

# **Dominion**

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## **Dedication**

**To Dreamers everywhere who never give up their dreams.**

**Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth.**

**Genesis 1:26**

## **Chapter One**

“Have you seen this article?” the President demanded of his Secretary of Homeland Defense. He threw the paper down on the table where it nearly knocked over the china cup of Blue Jamaican coffee. Oliver Sustain looked up in surprise, the President was normally an unflappable sort, not one to give in to his emotions but he was clearly in a rage.

Sustain picked up the Washington Post and read the screaming headlines about an offhand derogatory remark the President had made to an aide over an international figure. “How did anyone hear me?” He demanded.

Sustain said mildly, “maybe your aide sold you out.”

“No way in hell,” President Rickover returned. “He knows he’d be canned. And besides, I checked. He’s been incommunicado with my wife at Camp David.”

“Cell phones and text,” Sustain shrugged.

“No phone calls or texts went out. I checked. And this isn’t the first time, Oliver. I’ve called several other people who’ve had the same type of scenarios. Some were the only ones there, and yet someone overheard them. And don’t say they were bugged, one of them was a CIA Director, for God’s sake.”

“Are you saying we have a spy in the White House and Langley?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying, Oliver,” the President sighed. “I just know my supposedly private conversations or sometimes not so private.”

“Are there any common factors, Jason?” Sustain asked. “A common place, same room, same person?”

“No. Some occurred at home, some here in the White House, the National Museum office, the Park. One even inside the New York Stock Exchange. That one instance netted someone an advance tip on a five hundred thousand dollars stock transaction made with a thousand dollar purchase. The SEC is looking into that one.”

Sustain looked at the paper. “Well, you didn’t have to call the Secretary of the United Nations a fat dyke bitch, Jason,” he said mildly. “Are you going to deny it?”

“Well, there’s no proof.”

“Unless they track down the aide and subpoena him.”

President Rickover sighed and sat in the spindle backed chair, petting the smooth head of the golden retriever named Dusty. Almost every White House administration had an official White House dog and Dusty was Rickover’s pride and joy. A female apricot Golden retriever four years old rescued from the pound, she accompanied Rickover everywhere from jogging to trips on Air Force One. Her coat was burnished gold with feathers that Rickover kept groomed and neat by himself and he always made time for her care. She was a sweet tempered dog, well trained in obedience; fiercely protective of her master, his wife and Rickover’s two daughters.

“What do you want me to do?” Sustain asked, reaching for his coffee. He drank, staring over the rim at the president.

“Find out how the shit is getting out there. Morton himself is the one came to me with all these instances. He has over a hundred of them.”

“What are you going to do about this?” He pointed to the paper.

“Lie, lie, deny,” Rickover grinned as he reached for a cup and a bran muffin. “Besides, it’s true. She is a fat dyke bitch.”

Sustain sighed, and finished his morning coffee before the rest of the Presidents staff entered the room to discuss the day’s events. Dusty snored, turned around twice and laid down under her master’s feet, resting her nose on her paws.

## Chapter 2

Dad yelled up the stairs for me to get up and I rolled out of bed to struggle and wake up. Even nine hours of uninterrupted sleep hadn't been enough, I was still logy, confused and grumpy. Padding into the bathroom, I turned on the lights and winced as it speared my eyes to the back of my brain. Squinting in the glare, I stared into the mirror seeing myself in disgust. My hair stuck up in blonde and brown spikes like the cat had clawed through it. Lines pebbled my skin where the sheets had wrinkled the flesh, one brown eye drooped and the blue one was bloodshot, full of crusted gunk. My mouth tasted like I'd died after a raw fish eating contest and my dark brown eyebrows were scrunched close to my eyes. I looked like I'd been dragged behind a street sweeper and smelled worse than my gym bag after a week of being forgotten in my locker.

Twenty minutes later, I could claim to look like a new man outside, even if the inside was still half asleep. At least my hair was combed, gelled down and tamed, my teeth brushed and my contacts in. It was a brown day, both blurry brown eyes looked back at me from my mirror.

I decided on black jeans, long sleeved tee and a Big Dog navy blue zip up hoodie, socks and soft leather laced up climbing boots. I was fanatical about my shoes, I never wore sneakers or hiking boots, steel toed or Kmart brand. My shoes were all custom-made, top-of-the-line and mail-order. It drove my Dad crazy, but I paid for them out of my earnings and he never questioned where the money came from. Of course, he never saw the bills, either. So he didn't know to ask about the thousand dollar price tag or the designer names. Besides, they were my feet, I liked to be comfortable and there was nothing worse than sore feet.

"Danny, are you up?" Dad yelled up the stairs and I could see him standing at the bottom shading his eyes as the sun blasted through the skylight from the second story Cathedral ceiling.

"Coming, Dad," I called back and slowly stamped down the steps as he retreated to the breakfast nook. On weekends, my Dad cooked for me, eschewing the services of the live-in housekeeper to preserve, he said, both independence and a semblance of family normalcy.

I slipped into the nook, hoisted myself onto the kitchen stool, sliding under the counter table to poke at the plate covered with pancakes and bacon. Blueberry pancakes, maple bacon and real Vermont Maple syrup. "Wow," I murmured. "What are we celebrating?" More calories here than he'd eaten all week.

"Your last stock tip netted me a forty K profit," he grinned.

I took a big bite, and swallowed in surprise. These were good. "Dad, Yum." I looked at him. 6'6", 240 pounds and all in the right places. My Dad needed a diet like I needed a pierced eyebrow. Hey, that sounded cool. I stroked my right eyebrow, the one above my blue-eye.

"No," he waved the spatula at me. "No eyebrow piercings."

Disgruntled, I stared. "No, I'm not reading your mind. You just do that whenever you think about piercings or look at piercings."

Good. For a minute there, I thought he *was* reading my mind.

“Finish your breakfast, and we’ll get going,” he ordered and I inhaled my food in minutes, while he watched in amazement. “You eat like a Marine on a three-day bender at a hot dog eating contest,” he sighed. “All right, let me do the dishes and we’ll leave.”

It was the first three-day weekend we’d had together since my Mom died and he’d promised me a trip to the National Space Museum before its grand opening. Being Senator Michael Patrick De Rosier and a former astronaut space hero, he got to be the one doing the ribbon-cutting and getting the pre-opening tour. With me.

His car was waiting out front. His car, not the official black SUV the size of a house or chauffeur driven limousine. No sign of any bodyguards either, just the gray four-door Kia SUV with extra headroom for Dad’s height. He might be a rich guy, but he didn’t flaunt it. Our house was a 3000 square ft. two-story in Chevy Chase, I went to public school and rode the bus. Dad drove a Kia to work, and most days, he was in his Senate office or on the floor. Not hiding in some fancy restaurant or hobnobbing with Washington lobbyists and millionaires.

I got in and buckled up. “How did you get away from Eastwood and Damon?” I was referring to his Secret Service guys.

“They’re meeting us on the highway. I tried to get them to meet us at the museum, but no go. What with the Olympics and all, security is extra tight.” He checked to make sure my belt was tightened before he drove off.

At the bottom of the small hill and past four other houses, he turned left, his eyes never still watching everything. We both did. Both of us were paranoid, some idiot drunk driver in a minivan had T-boned my Mom and killed her. I was still dealing with it even after nearly a year.

“You invite Felice to the opening?” He asked casually, as we meandered through the neighborhood for fifteen minutes before we hit the highway and I spent the next forty-five trying to spot the Secret Service dudes. Dad asked me again sometime later about Felice.

“Uh, yeah,” I answered, searching the parking lot for her escort. She came in a limo with her agents’ right on her heels. Looked really nice in a skintight pair of cream-colored jeans, shocking lime green blouse and a hand knit Aran sweater. Kick ass boots with heels that made her almost tall enough to reach my chin. She bounced over to the car and pulled the door opened before I could get my seat-belt unhooked.

Felice Rickover leaned in and her long, dark hair tickled my face as she smiled at me with those big, incredibly green eyes. “Hey, Downtown. Miss me?” She kissed me on the lips and Dad made hooting sounds from the front seat.

“That’s one way to get my vote, Lisi,” Dad grinned.

“Hah,” she retorted, pulling me out. “As if I’d vote for a Democrat.”

Dad slithered out, “you’re not old enough to vote. Besides, I plan on bribing you away from your Dad.”

The two agents met up with Dad and escorted us into the brand-new state-of-the-art National Space and Air Museum. Built of concrete and glass, it was designed by I. M. Pei and as cool outside, as in. Had everything from the Wright Brothers original plane to the last shuttle that retired. There weren't any reporters around waiting for the grand opening, which was tomorrow and with the ribbon-cutting ceremony. Today, the Director named Mark Hansen was going to give me, Dad and Felice a guided tour. He greeted Dad with a handshake and Felice and I with a smile and nod.

"Mister De Rosier, Ms. Rickover, shall we enter?"

Oh yeah. Did I forget to mention my girlfriend was the President's daughter?

### Chapter 3

"Well, Downtown," she mumbled over cheeseburger and fries. We were sitting in a booth at Denny's surrounded by the four agents and Dad. I'd wanted to sit by ourselves, but knew that wouldn't happen. I had learned to deal with the realities of being a Senator's son and boyfriend of the President's daughter.

Had I been to the White House? A few times. There was enough for me. Plus, after watching White House Down, I was glad to stay away.

We babbled about the planes, the Saturn rocket, and the actual console of the Enterprise where we were able to go inside and work the toggle switches and buttons. Sit in the pilot seat and pretend to know what it was like to fly one.

Felice ate like I did, not an ounce of extra fat on her body. She ran track at school. And yes, she did go to a private learning institution, even though that was a constant argument with her Dad and the Secret Service. She said it could be worse, she could have been home schooled. I rolled my eyes at that, home schooled in the White House didn't really count.

I stole her French fries and dipped one in ketchup. I'd already polished off my burger, fries and a chocolate milkshake and was working on hers. She slapped me.

"Get your own, Downtown," she grumped. So Dad ordered onion rings and I ate those, too.

"Downtown?" He asked, raising an eyebrow. His eyes were blue, his hair a dark blonde. I got my eyes and my looks from Mom, he often told me, my height and blue eye from him.

Oh, my name is Dantan Townsley De Rosier, hence the nickname 'Downtown'. I got the Townsley from Mom, named for my weird, lovable and eccentric great uncle. He had the weird eyes—one blue and one brown, like Mom. Said he was psychic, too. On the morning my Mom was murdered by the drunk driver, he tried to call her, warned her about the blue minivan and T-bone from his nursing home, but the staff who caught him wandering in the RN's office thought he was babbling about supper as if T-bones were on the menu for toothless old farts. His words, not mine. Dad and I visited Uncle Town nearly every week. Even if he did give me the creeps.

"Where to after this?" Dad questioned. "Is this an official date? You need to borrow the car?"

I slugged him. I'd just turned fourteen and no matter how I begged, he wanted me to wait to get my learner's permit. Even though Matt Damon [real name Jake James], offered to take me to the FBI closed driving course and teach me where agents learned real defensive driving.

I could understand Dad being cautious after Mom and truth is, I was a bit scared myself. I'd seen and read the statistics for teenage drivers and fatal accidents. Last thing I wanted was to put my Dad through that again. "It's seven thirty, Dad. You have an early day tomorrow. Don't you need to get in early?"

He rolled his eyes at the grinning agents and Felice. "It's almost past my bedtime," he whispered to her. "Do you think if I beg, he'll let me stay up another hour?"

"What are you doing tomorrow, Danny?" She asked finishing her last fry and looking for an onion ring, but I'd eaten them all.

"Pig," she added.

"Look who's talking. Those jeans look tight," I said staring at her chest.

She slugged me. "I weigh exactly 125," she retorted. "And I can still outrun and out leap you."

"But I can out shoot you," I sneered. "Out eat, out track and outlast you. And I'm smarter, too." I never let her forget my PSAT scores were higher than hers.

"By ten points. You spelled your name right for that. Any who, Dad's going to the farm to get some fishing and riding in. Want to come?"

"He's hiding from his bigmouth faux pas?"

She flushed red, having heard about his unfortunate words. "He said he didn't say that," she defended.

"My Dad said that the Easter Bunny's real, too," I returned. "I stopped believing that when I was eight."

"Really?" Dad inquired. "And how come I put a five dollar bill under your pillow for the last tooth you lost on Friday?"

I flushed, and said, "tips for the dentist."

"Speaking of which, you have a dental appointment on Monday at 11 AM. Ms. Penny will get you out of class and take you." Ms. Penny was Dad's secretary and stood in for errands where a full-fledged agent wasn't quite needed.

"I can take myself, Dad. The office is only four blocks from school."

"No," he said sharply. I knew he meant it. It wasn't the best neighborhood between school and the strip-mall where the dental clinic was.

"Okay," I agreed quietly. "Tomorrow, I'm going to the park and practice shooting. Tournament's coming up, and I'm stale."

I was enrolled in archery class and wanted to try out for triathlon, archery, target shooting and running sometime in the near future.

“You guys done?” Dad asked, standing up and the other agents flanked him. The waitress brought the check, Dad handed over his American Express and left her five dollar tip. He never paid more than 25%, he said waitresses deserved to be rewarded for their service, but not to make him feel magnanimous. Out in the parking lot, Felice gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek before she was hustled away into the big limo and we got into the Kia. I sighed. Dad waited until I was seat belted in.

“You like her, Danny?”

“A lot. She’s smart, pretty and fun. Likes to read, and do the same things as me. Likes animals. You know she wants to be a vet?”

“I take it you don’t mean a war vet?”

“Daaad,” I sighed. “A veterinarian. Why can’t we have a dog, Dad?”

“We tried, Danny,” he said softly. “When you were young, several times. It made you sick. Your Mom wanted you to have a pet, too. We both loved dogs. It killed her to give Clipper up when you got ill at seven. That was the last time we tried.”

“No one else’s pets bother me. I can be around Dusty all day and I’m fine.”

“Outside. Not in the house,” he pointed out.

“What is it, do I have asthma or something?”

“No, Dantan. Worse than that. You passed out and were in a coma for days. We had to take you to Crowley Trauma to a Specialist. Four times.”

I rubbed my forehead and squeezed the temples, as a sudden headache accompanied by nausea hit me. “Dad, pull over,” I managed and he stared at me in the rear view mirror.

“What’s wrong, Danny?” He asked sharply, putting on his right blinker. “You’re green!”

He pulled to a stop and unlocked the doors. I headed for the grass along the wood line as his escort pulled over to park behind, hurrying up to Dad with their hands on their hips. I leaned over and puked as Dad kept his distance. One thing he hated was the smell of vomit.

Voices babbled in my head. I saw pictures of a man putting together a rifle and a fat tortoiseshell cat was watching him from the table covered with a purple-flowered plastic tablecloth in a large dining room wainscoted walls and an overhead five-bladed fan light. Three windows and a door covered with paisley drapes in the picture window opened into the narrow kitchen, a window frame sized opening but no glass. The floor was carpeted and on top that was one of those braided rugs in green.

