states," he returned bitterly.

They lifted the boy, now hooked up to life support equipment and trotted back towards the highway. The SWAT leader radioed the chopper to put down on the road and pick them up, to call Crowley Trauma in Maryland and prepare for an incoming PEDs case. His vitals and condition followed.

"Cale, we've got you. You're safe and on the way to the hospital. The Sheriff is dead. Your friend, Beebe Junior is alive. They shot him but the bullet only creased him." He carefully refrained from telling him about Cassie Elkins.

"Mr. Special Agent in Charge," her whispery voice with its strong southern accent came out of the air near the boy's mouth. "He already knows I'm dead. He took me into his mind and holds me there, so in a sense I am still alive. Good to know about Beebe Jr. though. You kill that no account, lowlife, sick bastard that sold kids to dirty old men?"

"Cale?"

"Cale's sleeping. You're talking to Cassie Elkins. You tell him it's so, Alice Freeman."

"That's Granny Elkins voice," she whispered her eyes large and round.

"I'll let him sleep until he heals but then I'm gonna kick him out so's I can go to my next...whatever. You take care this boy, Mr. Special Agent. He's a special boy, gonna do great

things. Goodbye, Alice. Don't screw up your second chance now that Billy Trask ain't got you tied up in knots."

"Granny?"

She chuckled and the sound coming from nowhere was strangely scary. "You're gonna have a good life, Alice. Take care of yourself." The chopper lifted to into the air and headed off to the hospital.

Chapter XVIII

The surgical team met them on the heliport and the Director of the FBI, D.O. Kelstrom came down from his office at Quantico to personally take charge. Jed and Alice went with them to the OR doors and were escorted to the waiting room by insistent nurses.

"We'll call you when we're through surgery. Or if anything changes. He's in good hands, our trauma surgeons are the best in the world."

He paced, she sat and worried her lip. The big clock on the wall tottered like an old man on his last legs.

"Coffee?" She asked the agent and he shook his head. "Tell me about the boy," she asked to distract him. "Where is he from? How did he get that way? Where do those eyes come from?"

Jed spent the next two hours telling her about Cale Snowden's last six months and then by gentle questioning, he got her situation out of her and her involvement with Billy Trask.

"So you thought all he was doing was selling kids to adoptive parents?" He questioned.

She laughed ruefully. "Pretty naïve, huh? What will they do to me?"

"We have no proof of anything criminal on you, Alice. Why would we go after you? You helped Cale to escape."

"He engineered his own escape," she returned.

"What do you mean?" He turned those laser eyes on her drawn face.

"He told me to use the O2 tank as a bomb and use it to open the cargo container doors," she explained.

"Cale did? Not Granny Elkins?"

"No, it wasn't her voice. It was a frightened little boy."

"He's trying to come back," he mused and lapsed into silence, deep in their own thoughts while they waited for word on the teen's condition. The surgeon bounced into the room an hour later and he looked pleased as he approached the pair.

"Special Agent Deleon," he held out his hand and shook Jed's. "I'm Doctor Larabee. We have him in stable and fair condition. It was touch and go for a while there. We had to replace several units of blood, redo his chest tube and clean out the punctures. Suture a vein. He's on forced oxygen and a respirator to give his lungs a chance to heal; he has a breathing tube so he can't speak. He's still unconscious and probably won't wake up for six or seven hours. You can come in and see him for 15 minutes each as soon as he comes out of recovery.

"His heart is strong, O2 levels are up and his BP is good. Given his age, he should recover quickly. We are a bit concerned over his weight and his CAT scan. Director Kelstrom gave us his medical history; it's unusual to say the least.

"We have hopes that his withdrawal will revert now that the threat to him has been removed."

Alice looked from one to the other. "The buyer is still out there and he's increased the bounty on the boy to \$250,000. The threat is still out there."

"The best thing for him would be to be declared dead," Jed mused. "You can release that

information to the Press, doctor. There are reporters outside already gathering about the wreck and by now, they had the identity of the victims. Declare him dead; transfer him to Walter Reed under another name.” He flipped his sat phone open and spoke to the Director for several minutes.

“All right,” the doctor agreed. “I’ll schedule a press release. Right now, you have 15 minutes to see him. Do you have a name?”

“Mark Elkins,” Cassie suggested.

Jed shook his head. “Not Elkins. They know Cassie’s name. Use Kelstrom, the Director suggested it. Mark Kelstrom.”