A small pendulum clock ticked on one wall between the windows and on the other was a really nice pencil drawing of a red setter.

The man was in his 30s with a bland generic face, blue eyes and dark hair. You’d look at him twice and not see him. He was not tall, but it was hard to judge his height sitting in

the Captain's chair at the table. There were four other chairs around the table, each one different. A portable phone lay at his right side near the cat that purring away.

I was seeing it all through the eyes of the cat, could hear and smell what the cat did.

"Danny?" Dad's voice came from far away and I vaguely felt someone's arms around me.

"Gonna get that bastard with one shot," I said, echoing the man in front of me. "Oh yeah, President Jason Rickover's gonna be splattered all across the front of the Museum of Space and Science."

"Danny?" Dad shook me. "Danny, what?"

I looked up, no longer in the cat's mind, but back on the side of the interstate with five worried faces staring at me. Dad sent the other guys back to the car to get help.

"Huh?" I asked, wiping my mouth of vomit.

"Danny, what did you say about President Rickover?"

I swallowed. "Dad, remember when I gave you that stock tip, and told you not to drive that day the accident happened on the expressway?" He nodded. "Well, tomorrow some guy's going to shoot Felice's Dad in the head at the museum's grand opening."

"Danny," Dad said helplessly.

"Dad, you've got to do something. Don't tell them, they won't believe me."

"You know who he is?"

"Some guy with a cat. A tortoiseshell. Dark hair, blue eyes. He looks like everyone. He has a rifle."

"What kind?"

"Like that short sniper rifle made of composite so it doesn't show up in x-rays or metal detectors. Is Felice's Dad supposed to be there tomorrow?"

"Yes," Dad said. "A last-minute change of plans... How did you know this, Danny?"

"He told me. The guy with the rifle."

"Danny, you telling me you read minds?"

"No, Dad. I can't read minds. I hear things see things, sometimes. Like through their eyes."

"The people's eyes?"

"No, Dad. Through their pets' eyes. Dogs, cats, birds. Even wild animals. It's like I'm in their heads, seeing through their eyes, hearing through their ears."

He started to say something, stopped and then said, "The stock tip?"

"I heard a broker, talking on the phone to his partner. His dog was in the room, a big black lab."



“How do you pick the animals, Dantan?”

I shrugged. “Sometimes, they just suck me in. No rhyme or reason. Doesn’t usually make me sick either.”

Dad said, “Hush,” as the agents came back over.

“Hey, Danny,” Damon asked. “How are you? We called an ambulance, Senator. Just in case. Food poisoning, you think?”

Dad said smoothly, “I’ll take him home. I think he’s okay now. Cancel the ambulance, please.” Dad held onto me back to the car and made me lie down in the back seat. Halfway home, I passed out. Don’t remember being carried into the house or the subsequent pandemonium when they couldn’t rouse me.

## Chapter 4

I woke up disoriented in a strange place. I knew it was a hospital after few minutes, it had that smell. Although I was in a private room, it had a BP machine, O2 and EKG scanner at the side of the hospital bed. In a padded armchair with his feet up slept my Dad, still in the suit he’d worn to the museum tour. Outside my closed door I could see an agent in a neat blue suit, and coming through the door was Ms. Penny carrying a plastic bag from which dangled Dad’s gray pinstripe, what he called his power suit.

“Hey, Danny,” she said softly so as to not wake him. “How are you?”

“What am I doing here?” I grumbled.

“You don’t remember?”

“Naw. How long’s Dad been asleep?” I asked.

“I’m awake,” he said without opening his eyes and Ms. Penny hung his plastic bag up on the hook near the bathroom and then she put a super-sized coffee in his hands. He opened his eyes and smiled. “Oh God, thank you,” after a few sips, he sat up. “Danny, how do you feel?”

“I got a headache,” I complained. He raised an eyebrow at my grammar. “What am I doing here, Dad?”

“You passed out in the car after you puked up Denny’s,” he explained. “Brought you home and we couldn’t wake you up. I called the ambulance, but Jake said it would be quicker if we took you so he drove to Crowley.” He shivered. “Danny, you were limp and boneless. I thought you were dead. Your heartbeat was so slow, I could barely find it, and your breathing was sporadic. We thought you might’ve had food poisoning but Felice was fine and then you wouldn’t wake up.”

“You called Felice?” I interrupted.

“To see if she was sick,” he explained patiently. “She’s concerned, too.”

“Ms. Rickover is on her way over to see how you’re doing, Dantan,” Ms. Penny told me.

“So what’s wrong with me?”

“I don’t know. The Doctor wants to do a bunch of tests today. They did blood, urine, and EKG last night when you came in. Today, they want to do a spinal tap, MRI and CAT scan.”

“Why?” I asked suspiciously.

“To rule out epilepsy, stroke or brain tumor,” he returned grimly.

I stared, my mouth hanging open. Swallowed.

“Dantan,” he started. “About what you said yesterday–.”

“Dad, you have to go to the opening and make sure nothing happens,” I said urgently. “Wait a minute, then.” I held up a hand, the one attached to a finger lead and reached for the tortoiseshell cat. Found it sitting in the window sill, staring out at a silver gray Ford Escape with Maryland license plates. “5DUX – 8894, Dad. Silver gray Ford Escape. 2013.”

“You sure?”

“The plates aren’t his. They’re stolen. I see another set on the table. Virginia MLB 6656P. Don’t know if these are his or not. He’s in the driveway, it’s a circular drive, two houses across the street, blue with black shutters. Mailbox says 7729 Manassas. Does that help?”

Dad bolted out the door, leaving Ms. Penny and me staring at each other.

“Where’s he going? He has to be at the Museum opening in two hours!”

“He knows, Ms. Penny,” I said, and the Doctor came in while Dad was doing some fast talking with Jake James.

“Hi there, Mister De Rosier,” this dude said. He was young and talked with a New York accent. Introducing himself as Doctor Greg Kujowski, he shook my hand and asked me what was up. My answer was a shrug.

“You tell me. I remember puking my guts out on the Interstate and then waking up in here.”

He checked my heart, lungs, and when he headed south for my belly, Ms. Penny left the room. Poking around, his hands were cold and tickled but didn’t prompt any painful reactions. Next, he examined my balls, which made me both uncomfortable and creped out.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “But sometimes, young boys your age get a herniated testicle.” He went on to explain, and I interrupted him.

“I know what that is. No, I haven’t hit my head or been around any of those encephalitis prone schools. I had a headache, felt nauseous and puked. End of story.”

He shook his head. “No, Dantan. You were unconscious and unresponsive when you were brought in. We ruled out drugs and alcohol, trauma or accident. And your Dad said you weren’t emotionally upset. You had an EKG when you came in and that was strange, abnormally slow but your scans are normal now.”

“I have you scheduled for a CAT scan, EEG and MRI. That’s a lot of tests for one day so you’ll be spending a few days here until we can find out what’s going on.

“You will also have a spinal tap and I will warn you, that one hurts even with the numbing medicine and a spinal headache is no fun. You can’t move during or after. Are you claustrophobic? The MRI and CAT scan are in tight tubes so I can give you a tranquilizer if you think you need one.”

“My Dad Okayed this?”

He nodded. “Your father is very worried about you, Dantan. He told me once, he wants the best care we can give you, whatever it takes to get you well.”

“I’m not sick,” I complained. “When can I go home?”

I hated hospitals. That’s where I’d seen my mother last and associated the place with everything bad.

“We’ll see after the tests, okay?”

Ms. Penny poked her head in. “Dantan, the Senator says stay, behave and he’ll take care of your little problem. He’ll be back after the opening. Rest. Do you want anything?”

“My clothes. My Nook, my laptop.” Although it never worked right around me. After a few days, the motherboard fried itself. “On second thought, leave the laptop and bring my notebooks. I’ll work on my homework.”

“On your desk?”

“Book bag on the chair.” I yawned, suddenly sleepy, didn’t see or hear them leaving my room.

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I woke up as they were wheeling me down the hallway and grabbed hold of the railings, yelling at the two dudes pushing me and saw that the doc was with them.

“Relax, Dantan,” he said. “We’re just taking you to CAT scan. You had another episode.”

“Episode? I didn’t puke,” I protested trying to sit up. “Let me out of here!”

I saw that the dude in the blue scrubs and he ducked, grabbing my hands while I tried to slide off the gurney. I made it to my feet by using his shoulders and my feet as a fulcrum, swinging over his head. The angle forced his hands to release so I took off running down the corridor, sliding on the slick floors with no socks on just those paper booties. I could feel my ass hanging out the back of that nasty gown. Voices yelled to stop, to catch me but I wasn’t a track star for nothing. I turned the corner and bypassed the nurses’ station heading for the nearest fire doors and stairs with a growing cavalcade behind me. Hit the fire doors and smashed them open, taking the steps down three and four at a time.

Twelve treads down, landing, then another twelve to a floor. I emerged on the lower floor and opened the exit to peer out on the atrium midst a bunch of flowering plants and

honest to God trees growing in the lobby. Four elevators faced me, North and South Towers and I still had seven floors more below me.

Heard an alarm in a woman's voice over the intercom calling for code 7 as the elevator dinged. I pushed the one for South Tower and jumped inside as soon as it opened, regardless of the people in it. Two men, two women, all visitors from their clothes and baskets of food and flowers. They carefully pretended not to look at me as I danced from 1 foot to the other holding my gown, back closed.

"Going down?" I asked and pushed the 'G' button. The elevator doors opened on Four and standing in the doorway were two security guards, the Doctor, and two huge orderlies.

"Dantan, just relax," Kujowski said slowly as he approached. The orderlies motioned for the other people in the car to exit and they bolted out quickly. I tried to dodge past them, and the big orderly grabbed me by the arm and bear hugged me. Kicking, I walked up the wall and pushed off, flipping myself behind him but he dropped backwards, landing on me crushing the air out of my lungs. I wheezed, saw spots, and felt someone stab me in the butt with a needle. Melted.

Went flying upwards onto a flat padded surface, my arms and legs strapped down while fingers pried my eyelids up.

"2 ml of Ativan," the voice announced. "Vitals?"

"Heart rate is one fifty, BP is 145/80. Respirations twenty-four, temp is 99°," a nurse announced.

"He'll sleep for a while. Let's get him to Imaging, get these tests done before he has another panic attack. Anyone hurt?"

There were all negatives. "Dantan, you're okay. We're going to take you for these tests. Someone call the Senator and let him know what's going on."

I mumbled about the opening and the men after the President, but my mouth didn't work right so my words never made it past my lips.

The rest of the day was a blur, voices telling me to stay still, roll over, bend, and was I cold until it all merged into a buzzing that turned black and seamless. I was asleep.

## Chapter 5

Woke up back in bed in the same room only now, there were balloons, cards, flowers and candy piled everywhere. Dad was watching to see if I was awake and Felice was there looking worried.

"Hey," I mumbled.

"Hey, kiddo," Dad smiled, his eyes lighting up.

Felice looked like she was crying, "hey, Downtown. Wuzup?"

"You tell me."

"What was with the Great Escape?" She queried. "You breaking out of here?"

“Dad?”

“The cat’s name is Harry Turtledove,” he said and I understood what he didn’t say. He didn’t want to alarm Felice. “Danny, why did you bolt?”

“I dunno. Scared.”

“Of the tube?”

“Naw. I’m hungry.”

“You missed lunch, dinner and breakfast,” he told me. “You slept nearly 16 hours. It’s Tuesday afternoon.”

“Yikes. Can I go home now?”

“After the Doctors check out your scans,” he said carefully.

“What did they find?”

“We’ll talk to the Doctors together.”

My stomach lurched and it wasn’t because I was hungry. I threw the covers back, sat up and froze as I realized I was nearly naked in front of Felice, so I pulled the sheets back up to my chin. She grinned.

“I’ve seen you naked before in second grade, Downtown, there’s got to be some improvements.”

I blushed. Mumbled as Dad laughed. “Lisi, you are a bad influence on me. Shall I leave you two alone?”

“He’s perfectly safe with me, Mister D,” she grinned. “I promise not to look under his skirts.”

I turned beet red. Was saved when the doc came in looking all serious and Felice took that cue to exit gracefully. He cleared his throat and looked at Dad.

“Dantan’s CAT scan showed a lesion in the area of the brain called the limbic region, deep inside.”

Dad said, “A lesion? A tumor?”

“Not a tumor, an area about the size of a lemon that is thickened like a bruise. It can affect memory, balance and speech. Part of it extends to the optic nerves and there is pressure on those nerves, which will cause vision degeneration.”

“You mean I might go blind?” I burst out.

“I mean, Dantan, you might die,” Kujowski said bluntly.

“Do we need to bring a Neurosurgeon?” Dad asked, his hands gripping the arm rests until his knuckles turn white.

“I consulted with Doctor Anton Soong, he is the top Neurosurgeon on the Eastern seaboard, but you’re welcome to speak to any others. He’s agreed to see Dantan tomorrow

on my recommendation, which is a tremendous favor, Senator. Most neurosurgeons are booked 6 to 8 months in advance.”

“And according to your findings, Danny needs to be seen that quickly?” Dad seemed to have trouble speaking, he swallowed often as if he had a dry mouth.

“In my opinion, yes,” Kujowski said. “There’s definitely something neurological in there that shouldn’t be. I’d like to arrange a biopsy, but that runs a significant risk in itself, although it would definitely determine what we are dealing with.”

“Go ahead,” Dad decided. “Make the appointment.”

“I’d like to keep, Danny, is it? Here for another few days, he’s had a few episodes of fading in and out he isn’t even aware of. We’ll hook him up to some EEG leads, so we can monitor his brain waves while he’s awake and asleep.

“I’ve put him on anti-anxiety meds and a mild tranquilizer to prevent a re-recurrence of Monday’s unfortunate mishap.”

Dad gave me one of those looks. “I thought I told you to behave, Dantan?”

“What did I do?” I spread my hands in dumb innocence, which usually worked to get me out of trouble. Trouble was, I really didn’t remember doing anything bad. “Lunch?” I asked, looking hopeful.

“I can order that. Any restrictions, Doctor?”

“As long as you don’t feel nauseous.”

“I’m starving. Can I have a meatball sub with mozzarella and Parmesan? Garlic bread and a salad? Oh, and honey barbecue wings. With ranch dressing. On the side. Pepsi.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Dad told me. He looked at me sternly. “Don’t move out of this bed.”

“What if I have to pee?”

“Wait.”

“Dad!”

“You heard me.”

“Yes, sir.” He got up and left the room with the Doctor. I looked around, snagged a basket of Ghirardelli chocolates and ate two bars, dark chocolate with almonds and sea salt. My favorite. The card was from Ms. Penny and read ‘Get Well Soon.’

The big basket of fruit was from Dad’s peers at the Senate. The Secret Service dudes had sent me a horde of Dove bars, word search, crossword and Sudoku books along with chewing gum and beef jerky. Felice had left me a bag of rice crispy treats and chocolate chip macadamia cookies which she’d baked herself, just the way I liked them – soft and gooey.

I put two of them in my mouth and savored the deliciousness of white chocolate, macadamia nuts, and cookie dough. Took another bite out of the third one, and felt the twinges of the headache coming on...

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Harry Turtledove was winding his body around the legs of men dressed in crime scene jumpsuits with blue windbreakers labeled FBI, HS and US marshals. It was a cluster fuck inside the house and the cat decided to leap onto the table where it was safe. He sat, watching as the agents bagged and searched. The noise they made was negligible, the cat and I heard every word, but it was me that translated.

They had apprehended the owner of the house, four blocks from the museum, with Presidential passes that allowed him inside the building, found the armor-lite sniper rifle in pieces with a full clip of armor piercing bullets. He was driving a gray vehicle with the stated MD plates and how the hell did the Senator come by such exact information when even the Secret Service hadn't a clue. He had even given the State Cops the perp's home address and warned them not to hurt the cat.

"Speaking of which," the Director of HS top agent said. "We're supposed to bring the cat to the Senator."

"Not animal control?"

"No. Senator De Rosier was explicit. The cat goes to him."

"You hear his son's in the hospital? Some kind of brain tumor. Poor kid. He's just fourteen. This will kill Mike, after losing Evangeline in that drunk driving accident."

"You saying the kid might die?"

It's weird to hear people talking about your death when they don't know you're listening. I knew that agent, his name was Mark Andrews and sometimes he was on Felice's detail.

"Does Canary-bird know?" The other HS dude asked, referring to Felice by her Secret Service nickname.

"She's been to the hospital, but I doubt they've told her. How long till the Grand Opening?"

"Twenty minutes. I wanted it canceled, but both the President and Senator said no. Said he owed it to Downtown."

"Danny, his Dad calls him Danny. Maybe, the cat's for him."

Harry Turtledove was scooped up in Mark's arms, and he called out, "anyone see a cat carry case in here?"

Shoved inside, my/our vision was limited as seen through the bars. Harry meowed plaintively, both of us hated the confines of the crate. Being dangled from the handle and bumped against his legs on the way out to his SUV made both of us sick. The HS dude followed him out. "You hear about the stock brouhaha? The SEC is all over that broker on insider trading. Seems the Senator made a killing on a minor thousand dollar trade."

“Illegal?”

“Can’t prove it. Besides, he’s already rich, and his reputation is one of the most stable on the Hill. Hell, he doesn’t even get parking tickets.

“You know, that’s the third weird coincidence surrounding the Senator,” Andrews mused.

I could see the other dude’s face, especially after Mark shoved the crate in the backseat of his Denali and belted it in. He slammed the door. I did hear the other dude make weird noises and then what sounded like–‘interesting’. We were left alone in the parked vehicle. He did leave the window open and it was cool enough out that the cat wouldn’t overheat. He meowed, curled up and went to sleep. Me too.

## Chapter 6

Faces gradually became clear. Leaning over me. I felt out of it, like my body didn’t belong to me anymore. I wanted to move, but I couldn’t. Tried to speak but my mouth was so dry my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and my lips were sewed together. My eyes burned as my eyes wandered over the funny shaped people. She adjusted my pillow, my sheets and pulled my arms on top of the covers. My head felt weird. Sticky. Itchy. I turned it slightly and saw thin leads coming up from my neck and down to a machine that recorded colored lines, and came out on graph paper.

A BP cuff inflated on my arm, but I couldn’t see the results. That Doctor and another one that looked Chinese-American were standing near my Dad and Ms. Penny, Felice and holy cow, President Rickover was there, too.

“Dantan,” he said formally. “I had to thank you in person. For saving my life,” he started.

“I’m still not voting for you,” I mumbled past the dryness.

Dad understood me and laughed. “Just take it easy, Danny. You just had surgery on your brain. You’re going to feel weird. Doctor Soong did a biopsy. You had a seizure two days ago and it was on the EEG, gave the Doctor something to work with.”

“Epileptic?” I managed.

“No, Danny,” the Chinese Doctor said in perfect English. “You’re not an epileptic.”

“Am I gonna die?” I heard Dad and Felice’s gasps.

“In about seventy years, Danny, I hope. The biopsy isn’t cancerous. Frankly, we don’t know what it is, but it’s not normal brain tissue. These seizures or episodes are indicative of something wrong in your brain, and trigger a circulatory shutdown. Do you remember when it started?”

“Don’t remember even doing it,” I mumbled. Looked at my father and Felice. “Daddy, I’m scared.” Felt my eyes brimming with tears and the two of them hugged me. I felt wetness on my neck and cheeks, never heard the rest of them, leaving as I burst into sobs on my Dad’s chest, unable even to hug him back. I was enfolded in their arms and was not comforted.



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I lay in bed in the room darkened to give my eyes some respite as bright lights triggered those massive headaches with nausea. The slightest movement would make me hurl. My appetite was gone, I no longer wanted to eat anything.

Felice stayed with me as well as my Dad. The orderlies had brought in a spare bed where he could sack out and I could see him when I woke up.

They had me on drugs. It made me sleep most of the time, had me hooked up to IVs and I'd overheard them telling Dad, if I didn't start eating, they'd be forced to put me on IV food or a gastric tube down my nose.

"Dad?"

"I'm here, Danny," his voice came instantly.

"How long is this going on, Dad?"

"Till you're better, Danny."

"Not gonna get better, Dad." I paused, struck by a certainty. "Dad, go talk to Uncle Town."

"Why, Danny? He's got dementia. He can't tell us anything."

"Dad, please. Tell him. Ask him for help. He knows." I felt myself fading away again. "Dad, he's like me."

Wasn't sure if he heard me. Felt Felice tug on my arm and say something. Couldn't hear her either. Saw an electrical sheet in front of my eyes, as if fireworks and welders torches were playing a musical score. Felt a warmth on my tongue, a brassiness give way to velvet darkness.

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*Danny? Dantan Townsley? Time to wake up, boy.* I knew those names, that voice. Forced my eyes open, struggled at the horrible fullness in my throat that made me want to gag. Looked around as tears pooled involuntarily down my eyes.

"Danny, relax. There is a breathing tube down your throat, helping your lungs. I can feel you struggling to breathe on your own. Your O2 levels are up so we can remove the breather. Cough and on three we will pull it out."

I coughed violently, wanting it out NOW. He removed it smoothly and the gagging sensation left but my throat was really sore. I couldn't speak, just flailed my arms at them in anger. Someone grabbed them and held me down. "Relax, Danny or I'll sedate you," Doctor Kujowski said sternly.

Dad's terrified face. Doctor Soong. Two nurses, two orderlies. No Ms. Penny, no Felice. Uncle Townsley. He shuffled forward, dressed neat and clean with a visitor's badge on his lapel. In a suit.

"Uncle Town? You going to a funeral?" I asked. The last time he'd worn that suit was at Mom's funeral.

“No, Danny boy,” he smiled, his odd eyes the same as mine and Mom’s. “You asked for me. Do you remember that?”

Dad stared at my uncle. Sure didn’t seem like he had dementia.. His eyes were bright and focused.

“I remember Dad telling me about a cat. Felice and her Dad visiting me. Being in the hospital.” It hurt to talk and Dad gave me some ice chips, which helped.

“You’ve got to learn to back off, Dantan. To keep part of yourself out or it’ll kill you.”

“How, Uncle Town?” I asked and it was like we were the only two people in the room. Abruptly, I was inside his head, not on my own but he’d carried me in there.

A small cozy room with a red velvet chair that Uncle Town gestured me to sit in. I sat. “You’re like me, Danny boy. A little something extra that goes with our eyes. I call it Psi. Your Mom had it also, but it went away after you were born or she would’ve known about the minivan.”

“Uncle Townsley, why are you in this nursing home if you’re not...”

“Crazy? I am crazy, Danny boy. I learned too late how to filter what happened in my brain. Sometimes, I can push it back for a few hours, enough to warn about what I see. I can feel it creeping up on me now. See?”

He pointed at a pulsating darkness that was encircling us, with gibbering monsters slowly taking shape and morphing into even worse ones. “Try to make a room in your head, Danny. A place only you have the key. Tight, impregnable like the vaults in Fort Knox. Keep your mind in there when you feel yourself losing your reality.”

“I don’t lose reality, Uncle Town. I see and hear everything the cat or dog does,” I protested.

He smiled. “I wondered how yours would progress. I see events before they happen. You can read animal minds?”

“Not read them, I’m in there, but I’m still me. I... use their senses. It’s after I get out that I’m... sick.”

He wandered around the chair, ignoring the approaching willies, searching my eyes. It felt like fingers poking in my head.

“Don’t bring all of your mind with you when you go in,” he told me. “You have to learn how to step back a bit.”

“How?” He grimaced and hands reached out to grab him and disappear into the swirling maelstrom of what I knew was his particular madness. I jumped up, lunged for his arm, and we engaged in a tug-of-war that resolved by a sudden snap of both arms where my uncle popped free to bounce on the armchair on top of me.

I screamed as a wave of intense light burst out of my eyes, mouth and nose to swallow the writhing darkness.

“What did I do?” I asked shakily as white light bathed us both, opening up the room around us into a real room under bright fluorescence.

“You fixed me,” he said in amazement and he slowly faded as I opened my eyes in my hospital room.

## Chapter 7

The same crew, minus Felice and someone I’d seen before but couldn’t remember where until he brought out a cat crate giving it to Dad. Uncle Town was seated on my right side next to my father and his eyes were bright and with it.

“Danny,” he grinned. No one looked alarmed as if I’d gone away for hours.

“I brought Uncle Townsley,” Dad was saying. “Now what?”

I yawned. Tried to sit up. Felt better, even if my throat was killing me. Put my hands on my head, and felt bandages. “Hey,” I complained suddenly scared. “You didn’t shave my head, please tell me you didn’t.”

“Sorry,” the doc said. “We did so we could do a craniotomy. It’ll grow back fast.”

“Ugh. I’m bald. Felice will rib me endlessly.” I sighed. “Will you dudes lighten up? Y’all look like you’re going to a funeral.”

Dad choked and Uncle Town gripped his shoulder. “Mike, he’ll be okay,” he promised. “Just give him some time.”

The Chinese Doctor shone a penlight in my eyes and seemed pleased. He checked my reflexes, had me touch my nose with my index finger, push against his hands and asked me a bunch of silly questions which I answered without hesitation or error.

“No cognitive deterioration,” Soong said. “We’ll take the drain out a few days. For now, rest. Are you hungry, Danny? You can eat in a few hours if you feel up to it.”

“I’m thirsty, too.” Dad gave me water through a straw, and I sucked the Styrofoam cup dry. “Can I get up?” All of them looked at the doctors.

“You think you can, Dantan?” I tried, but whatever drugs were in me still had hold of my limbs. I felt like spaghetti left too long in boiling water. “Try again later this evening. We have you on some stiff tranquilizers. You weren’t the most cooperative kid, you know,” Doctor K. grinned. “You’ve a pretty good right hook.”

“Oh no,” I groaned. “I hit someone?”

“Don’t worry, he won’t press charges. He’s a Democrat,” he said and I laughed. Everybody left, except for Dad and Uncle Town.

“Dad, Felice’s Dad?”

“He’s fine. We apprehended the guy before he got to the museum. The President did the opening ceremonies for me so I could come back here.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Four days, Danny. You’ve baffled them.” He turned to Mom’s uncle. “Townasley, what’s going on with my son? Do you understand, Townasley?”

“More than you know, Michael,” Uncle Town returned. “Danny has a gift. Like I did, like Evangeline did. An extra something in our heads that lets us know things, hear and see things. In Danny, it lets him ride inside the senses of animals, see what they see, hear what they hear, but interpreted as Danny’s mind does.”

“Can he read my mind?” Dad asked in a whisper.

“No,” we both said. “It doesn’t work that way for me, Dad. The only head I’d ever been in was Uncle Town, and he brought me inside there.”

Dad stared at my uncle. “You read minds?”

Uncle Townasley nodded. “What do you think drove me nuts?”

“You don’t sound crazy now,” Dad pointed out and laughed. “As if mind reading isn’t crazy.”

“Danny fixed me, somehow. For the first time in years, I can think.”

“Can you read my mind now?”

Uncle Townasley, hesitated, and shook his head. “Danny fixed me, but in doing so, he took away that part of my brain that had the ability.”

“Are you saying Danny will go the way you did, Townasley?”

He nodded slowly. “Unless Danny learns to filter and control it, he’ll wind up like me or worse. His ability has come on much earlier than mine.”

“And Evangeline?”

“Having Danny burned hers out early.”

“Evangeline was psychic?” Dad was skeptical.

“Not psychic, she could make you feel better by touching you. An empath. She felt your emotions and could enhance or change them.”

Dad said slowly, “she always knew how I felt, and when I was down, she always made me feel better.”

“I wish I’d been okay before she was hit, Michael,” Uncle Town said regretfully. “I tried to warn her, but no one believed me and I couldn’t stay together long enough to make anyone listen.”

“I know you tried, Townasley,” he was patient. “What are we going to do about Danny? Can you teach him how to control this thing?”

“I can try, Michael. I didn’t have much luck myself.”

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Mitchell Gaines requested a meeting with the Director and after waiting the requisite ten minutes, he was ushered into Oliver Sustain's office to find the Director of Homeland Security busy reading memos and agent reports.

"Have a seat, Mitch," he said, pushing over a cup of coffee black with sugar.

"I found something," the agent reported, and Sustain looked up in surprise.

"Really? Already?"

"It's not like this person was trying to hide anything. And I'm not sure exactly who, either. I've just found a common thread in over half the instances."

Sustain gave his agent his undivided attention.

"Dantan De Rosier."

Sustain laughed. "Senator De Rosier's kid?"

Mitchell ticked off on his fingers, "one – the stock tip that led to a windfall was given to De Rosier's broker on the kid's say so. Two, the tip about the nut job who tried to assassinate the President came from the Senator, three," he went on, listing a dozen cases where either the boy or the Senator was somewhere in the picture.

"What are you saying? This fourteen-year-old kid is a spy? Or Mike is?"

"De Rosier made half a million on a 1K transaction."

"Senator De Rosier is worth millions," Sustain scoffed.

"And his boy's just been diagnosed with a brain tumor or something. Maybe he needs millions for surgery," Mitchell argued.

"We have the best insurance money can buy," Sustain shrugged. "And there's no alternative medicine out there for cases of brain cancer. You want to dig into it a bit more?"

"Yes, Sir. I want to use the NSA to poke into the Senator's background. The Senator brought his wife's Great Uncle to see the kid."

"Townesley Hutton? He's in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's."

"I met him when I delivered the cat to the Senator. He seemed pretty with it to me."

"Whatever you need, Mitch. But why would either the boy or the Senator relay the President's words about the UN Secretary?"