He nodded and led them into the recovery room off the PEDs ICU. Nurses in cheerful scrubs were checking his monitors and his vitals. His eyelids were blued, with black circles underneath, his face pale and drawn. The hiss and thump of the respirator lifted the skinny chest that barely made a dent under the sheets and warmed blankets. Tubes and drains came out of various places on his body.

Alice’s eyes were drawn to the monitors. “Everything looks good, O2 SAT levels are great. Sinus rhythm’s up and normal.”

Jed gave her an annoyed look. “You see a patient, I see a little boy who’s been through hell.” He picked up one of Cale’s thin arms and squeezed his fingers gently. “Cale, I’m here. Alice and Cassie sent me. We’ve got you safe in the hospital away from the Sheriff and the child snatching gang. We’re going to tell the press that Cale Snowden died from his injuries and will be buried in Texas on his ranch next to his family. You’ll be transferred to a rehab hospital in Virginia under an assumed name and into a safe house under Dir. Kelstrom’s direct care. No one but he and I will know where that is.” He continued to talk to him and kept physical contact with the teenager, thought he saw the eyelids flicker but was not aware of the night nurse’s silent return until she put her hand on his shoulder.

Quietly, she said, “that’s 20 minutes, sir. We need to let him rest.”

Jed got up and followed her out to the ICU waiting room. A crowd of people had joined them, several soldiers from the Marine base, Jamison Snowden and Kyle Beebe, as well as Dir. Kelstrom. He raised his eyebrows at Jed as he reported on Cale’s condition.

“Critical but stable. Just what the hell does that mean?” They asked.

“It means he’s holding his own but he can go either way at the drop of a hat,” he explained.

“The place is besieged with reporters,” Jamieson noted. “There are stories in the *Enquirer* about him, for God’s sake. They’re calling him some kind of mind freak. How did the press find out about Cale, anyway?”

“They monitor police band frequency and listen for newsworthy events. They probably heard about Cale’s kidnapping and tracked him.”

Kelstrom took Jamison Snowden aside, stared at the strange eyes and more mature face and saw what the boy might become as a man. He explained quietly what they were going to do and Jamison’s face paled.

“Can you handle it?” The Director asked and the boy’s uncle slowly nodded.

“Do I have a choice?”

“There will be a press conference, so be prepared,” he warned.

Still, when the doctor came back in to announce that Cale’s blood pressure had plummeted and his heart stopped, it was a shock. “We tried for 45 minutes to resuscitate him but his heart just wouldn’t fibrillate,” he sighed. He looked exhausted as if he’d fought the battle single-handedly. “I’m going to notify the Police and the Press. Officially, it’s now a murder. I am sorry for your loss.”

“Can we see him?” Someone asked.

“Immediate family only,” the Doctor denied. “I had to crack open his chest and we didn’t get to close.”

“I want to say goodbye,” Jamieson choked.

“Me, too,” Alice added and Jed took her aside, let her away as the doctor brought Snowden into the recovery room to stand over his nephew.

The doctor shook his head. “He *did* crash and we *did* have to shock him. The only thing different is that he did come back.”

His face above the sheet was gray with black shadows under the closed lids, the breathing tube in his lungs hissed and thumped in an endless monotone. Sweat beaded his forehead, his black curls were lank and matted showing the elegant shape of his skull. He looked more like a porcelain doll than a corpse. Jamieson stifled a sob and stroked his nephew’s cheek, reached under the sheet and picked up one of his hands. They had rewrapped his wrists where the restraints had abraded the stitched areas still healing. “Cale,” he murmured. “Cale, come back, please. We love you. Come back please.” There was no response, the hand remained lax and the fingers slightly curled.

The doctor escorted him out to the waiting room, explained what they had to do to release the body and make arrangements and then notified everyone that he was going to make a statement to the Press.

In 15 minutes, they watched him on the room’s TV telling the assembled crowd of Press and Detectives that Cale Snowden had succumbed to his injuries, passing away at 2:45 AM of respiratory failure. It was now a murder investigation involving an Interstate sex ring and that the FBI was on the case. Arrests were imminent, three men had already been taken into custody and one, a Sheriff was dead. He turned it over to the FBI liaison and detectives from Virginia. They had questions but he deferred to the FBI spokesman and left the room.

Chapter XIX

The two-story colonial with its rose-colored brick, black shutters and graceful column set back on a five-acre landscaped lot with crape myrtles and lace pines. The drive up was graveled, lined with azaleas and gated with high topped iron spears. Closed-circuit TV cameras covered every inch of the driveway and the exterior of the house. And Secret Service Agents patrolled the grounds even though the home’s owner was retired. The name on the oversized mailbox said *Daniel A. Kelstrom* and the former Director (retired) of the FBI lived there with his wife and son.