Mitchell replied, "He told someone at school and it got back to a reporter by a schoolmate. The details are so accurate, she printed it. The kid swore it was Dantan who told him."

"You talk to him, Dantan?"

"He's pretty out of it, Director. The doctors did a biopsy on his brain, he's been having bouts of withdrawal like seizures, but not the same electrical storm as a seizure. Couple of times, he stopped breathing. They're pretty scared."

"He might die?"

“The doctors are almost certain he will. They haven’t told the boy or the Senator yet because they aren’t sure what’s wrong with him, and because of Evangeline De Rosier’s death. Too close and too soon.”

“Is Senator De Rosier, asking for leave of absence from his seat?”

“I haven’t heard anything,” he admitted.

“Anyone else interested in Senator De Rosier’s tip?”

Mitchell hesitated. “State police, FBI, NSA, and Secret Service were all over the crime scene. That agent – Jake James, he’s pretty sharp. He is asking questions about the Senator’s tip.”

“I’m curious about how Mike knew the man’s license plate numbers and address. Why don’t we set a little trap for the Senator and one for Dantan? Got any ideas?”

Mitchell grinned. “A few.”

“Let me know what happens.”

“At least surveillance on the kid will be easy. He’s stuck in a private room in a PEDS unit at Walter Reed.”

“Not Crowley?”

“He was transferred for the brain biopsy. Walter Reed has Soong. Doctor Kujowski called in some favors and had them bump the kid in.”

He stood up, shook his boss’s hand. “I sent a Get Well package to the kid from you and the Department, boss.”

“Tasteful, I hope.”

“Kid likes puzzles, books and chocolate. I charged it to you.”

“Thanks. I’ll stop and give my best wishes to Mike,” Sustain returned.

“PEDS floor, room 2205. President’s been there every day with his daughter. She’s the kid’s girlfriend.”

“He’s in and out of the White House?” Sustain looked sharply at his agent.

“A few times. Hasn’t been back since his Dad was there for the Inauguration.”

“So he couldn’t have overheard Jason speaking.”

“Nope. I’m heading to my office to call the NSA for some deep research.”

“Call me when you hear anything.”

Mitchell nodded and shut the door quietly behind himself before heading for the elevators on the fourth floor where the day agents had their carrels. Deep cover employees came into the basements where they weren’t seen or recognized.

## Chapter 8

I was screaming and that woke me up. Woke up everyone on the entire floor. I felt better, more alert. Dad wasn't there to greet me or Uncle Townsley, just the nurses and they weren't happy I was making so much noise.

"Mister De Rosier, please quiet down," warned the hatchet-faced blonde. I took an instant dislike to her. The other one was a pretty Hispanic lady with curly black hair and doe soft brown eyes.

"Whas the matter, honey?" She asked as I swallowed spit.

"Nightmares. Where's my Dad?" The lights were dimmed still, and the shades drawn. I could see bright lights in the hallway and hear the sound of monitors going off.

"What kind of nightmares?" She asked.

"Could you please open the blinds?"

Hatchet-face whipped them back and I saw soft night skies with stars and clouds drifting, a huge moon that coated the towers in silver. Helicopters buzzed across from Quantico and I could almost hear the sound of Washington's incessant traffic.

"Now what can a brave boy like you be afraid of, Chico?" She said softly, taking my wrist in her slender fingers. They were warm, and a pretty olive color like hot cocoa.

"I'm afraid of dying," I said in a low voice. "Dying with my mind in tatters, drooling in diapers and not knowing my name or my Dad's face, in the dark where I can't see."

The hatchet blonde touched my shoulder and I saw her blue eyes soften. "Hey, kiddo, you want to eat something? I can get you some dinner and help you with it."

"What's on the menu? I'm hungry." I was, too. First time in days. "Where's my Dad?"

"Senator De Rosier took your uncle back to the nursing home. He said to tell you when you woke, he was going there, home to shower, shave and rest. He'll be back in a few hours," she told me. "What would you like to eat?"

I put my hands to my head and found it covered with one of those caps surgeons wore and felt hair under the brim and over my ears. They hadn't shaved me completely, more like a monk's goofy haircut. She misinterpreted it. "The drain came out yesterday."

"I don't remember," I said in dismay. "I don't remember much of this last week. I remember the Space Museum and Dad being here. Uncle Townsley came. Did someone bring me a cat?"

She patted my hand which was black and blue with needle marks. I had an IV in one near my wrist. It burned.

"You can have roast beef, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, meat loaf, stewed tomatoes, salad, macaroni and cheese, chicken divan, butternut squash. Apple pie, strawberry shortcake, angel food cake, pudding, Jell-O, flan. Coffee, tea, milk, V-8, tomato or apple juice. Pepsi, ginger ale, root beer or orange."

I picked roast beef, taters, corn, mac & cheese, angel food cake with whipped cream, Pepsi and ice pops for my throat. She promised to bring the pops right away and the meal in 30 to 40 minutes. I begged to get up and both of them helped me sit upright, holding me until my head stopped whirling around. The lines on me were a pain, and kept getting in the way. I especially hated the one between my legs. "What's this one for?"

"Don't pull on that," Rosalita warned. "That's so you can pee-pee."

I turned red, and lifted the gown to see a bag tied to the bed and filled with pee. "No wonder I never had to go. Can you take it out?"

"Not till the doctor says so," she shook her head. I dropped the gown and stood up. The blonde steered me over to the chair as I concentrated on keeping my butt covered and my feet moving. Reaching the chair was a milestone and Rosalita threw a pillow and a rubber pad down before my ass hit. The blonde's name was Emerald, Emerald Caron and Rosalita Menendez. She brought me a warm blanket and threw it on my legs, a pillow behind my back, water cup pitcher full, my tissues and a basket from Dad stuffed with Dove Bars, Lindor Truffles and Ghirardelli's chocolates. I offered some to the two nurses and the blonde took Dove dark while Rosalita sucked down Lindor white truffles. I ate one of each. I believe my eyes crossed as the chocolate melted in my mouth.

"Is my backpack anywhere close?" I asked and Rosalita went through my closet to pull it out.

"Madre mia, it weighs a ton! What you got in here, bricks?"

"Schoolbooks. My homework. I thought I'd catch up."

"Oh, honey," she said. "School work is on hold for you for a while. Doctor Soong doesn't want you to stress your eyes."

"Not read? I'll go nuts," I protested and hugged my NOOK. No way was I going to give that up.

"He said no more than thirty minutes reading. You can watch TV for an hour. Your eyes are undergoing some changes, Danny because of your brain. Straining them only make it worse."

"Worse?" I cried. "What's worse than maybe losing my sight and my mind? I'd rather be dead!"

"Danny, you are a tough kid with lots of friends and support. You have the best neurosurgeon in America on your case. As long as you fight, you hang in there. Don't give up, life is too precious to just hang up the towel."

I felt ashamed of myself, swallowed and ate another chocolate. I poked my NOOK, turned it on and scrolled through my library, found Laura Hildebrandt's novel of Unbroken. Turned to page 88 where I'd left off. If he could go through what he'd suffered, my problems seemed puny in comparison.

Dinner came. I managed to clean my plate, which made the nurses happy. The two new ones came and picked out some chocolate and fruit, offered to give me a sponge bath,



which I politely declined. They changed my sheets, and left me a clean gown threatening me not to get up on my own and told me to call when I was ready for bed.

I turned the TV on and scrolled through the channels, HBO, Cinemax and Showtime were on along with the movie channels. I knew Dad had paid for them, so I wouldn't be bored out of my mind. Maybe I even had a phone.

I looked. On the bedside stand was a land line. I wondered if my cell phone was still in my book bag and charged up.

Dad said I wasn't ready for an iPhone; he'd given me a Droid. I texted Felice, the line in my left hand pinching as I smashed the buttons. She texted back in minutes.

Miracle boy! How R U feeling?

Im still here , eating dinner.

Watching TV. Reading.

Miss you. Head feels weird.

I'm nearly bald! Shaved my head.

Don't know when I'll B home.

Saw my uncle T got a cat.

Downtown.

Cat? I thought you were allergic 2 pets?

Lisi.

Some agent brought it from a crime scene.

It's a fugitive cat.

Name Harry Turtledove.

Downtown.

Cool name, dude.

U think that up?

No it's his name.

When U coming 2 C me?

I missU.

Not now. 10 PM Downtown.

I heard UR school is sending

U a big card.

whole place signed it.

Wish U were here. I'm scared.

Oh, baby. Wish I could make it all go away.

ILU. What can I bringU?

Will come by tomorrow.

UR Dad offered to PMU.

I yawned.

WhereU at?

Home with MND. Dusty here2.

Give him a pat 4 me.

I closed my eyes and looked up at Felice from Dusty's golden eyes. She was laying at the foot of her bed in the White House family quarters, texting on her pink iPhone. She had her legs in the air, crossed at the ankles and wore fuzzy pink, blue and white lounge pants with a T-shirt top over a purple sports bra. She was biting her bottom lip, a habit she had when she was nervous.

"Are you tired, Danny?" She asked as she typed. "Danny? Oh, Danny boy, please don't have cancer." She murmured, texting again furiously. I couldn't see from Dusty's viewpoint, but I heard her Dad yell for the dog.

"Dusty! Time for our walk! Dusty, come!"

The Golden chuffed and stood up, poking her nose in Felice's face, and gave her a warm lick. She tasted like cinnamon and soap.

*Dusty, stay*, I thought in her mind and she hesitated, torn between her master and my control. I kissed Felice and she rubbed our head, pushing us towards the door.

"Go on, Dusty. Dad wants to take you potty before bed."

I stepped back and let the dog take over and found myself a passenger at the end of a leash as I padded through the White House corridors to the South lawn where President Rickover, Dusty and I spent fifteen minutes looking for the right spot.

He at least, cleaned up her doggie do in a plastic bag and deposited it in a trash bin off the kitchen. The odor lingered and I felt sorry for the poor chef who'd greet the garbage in the morning.

Once inside an animal, I always knew the 'I' of my own self, never merged completely with the mind of my host, but there were definite degrees of encroachment. I learned how to back off enough to see and hear what was going on without being too close to it.

President Rickover went to the study with Dusty. She sneaked up on the couch, and he didn't chase her off, but sat next to her, petting her noble golden head.

"Hey, Dusty," he murmured. "Felice's birthday is coming up. What can I get a fourteen-year-old girl that would impress her? Ski trip to Aspen? Jewelry? Clothes, car? She's still too young for a car and a trip to Disneyland is too kiddie for her. Summer camp, maybe Space Camp?"

Wow. Space Camp would be cool. Dusty fell asleep and with that, I was back in my own head.

## Chapter 9

Eleven forty. I was really tired. No one had put me back to bed. I pushed the call button and one of the nurses came in my room. I saw an agent behind her and recognized Matt Damon, Jake James.

"Hey, Jake."

"Danny! You're awake and up," he smiled and seemed happy to see me.

"Thanks for the candy and stuff, Damon."

"Sure thing, Danny. What did you need?"

"Back to bed. I'm whopped." I slid my cell phone into the backpack with my NOOK so that was all he saw. He helped the nurse walk me to the bed and lowered it so I could slide my ass in. I managed to swing my legs over and she pulled up the sheet and blanket.

"Anything else, Danny?" He questioned.

"Where's Dad?"

"Went home. He had an emergency session in Congress he had to sit through. He said to tell you, he'll be here tomorrow. Ms. Penny will stay with you if you need her."

"No, that's okay. Tell Dad, it's Felice's birthday soon and ask him to get her something for me. She likes Terry Hicks and Morgan Feist books. Aran sweaters and lime green shoes, size 7B. Find out how much Space Camp would cost."

"That's out of your budget, kiddo," he laughed. "Cool idea though. I'll pass it on." The nurse handed me a cup of pills and some water.

“What’s this?” I asked, poking around in the cup.

“Steroids, a sleeping pill and Elavil,” she answered. “Antibiotics and a pain med.”

“Pain med? What for? I’m not hurting,” I protested.

“You will be. Those doctors drilled your skull open two days ago. Believe me when those wear off, you’ll feel it.”

I swallowed them and grumbled, “how come I was asleep and you woke me up to take the sleeping pill?”

“Hey,” she shrugged. “I just follow the doctor’s orders. Good night.”

“Want me to stay with you until you fall asleep, Danny?” Jake asked. “I can do my shift in here as well as outside the door.”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

“Danny, who told your Dad about the guy with the rifle, the guy with a cat?”

“I did.”

“You did, Danny?”

“Saw it,” my eyelids felt as heavy as the weight bar in the gym. I felt as if I was wading through mud.

“How, Danny?”

I mumbled something, but I’m not sure if it made any sense.

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I woke up early in the morning with a stuffed head, and a sense of being one step behind everyone. Assumed it was the pills and resolved to ask Dad to get the doctor to D/C them. I didn’t like the feeling, it made it too hard to think. Nurses came and left. So did the doctors on rounds and they talked over my head like I wasn’t there. Discussed removing the catheter, IV lines and redoing another set of CAT scans, MRIs and EEGs. They wanted to bring in another neurologist from Cambridge.

Some guy from dietary came up and asked me what I wanted for breakfast. I could barely read the choices so I picked out an omelet, white toast, bacon, short stack, OJ and chocolate milk. I was just able to hold the utensils when it came, and halfheartedly shoveled it in. I ate about half and started complaining.

I wanted a shower, to brush my teeth, to get up and go to the bathroom on my own. I wanted my own clothes on.

I yelled. “God dammit! Take this out of my prick or I will!”

In walked Dad, Felice and Ms. Penny. I shut up quick, ashamed of my behavior. Although, I still wanted to throw my plate at the wall.

“What’s wrong, Danny?” Felice asked, coming in to give me a hug.

Whining, I said, “I want to go home.”

“Doctor soon said maybe in two days,” Dad said cheerfully.

“Really?” I looked at all three of them and saw only happy faces. “Can I have a shower?”

“We’ll ask your nurse. I don’t think you’re supposed to get your head wet,” he returned. “You eat?” He handed me a paper Dunkin Donuts bag and inside was a super-sized hot cocoa and three Boston cream doughnuts. I ate all three, licking my fingers. Felice sat on my bed next to me and held my hand.

“Sorry. I ate them all,” I apologized handing over the hot cocoa. She pushed it back.

“Your Dad bought me a cup and four doughnuts.”

“Help me out of bed to the chair, please,” I asked and both of them shuffled me over to the recliner. Dad took the other chair and Felice set on the bed, picking at the remains of breakfast.

“I spoke to Doctor Soong and Doctor Kujowski, Danny. They said you can come home after the second tests. If they show any improvement after the steroids you’ve been on to shrink the... lesion. The last EEG looked good. Did talking to Uncle Townsley help?”

“I think so, Dad. I feel better. Except for these drugs they’re pumping into me. They make me feel foggy and out of it. Can you asked them to stop?”

“It helps to keep your mood stable, you flew off the handle, Danny. Hit people. That’s not like you.”