The backyard had been a well-manicured formal garden and lawn but in the last year it had been transformed into a child’s playground geared for a youngster of perhaps five or six. The boy being tickled by the retired FBI Director looked much older physically although his face wore the innocent expression of a much younger child. He was laughing and giggling as he rolled on the ground, trying to get away from the tickling hands holding him tight.

“Cry uncle,” Kelstrom smiled and the boy did so. He scooped him up, hugged and put him on his feet. “Ready for lunch?” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the unobtrusive guard and noted the smile on the man’s face.

For nearly 6 months, the boy had sat unmoving, unresponsive until the last few months where he slowly became aware of his surroundings. He still did not make frequent eye contact but it was obvious that he was trying to come back from his self-imposed exile. Only in the last few months had he begun to speak, in a childish baby talk that became more sophisticated as if he was going through his infancy all over again. Fully healed, he bore the scars of his last encounter, a ragged hole through the center of his chest and back, scars on both wrists and older ones from his ATV accident. He acted like a five-year-old with no knowledge of the past and spoke with a lisp in the piping tones of a young boy. He called the man Poppy and shyly took his hand as he was led into

the kitchen where the Director's wife was waiting. She smiled at the boy and told him to sit in his chair.

"Peanut butter and jelly?" She asked and he nodded resting his hands in his lap. She put the sandwich, cut into four quarters, in front of him on the placemat. His glass of milk had a straw in it. The ticking of a clock could be heard in the background and a strange expression flickered across his face. He looked up, studied the kitchen and opened his mouth.

"Granny?" His eyes were large and brilliant with unshed tears.

Marie Kelstrom stood back and sat down abruptly with a thump. Her husband stood next to her, his hand on her shoulder. "Are you remembering, Mark?" He asked softly, not pushing and following what the behavioral psychiatrist had suggested. As they watched, his face aged and the look of innocence disappeared.

Kelstrom wanted to gather him into his arms but remembered that the psychiatrist had warned them not to touch the boy unless he initiated it. They stood back and watched the internal struggle as memories flooded his mind and an inarticulate sound of pain erupted from his mouth. His hands with scars across both wrists fluttered to his chest and he screamed that it hurt. The guards came running in, guns drawn but stopped as he saw the Director and his wife standing back. "Call Jed," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "And the med team just in case."

"Yes, sir," one of the men ran as the other stayed behind the Director.

The screaming escalated, his eyes were wild and feral looking and objects began to fly around the room like miniature missiles striking the boy. Blood splattered. Instinctively, Kelstrom leapt to cover the boy and protect him.

"Mark! Stop it! You're hurting yourself!" He cried as the cups, glasses and knickknacks pelted him. They stung. His body was rigid under Kelstrom's grip. He heard his wife's gasp of horror and realized that the boy and his chair were levitating.

"Holy crap!" He yelled and did the only thing he could think of. He slapped the boy's face so hard that the imprint of his hand was visible in seconds, red against the white skin. Mark's eyes blinked as his mouth open in a surprised 'O' and he was quiet. Awareness seeped back into his eyes.

"Ow," he complained raising his fingers to his cheek. The objects whirling around the room hovered in midair until he glanced at them and everything scooted back into their places except for the broken ones. He looked around the kitchen at the mess of broken dinnerware, windows and gouged wallboard. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"Mark?"

"You can call me that. My name is Cale, though."

"What happened?"

"I remembered everything and didn't want to come back. Granny Elkins pushed me out and I fought her. I was winning, too. But if I had, I would have been psychotic for the rest of my life. When you hit me, it shocked me enough to let go and she got in and shoved me out."

"For good?"

He shook his head. "I can't answer that. I thought I was lost in there forever. At first, it was quiet and peaceful but then, I began to lose my sense of self. When Granny died, I gathered up her mind and brought her in with me. Sometimes, she was strong enough to come out. How long has it been?"

"You spent two months in the hospital, you've been with us for over eight months."

"Another year of my life gone," he murmured. He pushed back from the chair, realized that it was still hovering off the ground and set it down with a thump. Standing up, he seemed inches taller and years older. "You took care of me like I was your son," he said.

"You are our son. We've raised you this last year, Mark," she protested. "I changed your diapers, fed you and took care of you for this whole last year. It's only in the last few weeks that

you've even begun to speak and interact with us."

"I don't remember anything after Cassie died." He frowned. "There was a woman who helped me. Alice?"