“I was scared, Dad. I want to go home, be in my own house, in my own bed.” I sounded remarkably like a whiny brat. But I didn’t care.

“We’ll see. I want you well, and looked after, Danny. When you come home, you’ll have a live in RN there to see you’re getting well.”

“I don’t need a babysitter!” I spat. “Felice is old enough to go to Space Camp by herself, why can’t I go home alone?”

“Space Camp?” Felice asked. “I’m going to Space Camp?”

“Oops,” I said weakly. “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“Dad? For my birthday? Cool!” She paused. “How did you find out?”

I mumbled something about her Dad asking me what she wanted for her birthday.

Dad excused himself and went in search of the doctors, Ms. Penny brought me the cards from my junior high and unfolded the thing until it was the size of a flag. She taped it to the wall and I could read every signature from every classmate and teacher in the place, including a few dog and cat prints.

“I’ll leave you two alone. I’m sure you have things to say you won’t with us here,” she offered and shut the door after herself.

“Really, Downtown? How did you know I’d love to do Space Camp? I hear they keep an eye on those kids for future astronauts. I’d love to become one like your Dad. Super

cool! Dad was okay with that? You know how he hates me being out in public, what with security and all.”

“He was going to get you a trip to Aspen. Or jewelry. Nix on the car, we’re both too young for wheels, although that would be way cool, too. What would you ask for – Mini Coupe with racing stripes? Beamer or Audi 6?”

“Hah. With my luck, I’ll get a big honking SUV built like a tank and complete with armed agents. Can you imagine Daddy when his little girl’s driving?”

“Dad’s the same way,” I reminded her. “Because of Mom.”

“I know, Danny. I’m sorry that happened. A bunch of us promised our parents to never drink and drive in honor of your Mom. When did you talk to Dad? You never come over to my house.”

“Your house is the White House, Felice,” I said. “Like I’m going to steal a kiss under the nose of all those Secret Service drones. It’s bad enough with my Dad and Ms. Penny around.”

“I thought you liked the challenge,” she grinned. “When did you talk to Dad?”

“I heard him mention it to Dusty,” I said, and that stumped her like it always did.

“Like she tells you things,” she scoffed and punched me. “You getting up today?”

“Yeah. Can you help?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Dad bring me any clothes?” I asked and she went to the closet, found my jeans and polo shirt, flannel pajamas, clean brand-new underwear and socks still in the packages. My boots.

“Pretty fancy climbing shoes,” she admired. “Top-of-the-line. Are these hand-sewn?”

“Yep. Got them off the Internet.”

“You know you can’t get dressed, right, Downtown? You got a catheter up your wee wee.” She was grinning.

Disgruntled, I said, “I thought I’d just tuck everything to the right and let it hang out.”

“You’re attached to the bed. You gonna let that hang out and drag it around on the floor?”

“How’s it come out?” I gave an experimental tug and yelped. That hurt. “What? Is it sewn in or something?” Oh gross.

“I think it’s got a balloon on one end or something, to hold it in. You need the nurse to take it out. Look, here’s a clean gown. I can help you into that.”

“You just want to see me naked,” I complained.

“Oh sure, Dantan, it’s been my dream since I turned twelve, and developed boobs,” she mocked.

“Felice, would you do it with me if I was going to die and never got the chance?”

She grabbed my ears and stared into my eyes. “Dantan Townsley De Rosier, you are not going to die and when we’re both ready, it’ll be worth the wait.” She kissed me in promise. I copped a feel. She punched me and I fell backwards onto the bed, grinning like a fool. Dad walked in. Wisely, he didn’t say a word.

## Chapter 10

Another round of tests. I gripped the sides of the gurney and concentrated on keeping my emotions in check. Mostly, anxiety and a little bit of fear. I made it to all the rounds and by the time I was back in my room, I was ready for a nap and lunch. Dad had stayed with me through the whole six hours of tests. He left me when the newest nurse finally took out the catheter with a minimum of fuss and embarrassment. Dad offered to help me take a shower. By then, my hair was really gross and I wanted one bad.

He held onto me until I was certain I could stand and scrubbed my ring of hair gently, careful not to touch the stitches where the doc had bored my skull open.

I wanted to dress in clothes, but was afraid that I would jinx my chances to go home. So Dad put my PJs on me and grinned.

“Makes you look like you’re twelve, Danny. I remember when you wore only flannel PJs.” I still wore flannel PJs, but wasn’t telling him that.

“Now what?”

“We’re waiting on the test results, Danny. Once we hear how your scans look, we go on from there.”

Felice wasn’t there, Dad said she was in school, she had taken the week off to be with me, and now had to make up her classes. Towards noon, after lunch, both doctors came in and talked to Dad. They seemed optimistic; cautiously upbeat and explained what they found to me as well. My brain and the thing in it had shrunk back to the size of a pea and had a complex growth of spider-like veins coming out of it. Surgery couldn’t remove the pea without causing grave consequences to my motor skills, cognition and sight, so our options were to blast with radiation in the hopes of killing it, drugs to shrink it or leave it alone and see how it reacted. I had a sudden, stomach wrenching reaction to the first two. “Dad, leave it alone.”

The doctors thought I had given up in despair and was refusing treatment. I was refusing treatment because I knew doing anything was more dangerous than not. “Well, we won’t force you to make a choice now, Senator, Danny. You can go home tomorrow.”

“Best news I have heard today,” I said.

“You can go out of your room, too, if you want. The nurse will take your IV out. We prefer if you rest some but I realize you’re a fourteen-year-old boy stuck in a room with nothing to do so you must be going crazy.”

“Just about. What about the pills? Can I stop them?”

Doctor K shook his head. "I'm keeping you on the steroids, Danny and I prefer you to stay on the Elavil so you don't spike any blood pressures in your head."

"It makes me feel dopey," I protested.

"You'll get used to it a few weeks, your body will adapt and level off. The nurse will be in to help with the paperwork."

I bounced around the room happy I was going home. Dad grabbed me by my collar, laughing as he settled me down. Both doctors said they'd see us later and left us to my elation. Dad called Ms. Penny and had her make arrangements for my return home. He even called and left a message for Felice. "Where is your cell phone?" He asked as he flipped his sat phone shut.

"Book-bag." I threw off my PJs and was in my jeans, shirt and vest in seconds. Dad handed me my socks and boots, raising an eyebrow at the shoes.

"No sneakers?"

"Dad, I never wear sneakers, they're... juvenile. Besides, they hurt my feet."

"Like your Mom," he said softly. "Her shoe allowance was the size of the National Debt."

I giggled and he looked sad. "You sounded just like Vange," he murmured, and I leaned into him, giving and taking comfort from him.

"Dad, I love you."

He nuzzled my head in his arms, and hugged me ferociously. "Love you too, Danny boy. I'm glad you not too tough and grown-up to say so."

"Never, Dad," I vowed.

He cleared his throat and let go patting me on the back, gesturing to the wheelchair in the corner. "You want to ride down to the cafeteria, gift shop, or just wander around and get out of this room?"

"Sure. I think I can walk, no problem."

Dad called the nurse so they could take out my IVs and after that was done, Dad and I headed out for the elevators and the cafeteria. I didn't look at the other kids; I kept my eyes down and concentrated on my feet. We shared the elevator with Jake, Dad's Secret Service bodyguard. He was smiling and wished me welcome back.

The other people in the elevator were quiet as they recognized my Dad. He was invariably polite to his constituents, and never failed to say hello or listen to their complaints. He really tried to do what they wanted and what was best for the state.

Jake subtly steered them away from close contact with us and shepherded us out when the doors opened to the atrium. Cool. They had a fountain inside and lots of plants so it looked more like a jungle. Big skylights let in sunshine so we were either on the ground floor of one wing or in the Annex.



I saw a used book cart and made a beeline for it, squatting to read the titles. I found a John Connolly I hadn't read and a new Dean Koontz. I loved his Odd Thomas series and Christopher Snow.

Dad said mildly, "don't you have them on your NOOK?"

"No. This Koontz is new, it's nine ninety-nine in the store, and this one's only fifty cents."

I held my hand out and he dug through his pockets for change. Gave me a dollar in quarters so I got both, and stuck the change in the wooden box. "Thanks, Dad."

Looking around, I spotted the cafeteria and hurried over to it when I felt myself receding from the room. My steps faltered, both Dad and Jake grabbed my arm and steered me towards the couch....

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Saw a mirror in a big bedroom with blue carpeting, four poster bed made up with a white cover of hand knitted spread, big balls like popcorn and cables like on Felice's sweaters. White lacy curtains tied back with gold tasseled ropes. The walls were painted green below with green stripes above. One whole wall was a green check separated by double doors painted white like the woodwork.

A big yellow lab was staring into the mirror as his owner adjusted his tie. Purple with purple stripes.

"I have to go to Vermont, later today, Jazz," the man said. "To check on some old issues regarding the death of Evangeline De Rosier."

"Really? What brought that up?" A woman's voice asked from behind what the dog knew was the bathroom door. Steam escaped from the cracked opening.

"I reread the reports, it seems it might not have been a random drunk driving accident."

"She was murdered? Who would want to kill Evangeline? She was such a caring woman, she made you feel so good," the voice sounded shocked.

"You know the cops always check out the husband first. Well, they are re-investigating the Senator's whereabouts that evening. Seems like a witness saw him in town when he swore he was in Vermont."

"I don't believe it," the woman said and came out with the dog and I could see. She was a brunette and naked. I dropped my eyes and the dog did, too. Looked back up in fascinated awe at the full boobs, nipples as thick as my finger, dark curls between her legs misted with steam. I felt the dog affected by my own lust, and was grossed out.

She had dark hair and blue eyes, her face was pretty and flushed from the steam. She leaned up into the man kissing him, hungrily as he held her away from his clothes.

"Oh baby," he groaned. "I wish I could stay, but I have a seven thirty flight and I'll miss it if I don't leave in ten minutes."

She grabbed his crotch and even as I turned away, I wanted to watch, but being a peeping Tom was so not cool, even if no one would ever know. Especially if I saw the dude for real. I didn't recognize either of them.

He patted her on the butt cheek and squeezed, stroked the lab on the way out of the bedroom. The dog stayed in the room with the lady and she looked at us, sighed and said, "I'll take you for a jog later, Sassy. We both need a diversion." We woofed, trotted out of the room to get a leash and watched through the front window as the man got into a black Denali, backed down a short driveway into a circular cul-de-sac and out of our view.

"Danny? Danny, are you here?" Dad's voice broke into my awareness. I blinked and grabbed him, his worried face lightened up. Jake was kneeling in front of me.

"How long, Dad?" I asked.

"Not long. Less than five minutes. Your eyes were blank and you seemed to have trouble walking. Danny, about going home..."

"Dad, don't," I pleaded. "It's not my head doing this. I can control it. Please don't tell the doctors. I want to go home. They'll make me stay. If they do anything to that spot in my head, it'll kill me. I know it, or worse, I'll wind up like Uncle Townsley." I started crying in my distress, and that made it worse. Plus, I felt like a big baby, but I couldn't stop.

"Danny, calm down, okay? Just relax. No one's going to force you to do anything. I just want what's best for you, for you to get over this." He turned his head to Jake and murmured something I couldn't hear, but the agent nodded and hurried off.

"Where is he going, Dad?" I stood up. "You sent him to get the doctor, didn't you? I'm not staying here, Dad. I'm not!"

I bolted for the door and Dad shouted at me, for Jake and for someone to stop me. I dodged several people leaping over couches and muscled my way through the lines near the cafeteria, never slowing up. I could see the EXIT sign and pushed the doors open so hard, they flung around and smashed the ones next to them. Glass shattered and exploded inside.

The sidewalks were busy with people coming in, two ambulances and firemen were offloading. They turned around as Dad screamed at me to stop. A line of people were following him. Pausing for one stride, I looked up, down the street and ran across into the big department store across four lanes of traffic to disappear into the Mall of the Americas.

## Chapter 11

I didn't spend much time wandering the mall, I knew Dad would have the cops, mall security and Jake searching for me. In truth, I hadn't figured out what to do after I ran. The second I reached home, I'd be hauled off back to the hospital by the ear and grounded for life. I found the bathrooms and sneaked into the mechanical room, from there into the service hallways where deliveries were made out into the back alleys of the Mall. Made sure no CCTVs were watching, saw two and tried to calculate the angles where I was not in view.

Swore when I'd wished again I'd brought my cell phone so I could call Felice. Bitched when I realized I'd lost my two new books and bet Dad hadn't snagged them when I ran.

I took my chances with the cameras hoping no one was watching the back live and walked casually through the darkened bays toward a high cyclone fence. Climbing over posed no problem, I dropped down onto city streets and within four blocks knew where I was. Trouble was, this part of the city didn't have a subway, nor did I have bus tokens, subway fare or cash. I had no cell phone, and the only one I could call was Felice, and although she probably wouldn't rat me out to Dad, I couldn't exactly hide in the White House.

Same for Ms. Penny or any of the agents I knew. Had some close friends from school, but couldn't call them without a phone. I kept walking, standing still in this neighborhood wasn't a good idea. There were a few people on the streets, a lot of car traffic, but not the kind you'd want to ask for directions or a ride. Lots of bodegas and small shops, all with steel bars on the doors and windows. Two and three-story buildings with apartments over the first floor. I was on Eighth Street, turned left on Beaker and saw a Verizon shop that was still open next to a Dunkin Donuts and Pizza Hut. The door buzzed as I went inside and the guy behind the counter quit looking bored as he asked me what I needed help with.

"Cell phone."

"What kind?"

"Droid, pay-as-you-go. I want one charged and activated."

"You a fugitive?" He laughed.

"No. I lost mine and I don't want my Dad to know."

"Got lots of droids. How much you want to pay?"

"Hey, dude, I forgot my wallet. Can I borrow yours?"

"Pay phone outside, down the street," he told me.

"Got no cash, dude. I just need to call for a ride home."

"Local?"

"Just the city," I returned. "I can pay when my ride gets here."

"Okay," he decided and handed me his own iPhone.

I texted Felice, she was the only one I could call for help.

Felice can u come get me.

I ran. Dad and the SS R after me.

I was coming home 2morrow.

Now I'm not sure.

Where R U?!!!

U won't tell D?

Downtown, U need 2B where UR safe!

Go back 2 hospital.

No!!! I'm going home with or W/OU!!

I was pissed and handed back the phone. Remembered to say thanks and stomped out the door. Came back in and apologized. "Can I make one more phone call?" I begged. He handed it back over. Dialed the nursing home, asked for Uncle Townsley and waited. The staff told me to hold on and she would get him, he was playing poker with the residents.

"Make it snappy," he said curtly, minutes later. "I'm holding a winning hand."

"Uncle Town? I need your help," I said quickly.

"Danny? Where are you?"

"Verizon store on Mason and twelfth. Any way you can steal a car and come get me?"

"Where's Mike?"

"I...ugh... we parted ways and he's not exactly happy with me," I said cautiously. "I don't want to go home, either."

"You know I'm still in the nursing home, Danny? They don't believe in my miraculous recovery. Still, I know my way around, and I can swipe some keys. How long you got before this place closes?"

"Why?"

"I can't sneak out until lights out and bed check. After that, the lazy SOBs don't check on me because I don't piss the bed."

"They close at 8 PM," I read off the sign.

"Hey, man. You can't loiter here that late," the desk jockey blurted.

Uncle Town heard that. "Okay, Danny boy. Here's what we'll do. I'll call a taxi to come pick you up and bring you here to the Home. I'll pay the fare and smuggle you into my room. You can stay the night. But you have to call Mike so I can tell him you're safe."

"He'll find me," I protested. "Make me go back."

"Maybe so, Danny, but it's not fair to make him worry about all kinds of horrors that could happen to you. Besides, maybe those head bangers can help you."

I shuddered. No thanks, I'd rather live on the streets than go back. "This dude's letting me use his cell phone. I doubt he'll extend the courtesies to a third call. Besides, he'll tell Dad."

“Dude, are you running away from home? Cuz if you are, I ain’t helping you. I could be charged with kidnapping!” He snatched the phone from me and spoke into it, “hey, man, come get this kid or I’m calling 911.” He hit the END button and glared at me.

“You’re a real Samaritan,” I said dryly, and left the store. I bet he was dialing before the door even shut behind me. I cut through a bunch of back streets coming out behind a Chinese takeout and found a dumpster that was relatively clean, squeezed between it and the corner of the building where the kitchen vented. It was warm and smelled of cabbage and soy sauce. It was quiet, secure and dark enough so that no one could see me. I was so nervous, I started up at every sound for the first two hours. The restaurant closed at ten and around twelve midnight, a mangy dog sneaked out and rooted around the garbage eating the leftovers. He smelled me, came to investigate and whined. I patted his head, his eyes were large, brown and fearful looking. He was a cross between a Shepherd and a Heeler, about 30 pounds. Blue and black with one blue eye, one brown. Like mine. He wormed his way in with me and I put my arm around his thin body. His heat warmed me, and with him on guard, I fell asleep.

## Chapter 12

The clatter of garbage can lids woke us. The dog barked once and skittered away. I stayed where I was until I heard the hiss of air brakes and broke out of the corner with visions of being squashed against the wall and the dumpster as the garbage truck hoisted it overhead to dump into its bin.

Startled the Asian who was emptying bags into metal garbage cans. He yelled in fright and jabbered at me. I followed the dog and he waited at the corner for me before heading for a row of abandoned warehouses that backed up to the river. The smell from the water was horrible.

Most were surrounded by a chain-link fence, the dog trotted along until he found a section torn apart and pulled back. He ducked through, turned and looked to see if I was following and kept going, heading straight for what looked like an old junkyard. Only all these vehicles were old scows, barges and boats.

“Hey,” I called. “I’m hungry. Any place around here where you can eat for free?”

He disappeared down the row over towards rusty steel cabin cruisers, some missing entire hulls and others burnt to bare skeletons. At the end of the lane was a construction trailer and the lights were on. The dog trotted right up to the door, scratched and pushed it open. It stayed open and no one came to investigate so I crept closer. Peeked in the windows and used the dog’s eyes to see inside.

Table with papers spread across it. Fluorescent lights overhead. A ratty couch covered with an old dog-haired blanket, a pillow case of dirty yellow, which had once been white. Cigarettes on the floor in an ashtray, Burns in the weak, thin carpeting. The bathroom was disgusting. Piss on the floor, the toilet seat and a huge turd floating in the bowl.

Iron stains in the toilet and on the tub. A ring that looked like it was eons old. I didn’t even like being inside as the dog. Nobody was in the one-room trailer. No kitchen, no fridge, not even a beer bottle on the floor but there was a phone hanging on the wall. I pushed the door open wider and climbed the four steps into the mean little trailer brushing

against the dog. I picked up the phone and heard a dial tone. Called my house first. And someone picked it up on the first ring.

“Danny?” I didn’t recognize the voice so hung up, redialed to make sure I had the right number.

“Danny. Don’t hang up,” the man said. “This is Mitchell Gaines. We need you to tell us where you are.”

“Where’s my Dad?” I asked, recognizing his voice. Before I thought what I was saying, I blurted out, “you’re the one said my Dad was lying about being in Vermont! He was! I called him there, I know he was! My Dad loved my Mom! He would never hurt her!”

“Danny, we need you to come in and give us a statement so we can release him.”

“You arrested him?” I was shocked. “He didn’t do anything!”

“Where are you Danny? He’s terrified you’ll be hurt or worse, have another seizure, and no one will find you before it’s too late.”

I tried to reach his dog, Sassy, but she was asleep in her house, not with him.

“Where is he?”

“Police headquarters. I can send a car for you, Danny. Just tell me where you are.”

“Tell me what precinct,” I countered, and when he did, I hung up. Dialed information for the number and called.

“WMPD,” a bored voice said, “Precinct 20 – 77. How can I help you?”

“I want to talk to the Senator,” I said.

“Try the Senate,” he snickered.

“Senator De Rosier. You’re holding him for questioning. I’m his lawyer.”

“Yeah, you sound like you’re twelve years old,” he sneered.

“If you don’t give me answers, you dickhead,” I snapped, “I’ll hit you with US732.5, section 6 and you’ll need a Racehorse Haynes to keep you out of the poor house!”

“Okay, okay, Councilor. Keep your shirt on,” he put me on hold and I laughed. I’d told him I would sue him over a defecating dog on the sidewalk. He came back in five minutes, and sounded cautious.

“He’s in Interrogation with two Homicide Detectives. I can’t interrupt. Can you wait? They’ll be down in five more minutes, ten tops.”

“I’ll wait,” I decided.

“What’s your name?”

“Dan – Daniel Hillerman,” I used Dad’s chauffeur’s name since I was stupid enough to start saying my own.

“Okay. Hang on, then. I’ll put you on hold.” I heard the click and waited.

The dog came over and stuck his head under my hand so I petted him. Looked and saw that he was a she. "You got a name, Blue?" Of all the animals' minds I'd been inside, not one thought of themselves as humans do, a sense of personal self, a name that identified themselves. No self-awareness, just a sense of belonging to a particular person or not. This Heeler cross did not have a sense of a master. I felt sad for her. She lifted her head to stare at the door. Barked and before I could get up to check, dudes in black riot gear were jumping in through the windows and door.

She yiked and ran under the table and as I turned to bolt, someone tackled me. I fought, knees and elbows and teeth, but made little progress against their Kevlar and tactical uniforms.

In thirty seconds, I was zip-tied hands and feet, flipped over on my stomach, my jeans pulled down so my ass hung out bare. I screamed. Felt a cool alcohol swipe and the bite of what felt like an enormous needle. Then, nothing.

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*What's the docs say? He safe to move? Rumble, rumble rumble.*

*Eyelids are flickering. He's coming up. You're going to give him another dose?*

*Whew. This kid bruises easily. Look at those black and blues.*

*BP is normal, pulse, respirations are fine. I hacked his medical records, he was on steroids, Elavil and Tramadol. See no reason to change that.*

"Danny, can you hear me? Wake up, Danny." Someone slapped my face. I swallowed. Thirsty. My arms hurt. My butt cheeks throbbed in the same spot, and I felt hot. I gagged as the movement of my head triggered nausea.

"Tummy upset?" His blue eyes stared at me and held a pink basin under my chin. I spewed, heaved until my ribs ached. Wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

I was in a room with padded walls, no windows, a cotton mattress coming out of the wall and the chair he was sitting in a toilet of stainless steel, minus its cover and a sink. The door was solid with tiny windows at eye height. "This is a prison cell," I managed around the taste and smell of vomit.

"Yes."

I smashed the basin into his face and ran for the door to find it locked. Kicked it, bounced off and turned to confront him, dripping with my mess on his hair, face and shirt front. He held his temper, but that I could see he was pissed.

"Danny, we can keep you drugged and tied up, you know."

"You know who my Dad is? My girlfriend's father? You're in big trouble when they find out I'm missing. You better let me go."

"Your Dad thinks you've been kidnapped, Danny. He's waiting for a ransom note."

"In jail?"

"He's not in jail, Danny."

“But I heard you –.”

“Yes, Danny. And we want to know how you hurt us.”

I shut my mouth and then, begged, “You can’t do that to my Dad, it’ll kill him. Not after he lost Mom!”

“It’s kinder to make the break once and final, Danny.”

I stared at him in horror. “Who are you people?”

“NSA.”

“You’re going to tell my Dad I’m dead?” I screamed and launched myself at him. He grabbed my fist, whirled me around and bear hugged me with my feet off the ground. I tried to smash the back of my head into his face, but he tucked his to the side and I whip-lashed myself.

The door slammed open and a bunch of other dudes ran into the room and tackled us both. I went down on the cot, smashed my head into the padded wall hard enough to see stars. Felt them stick me in the hip through my pants and rolled me over. Shooting pains went up my head and down my back. I blinked slowly as their faces revolved around me in slow tidal surges. I remember crying as if my heart was broken, and then nothing. I went under praying I wouldn’t wake up.

## Chapter 13

Of course I did. The same little room only this time I was drugged with something that made me feel like a zombie. I lay on the cot staring at the ceiling for an hour before I rolled over. Using the wall, I sat up and stared at my knees in blue scrubs with the cuffs rolled up. Lifting my arm, I saw a blue cotton top with pockets and bare forearms. Two Band-Aids in the elbow crease over a wad of folded up gauze.

There were slippers like flip-flops on my feet. The door open with a pneumatic hiss and slid into the wall. Three men approached watching me warily and two held Tasers. One of them was the dude called Gaines. I stared dully at him, not feeling much of anything. My thought processes were circling in my head, not making any sense to me. I knew I was in danger, but couldn’t care.

“Danny?” Gaines questioned. I looked up and then back to my feet.

“How do you feel, Danny?”

“Okay,” I said listlessly. I wished they’d go away so I could lay down and stare at the wall. I could count the dimples in the padding.

“Danny, we’re going to take you for testing. All you have to do is walk with us, okay? Can you do that?”

“I guess.” He put his hand under my elbow when I stood up. Waited. He pulled me towards the door, which opened. Put cuffs on my wrists and locked them. “You okay, Danny? Not lightheaded or nauseous?”

I thought about it. Answered, “No.”



“Good. Just concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. It’s not far, we’re just going down the hallway to the elevator and the labs.”

“Okay,” I said agreeably and shuffled along with the other two behind us.

The hallway was short, only two doors, and then we were at the elevator. Black with shiny chrome. He punched in the code. While I stood there drooling.

“Not so feisty now, is he, Gaines?” One of the men snickered.

“Shut up, Read,” Gaines snapped. “He’s just a kid.”

“A kid with some weird ability.”

“Just leave him alone,” Gaines said gruffly. The elevator doors opened and his hand on my back sent me in. I stood facing the back wall. He turned me around as the doors closed. My stomach lurched as the elevator moved. No indicator to tell me if we were going up or down, nor what floors. Not that I cared or was curious.

The door opened on a hallway lined on both sides with windows that looked out over a city sky cape, but I didn’t recognize it. The three of them herded me down towards a set of fire doors which opened with a key card into a lab with long gray counters, and machines. An exam chair with arm and leg restraints. Some of which I knew the names and uses of – like a gene sequencer, mass spectrometer and gas chromatograph. Some stations held overhead toxic gas vents, specimen cages for large primates, exam tables, BP machines and even an open sided MRI machine. Only two people were in the lab, a man and a woman, both in white lab coats and laminated badges. They watched me closely as Gaines steered me towards the open area near the tables. One was an autopsy table, complete with a drain into a deep well sink. A metric scale hung nearby. On the counter was an autoclave.

“Where do you want him?” Gaines asked and the man pointed to the exam table.

“Up here.”

“Danny, can you get up on the table?”

I stood there and thought about it, put my hands on the cold metal covered with paper and lifted my legs. My coordination was shot, I wound up half on and half off, so he grabbed my legs and threw me up.

“Lie down, flat,” the white coated lab geek ordered and I did. He strapped my arms and legs with nylon belts and another across my forehead. I lay quietly, my neck aching from the angle. My backbone poked against the hard surface, but the pain was distant and muted.

“What’s he on?”

“Thorazine. Administered this morning at 6 AM. 2 ml IV. We went light because of his age and weight. It lasts about twelve hours before it lets up.”

“Behaviors?”

“He can be...volatile. He’s tall for his age and strong. His Dad is 6’6”. He’s fourteen.”

“Fourteen?!” The woman came forward. She was pretty, even with her hair pulled back severely, a reddish chestnut color, and she had pale green eyes.

“Like Felice,” I slurred.

“What?” She questioned.

“Eyes like my girl...friend. Green. Pretty.”

“Your eyes are pretty, too. What’s your name?” She continued hooking things to my fingers, head, and neck as she slid her hands down my chest. I giggled as she tickled me.

“Danny. Danny D –“

Gaines interrupted me. “His name is Daniel D 1, for the purposes of this trial. That’s all the Director wants on the file. When you’re briefed later this evening, you’ll get the complete dossier. Right now, all you need to do is get a baseline to start with.”

“The EEGs will be skewed by the Thorazine,” she complained. “Also, the MPD tests.”

“You can do without the MPD for now. Director Sustain wants a working premise in two days.”

“Two days!” The man bitched. “I can’t develop a theory in two days! A DNA test takes a week, at the very least!”

“Then, you’d better get busy and work 24/7,” Gaines threatened.

I had to pee and it seemed like too much effort to ask for the toilet so I just peed where I was. My back got warm and wet, it felt good. I closed my eyes and drifted. Didn’t care when they complained about the smell of my wet clothes.

“Jesus,” one of them said. “He pissed his pants.”

“I’m not gonna clean that up.”

“Danny, if you don’t tell us you need to use the restroom, I’ll catheterize you,” the lady threatened.

I opened one eye and shrugged. “Don’t care. Easier to just pee.”

The four of them got me up, stripped me, and washed me off with baby wipes before dressing me in a paper gown. Put me back on the table and started over.

“We’ll be done with the standard tests in four hours. You’ll be back for him? She asked.

Gaines replied, “I’ll be with him whenever he’s out of the cell. When you’re done, we’ll transport him to the mess hall, feed him, and back to his room. Sedate him to sleep. Recommence testing at 0615. After his shot.” He dismissed the two men. I lay there and did what they wanted, neither caring nor feeling anything. Time passed in a blur.

## **Chapter 14**

Oliver Sustain was in his office when Mitchell Gaines called to report on the latest findings.

“DNA is a little weird, Sir,” he said. “It’s definitely markers from both his father and mother. We had profiles on both – one from his blood work for his Senate confirmation and the mother’s from crime scene files. No surprises there.