"She saved your life and rescued you from the Sheriff."

"Is he...dead?"

"He was shot. He was the main supplier for the sex snatching ring. We're still tracking the head of it; we know there's a senator or congressman involved but he's so far removed and has covered his tracks so that we can't find him. We do have a list of his customers and the victims. The ones that survive grow up to become recruiters. The victims are tattooed with a barcode."

"Where?"

"On the nape of the neck under the hairline. You weren't done yet, you were a special order and they didn't have time to do it. There's no record to connect you to them. Still, someone has a standing running order for any child of your description. Whoever it is that wanted you, he hasn't given up even though you were declared dead a year ago."

The medical team burst into the room followed by the Special Agent Deleon.

"Cale!" He said as the paramedics set him down and checked him over.

"I'm okay," he protested as they treated the bleeding scrapes from the crockery hits. "Just tired. I expended a lot of energy."

"Your blood pressure is very low and your pulse is rapid," the medical tech announced. "How do you feel? Does it hurt? You took some pretty good hits to the face."

"That hurts, too," he said ruefully.

"We want you to go to the hospital and have some tests. Just to make sure you're okay," Jed insisted.

"I'm not okay. I'll never be okay. But, I'm sane and functional," he returned.

"We still need to you to get checked out, Cale." His eyes took on a hunted look and he was ready to bolt.

"Mark," Kelstrom spoke softly and calmly. "Let us help you. For a year we've taken care of you and treated you like our son. We won't hurt you now. Just relax."

He made a deliberate effort to throttle back his emotions. "Please don't drug me," he begged. "Don't drag me off to the hospital."

"Cale, you know I've never lied to you," Deleon stated. "I won't let them hurt you but you have to go and let them check you out. We need to make sure you're okay."

He deflated and said in a small voice, "okay." He let them put him on the stretcher and carried him out to the waiting medical Humvee. The entire party went with them to the hospital where they catered to VIPs and the elites of the US government. Jed and the Kelstroms rode in the back holding Cale's hands while tremors wrecked his frame and he complained of being cold. She murmured to him, stroked his face and felt the cold of the skin. "He's like ice."

"His temperature is dropping, too," the medic reported. He flashed a light into the violet eyes. "Still with us, son?"

Cale murmured. "I'm here. I won't relapse. Granny Elkins taught me how to make my mind a shield so nothing can come in. Unless I will it. I'm just tired, I need to sleep and recharge. I'm going to crash but don't worry. I'll wake up in a few hours." He closed his eyes slowly and went limp.

They were met at the ER doors by neurosurgeons and ER doctors as they whisked the boy straight into a private exam room and begin to work him up without benefit of registration or paperwork. Guards took up stations outside all the exits, followed him from the emergency room to CAT scan and back to a private room in a special wing reserved for high-profile patients. He slept through it all, did not wake as they applied the IVs, and was transferred to a bed in the private room under armed guards.

Kelstrom, his wife and Deleon sat out in the waiting room until the neurosurgeon came in. He shook hands all around and introduced himself. "Doctor Matt Albertson. His test results are scary," he admitted. "But everything else looks normal. BP is good, O2 levels, UA, CBC and blood are all good. He's not in a coma, just a deep sleep. He'll wake-up when he's ready. I think he's just burned out. We'd like to keep him under observation for a few days, see why his EEG is off the scale and redo a series of MRIs. We want to compare them to his previous scans." Doctor Albertson gazed at Kelstrom. "He's your son, Director?"

The retired FBI D.O. nodded. "Adopted."

"We have some paperwork for you to sign. You can see him, we gave him a mild sedative just so he'd stay relaxed. The paramedics told us he had an anxiety attack prior to admission so we're not taking any chances. He'll know you're there, so talk to him but a brass band wouldn't wake him." He shook their hands. "Someday you'll explain all this to me, right?" They didn't answer but followed him to Cale's room.

Chapter XX

I woke up, refreshed from a day sleep knowing who I was and where I was and what I needed to do. Sneaking past the guards outside my door wasn't a problem; I merely tweaked his sense so that his eyes were in a different direction when I slipped out and down the hallway. I felt bad about picking his wallet clean but left a note asking Jed and my uncle to replace the \$400 I took from him. Clothes were a more difficult problem, I finally settled on a pair of XS scrubs and some lady's sneakers.

My first ride outside the hospital was a motorcycle rider who told me he was waiting for me to show up and he would take me as far as PA. I hugged him around his leather covered waist and watched as the scenery flew by. He had an extra helmet and I wore it, concealing my face from the pursuit I knew would be coming as soon as the FBI realized I was gone. Police cars actually passed us, sirens blaring and my driver cut between traffic lanes to get out of the way.

"After you?" He yelled and downshifted as he slowed for the right lane.

"Probably!"

"You need a place to hang out?"

"No. I'm in a hurry. Headed to New York State. Maybe Vermont."

"You got some tough times ahead of you," he commented and his eyes lightened until they were colorless.

I pushed him. "NO! Don't look into my future," I warned him. "You'll burn out your own sense."

"That would be a blessing," he sighed. "How long have you had yours?"

"Ever since I can remember," I answered truthfully. He was silent for several miles until we stopped at a rest area for sodas and a bathroom break. He made sure he covered my stall, guarding me from any adults. I did not remove the helmet until I was inside the toilet where no one could see my eyes. He stood at the door and locked it while I washed my hands and stared at myself in the mirror above the sinks.

"Where are you from?" He asked me holding his helmet at his side.

"Texas."

"I'm from Virginia. Cousin to the Beebes. We'll be keeping tabs on you, Granny Elkins set it all up. We'll be around when you need us. Ready?"

I nodded and we exited the restrooms, mounted back up onto his bike and headed onto the

interstate. We watched as the highway system was overrun with state troopers, FBI agents and even ATF hot helicopters late into the evening hours but they never stopped us. We rolled into Pennsylvania's border around 11 PM and at the first truck stop, were met by a woman standing near an 18 wheeler that hauled pigs. Her plates were from Tennessee and I recognized that hillbilly accent.

"Howdy, Cale," she said and helped me off the bike. I was stiff from sitting so long, and felt like the vibration of the bike was etched into my bones. "Beebe Junior's my cousin. He's doing okay, can't remember much after meeting you at the Knob. The bullet creased his head, scrambled his brains and broke his collarbone when he fell from the loft but he said to tell you he's okay. Uncle Kyle sent you some things."

She handed over a backpack with North Face on the label, pulled out changes of clothing, sunglasses, baseball cap, a SAT-phone, wallet with ID and credit cards. Plus \$5000 in cash. I stood there with my mouth open.

"Uncle Kyle said it's yours. Cassie set it aside for you, knew you'd need it. They'll be tracking us after this, that FBI man knows we're in touch with you and suspects we can sense you like we do. Knows we got the sight." She blinked and her eyes paled to that strange quicksilver color. "Got bad times ahead of you, Cale. But not for a while. Got a respite for a while. Road ahead is clear for a few days. You need to walk, don't hitch, don't take rides, and stay off the secondaries. First town you come to, stay away from gas stations. Camp out when you get tired." She came out of her trance, smiled sadly at me and said, "Wish I could've said goodbye to Cassie once more. You take care, Cale Snowdon."

She climbed back up into her cab and drove off. The bike rider took his spare helmet back from me, tied it to a sissy bar and drove off without another glance. I didn't need to ask his name, I'd known everything about him from the moment I'd touched him until he gently pulled the shutters down on his mind.

I sighed, put on the sunglasses, the baseball cap and started my lonely trek up the side of the highway. Lights hit me, made my shadow appear long and stick like it yet no one pulled over to investigate. As I trudged along, the woman joined me. She spoke not a word but followed me anxiously. She wore only a blue striped towel and her feet were in fluffy yellow slippers. She had one of those vinyl shower caps on her hair and she smelled like strawberry shampoo.

"Who are you?" I asked but she didn't answer. She stayed with me until I found a spot under an overpass that offered a sheltered place to rest. When I looked up again she was gone. I knew that she would dog me until I found out whom she was and where she was going to die. She led me all the way towards Vermont and left me alone at the payphone in the small town square near the Village Green. I sat on the wrought iron bench near the Revolutionary War Monument, pulled out my SAT- phone and dialed the number I had memorized. It rang several times and then the familiar voice came on, sounding busy and harried. "Hello?"

His Boston accent was still as strong as ever and when I did not speak, he paused. "Cale?" He asked intuitively. "Is that you? Where are you? Are you okay? Don't hang up, talk to me."

"Hello, Jed," I said slowly. "I'm going to need your help."

"Tell me where you are, I'll be there ASAP."

I waited for him to meet me, to find Towel Lady's resting spot wherever she might be. The helicopter set down outside the small county airport and the FBI Team met me on the apron. Jed's face was extremely noncommittal as he loaded me up and followed my directions to the next town and the first murder in the state in 20 years.

The End.