“His EEG is really off the wall, MRI shows an anomaly deep in the core, midpoint. We have all the results from Walter Reed. Showed a large thickened mass of tissue when he was admitted. Now, it’s the size of a pea and is in the area of the pineal gland which you know has been associated with extrasensory perception. Both of the lab staff have designed trials to test the boy.”

“The father?”

“He believes the boy’s been kidnapped, the FBI is on the case. They’ve tracked him to the Verizon on East Gate. The FBI has the phones tapped and are waiting for ransom demands. The Senator has gone on TV to appeal to the kidnappers, citing his brain injuries. There is a million dollar reward. President Rickover has also made an appeal. The media is all over this.”

“We need to provide a body, then.”

“Yes, sir. Or turn him loose,” Gaines returned.

“Can you supply enough of his blood to prove he’s dead?”

“The lab geeks say yes. We’ll take 2 pints and replace it, keep it in a centrifuge so it doesn’t gel. Can’t put stabilizers in it or it shows up in the forensics tests.”

“Are two pints enough to prove a fatal scenario?” The Director questioned.

“Borderline. Anymore and it’s dangerous for the boy. 2 pints is a serious loss. Without medical aid, the victim would most likely die. We can’t wait days between the sampling, forensics would prove the samples came from different pulls.”

“Can you stretch it to three?”

“I can ask,” Gaines hesitated.

“Don’t risk his life, Mitchell. Not until we find out how he does it. Whatever ‘it’ is.”

“I believe he reads minds, Director. He eavesdropped on the conversation between my wife and me.”

“Keep me informed. How’s his health?”

“The docs had him tranked on Thorazine. He doesn’t care about anything. He’s a zombie. I’m not sure he can do what he does so doped up. Yet, when he is aware, he’s a little Spitfire. He tried to take me out twice now. Tough little bugger.”

“He’s an asset, Gaines. And a loose cannon. We can’t have him poking his nose into the White House and Langley. Find out how he does it, and fast.”

“Yes, sir.” The Director hung up first.

The boy was strapped into a chair like a dentist's, hooked to an EEG. He looked asleep, his bald head shining in the sterile light of a small, fully equipped OR. Two techs reading the print outs were circling high peaks with a red felt pen.

Images flashed in front of the boy's eyes on the blank wall, voices droning through a set of earphones around his bare skull.

Gaines watched from the window as a male scientist explained the testing. "We're asking him to name what he sees," he said.

"His eyes are closed," Gaines protested.

"Closed, taped shut and dilated. He can't see if he wanted to. Yet, he's 100% accurate with the images. Watch this." He spoke into the microphone. "Phil, images on number two."

The images in the room with a boy blanked out and began to show in the room with the pair. Gaines named them and heard the boy echo his own answers.

"How?"

"He can see them somehow. With his mind."

"He reads minds?" Gaines was skeptical. In the background, the lab monkey screamed and shook the bars of his cage.

"No," the doctor shook his head. "Watch this." He spoke into the microphone and turned to the monkey cages, covering them as the tech in the room with the boy did the same to all the lab animals. As soon as the last one was covered, the boy's voice fell silent. Plaintively, he said, "That's all. Can't see...no more."

"He sees through their eyes, hears through the ears of the animal," the scientist looked ecstatic. "He feels what they feel." He poked the rhesus with a prod and the boy's reactions were the same, his face grimacing in pain. "His pain responses are the same as the rhesus, their brain waves are patterned exactly the same."

Gaines mused, "My Labrador retriever was in the bedroom when I told my wife about the Senator. Christ, that's the connection we were looking for – every one of these leaks had a pet involved. Dogs, cats, even a God damn parrot!"

"Can you imagine the implications, doctor? Donate a trained falcon to the Sultan of OPEC and know exactly their policies before they make them? A trained dog to the President of Russia? 90% of foreign leaders have pets. We could spy on anyone without risking an agent's life!"

"We don't know how far his range is," he warned. "Or how long he can meld. I suspect the use has short and long-term damage effects to his brain. Perhaps, it triggered the neurological storm he was in Walter Reed for. His original scans indicated a serious, perhaps fatal condition."

"And now?" Gaines asked.

“Doctor Soong had decided to send the child home and just monitor him. Not having read his personal notes, I don’t know if it was because he considered the child hopeless, and to let him end peacefully at home, or he believed the boy would grow out of it and recover.”

“What do you think?” Gaines entreated.

“I think if we can keep him alive and on our side under our control, he’d make the perfect stealth weapon. Terrorist, dirty politicians, crime bosses. Anywhere an animal can go, we can point and aim him.”

“How do we control him, doctor?”

Now, the scientist grinned. “Ever hear of mind control? We know how to use EEG waves to loop and feedback the mind, program it to do nearly anything in an adult. A fourteen-year-old will be child’s play.”

Gaines suppressed a shiver. “In short,” the scientist said. “We’ll kill his ego and implant a whole new personality. He’ll be a totally different person.”

“How long will that take?”

“No more than two years to become permanent. Once started, we can’t stop without killing him. You sure you want to do this thing?”

“It won’t destroy the...thing he does?” Gaines wondered.

“It shouldn’t. It’s not like we use electric shock or torture. It’s all done with electrical impulses and subliminal transference under a auditory and optical stimulation while he’s in a comatose state. The initial phase takes a week in a sensory deprivation chamber. He’ll be catheterized, fed IV and hydrated during the entire process. Do you have any particular guidelines for his new persona?”

“Like?”

“We can program different languages and skills, job knowledge, personality. You want him a tough bully or shy introvert? Sports inclined or effeminate? Animal lover for sure, woman hater or sexually precocious?”

Gaines stared in disgust. “Can’t you just leave him as he is, but make him want to work for us?”

The scientist shook his head. “I have to destroy his personality before we can control the new one, or it won’t last. The core personality will reassert eventually and blow the entire program. We’ve done this before. I know the pitfalls of the procedure. He’ll be the youngest I’ve ever programmed and his will take the shortest time. The younger they are, the easier it is to break them.”

Gaines cursed and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind to bounce open and shiver on its hinges. In the room, the boy lay twitching.

## Chapter 15

Senator Michael Patrick De Rosier waited in the big empty house, although he wasn’t alone. The entire FBI team was there in the study waiting on the phone call. There had been

several, all crank calls looking to collect on the million-dollar reward, but all had been false leads.

Felice Rickover was there with her two Secret Service agents, her face was a mask of terror, and tear tracks. She sobbed quietly into her hands, her cell phone dialing Danny's voice mailbox endlessly. The State Police of Washington Metro PD were in and out constantly, murmuring to the Chief of Police. He was speaking to the Senator. Ms. Penny was organizing coffee and snacks, trying to get the Senator to eat something. His face was haggard, blue circles under his eyes, deep lines etched around his generous mouth. He looked shell-shocked, his usual air of quiet competence completely gone. Traces of tears showed on his face, his hands worried his son's backpack and two used paperbacks.

"Oh God," he cried. "Please, don't take Danny from me!"

One of the agents muttered to the Chief of Police, "Sir, is there a doctor handy in case the Senator collapses? He looks like he's on the verge of collapse or heart attack."

"There's team of paramedics outside," the head cop said quietly.

A phone rang and the people in the room checked their cells. The lead SAIC listened, his lips thinned and he jerked his head to his second, whispering to him. The Senator watched them like a mouse watched the serpent, was backing up into the wall and the Chief's arms as the SAC said, "Senator, I'm so sorry. They found blood at a scene near the Verizon store – an old boat salvage yard. They found Danny's fingerprints on the door, the phone and the table."

The Senator gasped, "How much blood?"

"A lot, Senator. The blood spatter CSI said more than a boy his age could survive."

De Rosier's eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed. His body didn't hit the floor, a dozen arms reached out to grab him and in minutes, he was on his way to Walter Reed. Outside, no one noticed the scrawny blue dog that lingered behind the rose bushes and hid from any people. Inside, the SA and SAC were scrambling for details on the alleged murder scene. The SAIC left two agents behind to man the phones, the rest he ordered back to the city and the salvage yard.

Jake James went later, after he had seen to the Senator and handed over his shift to the next Secret Service agent. What he saw in that filthy trailer stunned him. There was so much blood splattered, pooled and dripping that he knew Danny had to be dead, beaten and stabbed or worse. There was so much of it, he felt nauseous.

"Oh God," he murmured. "They didn't even leave us his body."

The FBI agent said. "You don't want the Senator to see this."

"Never," James vowed. "If it takes me the next forty years, I'm going to track down the fucker that did this and rip him into little pieces."

"I hate kid crimes," the essay cursed. "How is he doing?"

“The Senator’s tough, he’ll come through. He’ll use this to give him a reason to fight, to avenge his son. Some tough shit will come out of this against criminals. Mike will fight back,” James said. “It’s the funeral I’m worried about. That will drive home his epic loss.”

“His wife, and now his only child. There’ll be a funeral?”

“Ms. Penny is already planning a service.”

“No point in hoping,” the agent said flatly, looking around the bloody room. He saw there were dog prints in the blood. “There was a witness.”

“What?” James asked sharply.

“Dog prints. Small, about 35 pounds. See the dog hair on the couch? Black, gray and white hairs. I took samples.”

“Why?”

“Forensics. If we find the killer, we can match hairs found on their clothes with hairs from the crime scene.”

“Too bad the dog can’t talk.”

With a straight face, the SA said, “eyewitness accounts are invariably unreliable.”

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Two weeks later, a small crowd gathered at an old Virginia cemetery where some of the stones were as old as the late 1790s and had names that echoed with history, tracing back to revolutionary times. It was a beautiful place with century-old oak trees on a small hill, quiet, and laden with crape myrtles and roses, white graveled paths and mausoleums that exuded coziness and eternal rest, not ‘here lies death’. There were stone benches and carved angels, the scent of jasmine, and honeysuckle. Bees made lazy spirals from petal to pedal. The sky overhead was a blue so pure it hurt to stare at it, no trace of white marred its perfection yet a silver moon showed crystal-clear against the day sky.

No one wore black, but they were dressed soberly in suits, ties and dresses. Carried flowers, photos and favorite remembrances to the grave site of the Senator’s wife. They hadn’t disturbed the plot, there was no body and only a few ounces of blood left of his son so they merely came to see the boy’s name, birth date and death newly carved on the stone. White granite, it sparkled as if the sun kissed it. Felice Rickover could not stop crying. Ms. Penny, the Senator’s aide openly sobbed. Michael De Rosier stood, his face a mask, a muscle in his cheek jumping with seething rage as his eyes traced the fresh carving.

Dantan Townsley De Rosier.

Born March 1, 1996

Died April 12, 2010

‘Beloved son, in you I found my courage.’

One by one, agents, friends and family left their gifts on the soft grass and pressed the Senator’s hand as they departed, save for his security detail. Even Felice, her Dad and Ms. Penny did not intrude on his silent grief.

## Chapter 16

“Danny, do you hear me?” There was a voice in my skull, so loud I couldn’t ignore it.

“Yes,” I said and the voice quieted. I couldn’t think, I was floating somewhere, no light, no reference point, except for my own frantic heartbeat and the voice. I thought I should know it, fear raced through me and the only thing I could remember was my Uncle Townsley, telling me to make a room for myself, an impregnable vault.

Instead, I reached out. Screaming, searching for a mind, any mind where I could still be a part of the living world and the only thing I could even touch was so alien that I fell back sobbing in terror for the mind of a roach could not shelter me. Wherever I was, no other animals were close enough to enter their minds.

Brick by brick I built it, laying one atop the other against the titanium shell of girders, surrounded by nuclear bombproof concrete buried a hundred feet in the ground. I built the door of titanium and steel balanced on a ball bearing hinge so only my finger’s touch could open it. When I turned the key in the lock, I was inside, sitting in the room with my memories, where no one could touch or hurt me. I kept an image of my Dad in front of me and it brought me courage.

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The head scientist in charge of the project was a PhD at the age of twenty-two, his specialty was brain wave phenomenon and mind altering techniques grossly called brainwashing, but the techniques had come light years from the Manchurian Candidate days. His name was Everett Hawthorne, his fellow researcher Doctor Marian Cohen, herself a neurologist and psychologist.

Their subject was three days in the SDPT, (sensory deprivation tank) when the brain monitor flat-lined, to a chorus of alarms.

“It’s too soon,” he gaped. “Three days is too soon for the core to disintegrate. We have to get him out, now.”

Running for the room at the end of the corridor, they had the tank opened and drained in seconds and hauled the boy out onto the floor. He was naked, dripping with saline, leads attached all over his bald skull, pulse points, heart and groin so that he looked like one of the characters from the Terminal Man.

His brain waves were flat, his heart in de-fib as a crash team joined the two. As they started CPR and established a heartbeat on the first try, picked up the boy and rushed him into the OR where they hooked him onto the cardiac monitors, IVs and drugs to bring him up but not quite aware. Pain meds for the aches that surely he would feel from both rib cracking CPR and cardiac stimulants.

“Can you hear me, Danny?” Doctor Hawthorne asked as he flicked a penlight into the dual colored eyes.

“There is no Danny,” the eerie little voice returned.

Cohen murmured, “alpha waves are flat, feedback is completely different from baseline, Everett.”



“He broke in three days? That’s not normal,” he protested. “The super id is usually too entrenched by age 10 to reprogram that quickly.”

“He’s a kid, Ev. Your youngest subject was twenty-two and he took 6 ½ days. Truth is, you don’t know how age plays a part in the dis-associative stage.”

“Yeah, well, I never had one flat line on the cardiac, either,” he returned. “Do we even have a profile set up?”

“I’ve been working on it. They want someone they can easily control and use as an agent, someone quiet, non-obtrusive and capable of blending in.”

“How complete is it?”

“It’s not, it is bare-bones. I have a computer fleshing it out.”

“It’d better be done soon, I don’t want to leave him blank for too long, it makes it harder to download the new personality.”

“You have a name?”

“Daniel. I want to keep as close to his real name for the programming success.”

“Daniel, it is.”

The boy lay there with absolutely no reaction on his face, no emotion, no personality.

“What about his eyes,” she asked. “They’re unique and memorable.”

“We haven’t succeeded in changing eye color or replacement eyes yet, Marian. Best we can do with them are contacts. Or remove the eye itself.”

She shook her head. “A kid missing an eye is also memorable. Besides, we don’t know how that will affect his talent.”

He fiddled with the lines and watched the monitors, pleased with the strengthening heartbeat and brain waves.

“How are you feeling, Danny?”

“Don’t know,” the flat voice said. “There is no ‘I’.”

“Your name is Daniel. Daniel Atkinson.”

“Okay. My name is Daniel Atkinson,” the boy closed his eyes and his breathing slowed as his body relaxed.

“Keep an eye on him, Marian. I’m going to report to the Director, and let him know we are ready to start the next stage.”

“You expect any more setbacks?”

He shuddered. “I hope not. Be a shame to lose this one. First case of real psychic ability I’ve been able to document.”

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Mitchell Gaines wasn't in his office, the labs in the research division of HS, but in the backseat of a black Denali sandwiched between two big men in dark suits, sunglasses and shoulder holsters. They had flashed FBI credentials, but he knew most of the special agents in the area, and he didn't recognize either of them or the driver. He suspected they were either NSA or NIA.

"Where we headed?" Gaines asked expecting no answer.

"Director wants to see you," goon number one on his left answered.

"Director Walters?" He named the present head of the FBI. Neither man replied. "Couldn't we do this with a phone call?"

"The Director will answer your questions."

The drive was over an hour, heading out of the city towards the Blue Ridge Parkway and the complex he knew to be a government facility called Spook-Land. He was escorted inside the sprawling high-tech security to an inner office reached by key cards, hand scanners and retinal readers. Against the wall was a chair that cost more than a luxury car behind a desk worth a new Mercedes, and the man who entered the black on chrome office through the rear door was of medium height, wore a Colonel's uniform. He was instantly recognizable as Colonel Mathias Washington Pierce. He stared at Gaines before he sat down.

"Colonel."

"Gaines, what's going on at HS and in their R&D labs?"

Gaines spread his hands. "How would I know? I do office work."

"You're working on something called the 'Ed Project' with a forty million dollar budget. What is it and what's it got to do with President Rickover's assassination attempt, Senator De Rosier son's kidnap and murder?"

"What makes you think I know anything about it?"

The Director threw memos and reports down on the desktop with Gaines name on the requests for a detailed search of De Rosier's background, the case report on the assassination attempt and medical records of the child, Dantan. All with Gaines' clearances and signatures. He said mildly, "we are the NSA, Gaines. We've been around a hell of a lot longer than Homeland Security."

"So, what do you want?"

"I want to know what the 'Ed Project' is."

Gaines explained and the Colonel listened without any sign of skepticism or disbelief. When the HS agent was done, the colonel nodded once. Said, "Want to continue on the project?"

"Of course, sir."

"You've a choice, Gaines. Work for me or be pushed out."

"Pushed out? What do you mean?"

He looked at his watch. "As of twenty minutes ago, a black ops team hit your R&D department. They will remove the subject, the doctors, all computer data and files on this 'Ed Project' transporting everything to a secure location of my choosing. I will be in charge of the 'Chameleon Project'. There will be a substantial increase in pay and security clearance. If you come on board."

"Did you make the same offer to the doctors?"

The Colonel shrugged, his gray eyes lacking any sign of remorse or compassion. They were as cold as a gun barrel. "They are no longer with the project. They resigned due to their objections."

"And the Director, Oliver Sustain? What do I tell him about my change of employment?"

"The two doctors, Cohen and Hawthorne e-mailed the Director with news of the subject's death. It seems the boy coded. Heart failure. CPR cardiac shock was administered with no results. Subject was incinerated after a thorough autopsy."

"The computers and cameras will back up the scenario. Both scientists perished in a lab fire. It should just be hitting the news in the next half hour."

"Was I in this lab fire?" Gaines asked grimly.

"No. You were asked to report to the Director's office to confirm the boy's death and was involved in a minor car accident where you sustained a minor concussion and a broken arm. You're taken to Walter Reed, treated and released. Are now officially on leave, pending disability where you will resign with a full pension and move to Dallas, Texas."

"Dallas? Why Dallas?"

"Because, according to our expert brain designers, the boy is fourteen and requires at least four years to become mature enough to activate. Dallas is not a city where either you, the Senator or any of the family's circle had contact."

"How do you feel about kids?"

"Why?"

"It's been determined that it would be preferable for the child to be raised with an adoptive family, in a normal social structure. We don't want him placed just anywhere. You're married, in a stable relationship and your wife wants kids. She can't have any."

"How do you know that?" Gaines snapped angrily.

The Colonel quirked an eyebrow. "We know everything about you, Mitchell, including your application to join us after 9/11."

"You turned me down," Mitchell Gaines pointed out.

"As did the Secret Service and the FBI. On my say so. I wanted you sufficiently hungry to be my man."

"And I am now?"

“I can give you the man responsible for your brother’s death, Mitchell. With this... project, we can track them down and dispose of him and his cohorts.”

“You think this kid reads minds, Colonel? He doesn’t. He can’t get into the Kremlin or Al Qaeda headquarters or the Pentagon. You can’t make a super spy out of him. He’s not one of those guys like Men Who Stare at Goats.”

“I know what he is, Gaines,” the Colonel’s eyes burned hot as molten steel. “I know exactly what he is. I knew his uncle, Townsley Hutton. Went to school together. I knew Evangeline, too.” He turned to the back wall, spoke over his shoulder. “You’ll be airlifted straight to a safe house somewhere in the Midwest until the boy stabilizes and is ready to meet you in Dallas. We’ll take care of the details, your house, and your wife.” His eyes flickered as the door behind Gaines opened, and he turned around to see a man in a white lab coat, stick him in the neck. He collapsed without a sound.

The Colonel said tersely, “Minor concussion, broken arm, but don’t damage it permanently. He needs to be able to shoot and make the physicals.”

“Complete memory traces?” The white coated professional queried.

“Career move after the car accident. Wife pushing for less hazardous duty, job at high tech computer consulting, General Fiber-dynamics. Make him a Systems Analyst Grade 4. He has a degree in robotics and computer science.”

“On the project?”

“Yes. He’ll be the subject’s adoptive father.”

The lab tech looked down at the unconscious agent. “Big guy. He FBI?”

“HS. Make sure he’s ready by Friday. Rickover is doing a memorial for the Senator’s son on TV and pleading for help to solve the murder. I have to be there in Washington, and I want all trace of this gone before then.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll need a team to transport him.”

The Colonel waved a hand. “Get what you need. Just don’t scratch the furniture.”

## **Chapter 17**

Mitchell Gaines grimaced as he banged his arm for the third time as he wandered the house behind the real estate agent. Jasmine, his wife was in a short skirt and jacket of pale lime. With her dark hair and blue eyes, she was sexy enough to make him drool if his damn head and arm hadn’t awakened with a vengeance. He barely remembered the crash, only woke up in the ambulance on the way to Walter Reed. The EMT said he missed a deer and swerved head-on into a venerable old maple tree on the curve to his house out in the Maryland wooded burbs. Apparently, he was on the way to or from his boss’s office with important news. Couldn’t remember that either.

He was on medical leave, pending a competency hearing, his ruptured rotator cuff and broken humerus might be bad enough to retire him on full disability. A job offer had materialized in Dallas, someone wanted to buy his house and in weeks, he was

whirl-winded somewhere he'd never dreamed of living with an income that promised a Beamer, speedboat and dream house.

Jazzy was ecstatic, a friend had mentioned a special needs child that was up for adoption, and she'd reluctantly agreed to meet him. And fallen in love with the shy, blue-eyed boy with the blonde curly hair and sweet vacant face. He spoke French perfectly, understood a little English and didn't interact with anyone or anything. Yet when he saw Mitch's lab, Sassy, he grabbed the dog's neck and refused to let go. The dog nuzzled and licked his face; it wasn't until she lay down at his feet, that he released her.

"What's his name?" Jasmine asked the woman Social Worker.

"Daniel Defreux. He was abused as a child, suffered both mental and physical damage. The neurologist believes with the right couple and home life, he'll come out of it. He was a brilliant child before the incident."

"Incident?"

"His father murdered his mother in front of him, forced him to cut her body up and bury the pieces. He sold the boy to a Nice sex ring to pay off a drug debt. The French police raided the warehouse on a tip, and found him hanging from chains in a room set up for sado-masochistic films."

"Oh my God! How old is he now?"

"Thirteen."

Every time Mitch thought about the boy, his stomach burned. He turned to the real estate agent and said, "Show us old country houses. Out in the country, with acreage. Maybe a pond. Big old trees and no neighbors closer than a quarter-mile. A two-story with a big wraparound porch. If it needs work, all the better."

Jasmine grinned knowing Mitch's mindset better than he did himself. Money settled the deal in less than fifteen days, the mortgage went through like clock work. Between the sale of the house in Williamstown and the equity, the ridiculously low price of the old farm, his mortgage payments on the ten year note were less than five hundred dollars, leaving him nearly 450 K to put into CDs and savings.

With his new salary and retirement, he brought an extended 4 x 4 pickup for him and an Audi SUV for Jasmine, with all the room in the world.

The old house was a soft rose color, two-story Texas colonial with dormer windows, wraparound porch and a front parlor. A big old kitchen that opened with French doors on a garden, back pasture, barns and century-old oak trees. Cedars that loomed like giant fingers pointing to a sky as big as, well, Dallas.

Mitchell loved the old house at first sight, even with its obvious needed repair work. The porch was wobbly in places. Several windows needed replacing. The whole structure needed painting, the floors inside wide planking that years of neglect and spurs had gouged deep holes into the wood. The kitchen appliances were fifty years out of date and he shuddered to think of the state of the furnace.

It was warmed by propane, and wood, had a modern generator in the tool shed, the well was a spring and several frost-less faucets lined the yard and barn aisles. At one time, the barn housed horses and beef cattle. You could still smell the faint aroma of horse.

They'd decided to ship all their furniture as Mitch's new job had a generous allowance for moving. In a week, Jasmine had managed to paint, wallpaper, and arrange everything to her satisfaction, including the second bedroom of the four upstairs. The room she'd done for a shy, introverted boy who liked nothing but animals.

They took the SUV into Dallas to meet the social worker and start the adoption process. Like the sale of his home and the move, everything fell into place with astonishing ease to which Jazzy replied it was as if it was meant.

Mitch asked if she would be happier with an infant and her reply was instant, she'd fallen in love with Daniel and wanted him.

The boy sat in the back with Sassy, seat belted and mum, his eyes down, wearing jeans and a jacket over a new shirt with the package creases still showing. He shivered constantly, his delicate wrists sticking out of the too short jacket.

He was tall for his age, but he hunched, making himself seem both shorter and younger. Even the sight of Sassy did not comfort him. Because of his special needs, he needed to have psychological treatments once a week and part of the adoption agreement was to continue the therapy. Luckily, his doctor was in the same high-rise where Mitchell's new job was situated, and both Jazzy, Daniel, and he checked out both places on his first official day at work.

Mitch liked the head shrink, a woman named Marian Cohen. She was kind and seemed to have a real insight into the boy. She spoke French and understood the little Daniel did speak. Both Mitch and Jazzy had downloaded the Rosetta Stone programs on their laptops. Within a month, they could hold a conversation with the boy and each other.

Danny slowly came out of his shell, he would never be a popular jock, but after a year of therapy both at home and with Doctor Cohen, he was able to be enrolled in the local high school and makeup classes.

He was intelligent, he caught up with an astonishing ease that amazed the couple, but he refused to join any after-school activities. He would not ride the bus, instead, Jazzy drove him and picked him up from the door of his own room.

Red Hill was a small town outside of the Dallas Metroplex, the high school held only a hundred students, neatly attired in regulations starched and creased blue jeans, Justin Ropers and George Strait, creased Stetson's. Their hobbies were barrel racing, team roping and tubing, drag-racing their pickup trucks on the sand or caliche back roads.

Drugs were available, but Danny had neither the money nor interest, his hobbies ran to reading and helping on the property. He dug post holes and built fence, hoed the garden and ran Sassy around the fields, went riding with Jasmine on her spotted Paso Fino trotting behind her on his own two feet. She wasn't able to get him on the horse, he said he ran with her at night and that was enough.

At fifteen, he hit 6 foot two, with crystal pure blue eyes under his contacts, a solemn, quiet, watchful face that when in repose was curiously beautiful. His hair had darkened to a honey brown, his eyebrows almost black. He had neat hands and feet, and was very particular about his footwear. He owned a dozen pair of sneakers.

Only twice in the last year had Daniel had a crisis, both times occurred before his scheduled therapy with Doctor Cohen. Both times, Mitch had found the boy seated in the barn under a noose hanging from the rafters.

Frightened, Mitchell had screamed at Daniel, jerked him away and asked him what he was thinking. The boy had not replied, only looked at him blankly mumbling in gutter French.

Doctor Cohen changed his meds and for a week kept him home until the trunk level evened out. They celebrated his birthday as the day he joined them, August 14.

Once a year, a Colonel came to Mitch's work place, sat in on the high level meetings and greeted him in the hallway, inquiring about his wife and son.

Four years passed. Daniel was 6'2" of hardened male and had every female for forty miles hanging around. He attracted them like a bee to honey and sometimes seemed bewildered by it.

Mitch sat him down and gave him a lecture about sex, protection and respect to which Danny listened with that same grave reserve.

"You understand me, Daniel?" Mitch asked, never quite able to reach beneath the boy's mask.

Daniel nodded. "We had this in gym class last year and this year, dad." He spoke deliberately in a soft voice, with a Gallic influence.

"Do you have feelings like that, Daniel? Wake up hard in the morning?"

Daniel looked away so his answer was barely heard. His jaw muscles clenched. "I know all about sex," he snarled in a voice so full of rage that Mitch jerked his chair back in alarm.

"Danny?"

When he turned his face back, all Mitch saw was the same bland expression. "Don't worry, dad. I won't get into trouble. I don't like girls."

Mitchell swallowed. "Uhh. Well, boys are okay, too, Danny. If that's the way you feel."

"Don't like them, either."

Gaines heaved a sigh of relief. "What did Doctor Cohen say about it...sex?"

"She said if I needed to, I could masturbate," he said it in clinical terms.

"Do you like going to Doctor Cohen, Daniel?"

He hesitated, his hand reaching for the grizzled head of his old lab, Sassy. She looked up adoringly at the teenager and licked his hand. A fleeting expression of real emotion animated the boy's face. "She scares me, dad," he admitted in low tones. "I don't like the shots or the tapes she plays. She puts me under and strange voices talk to me."

With a dry mouth, Gaines asked, "what do they tell you, Daniel?"

"They tell me who I'm supposed to be." Next visit to the therapist, Mitchell went with him.

## Chapter 18

Cohen called the Colonel on the secure line and told him that she recommended the start of the next phase of the project. The boy's adoptive father was breaking his conditioning and asking questions. She had placed Gaines in a suggestive state and reinforced the old parameters, but wasn't sure how long it would last.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "We're taking Daniel anyway. He's graduated, and has applied for several colleges. I've approved his application to CalPoly, we can monitor him there easily enough and recruit him out of second year."

"He's brilliant, Colonel, if a little quirky. He's extremely adaptable to languages, he knows all the Romance, Russian, German, Arabic, Farsi, and is working on Mandarin. Some Japanese too. Put him in any station and within a month, he'll be speaking the language like a native."

"No girlfriends?"

"No. His posthypnotic block is still in effect. When he has urges, he masturbates, he's told me in therapy his sex urge is negligible. At his age, he should be a randy jackrabbit. To blow off the excess testosterone, so he doesn't implode, I've arranged for a professional to teach him techniques for future use."

"He's not going to be a Nightingale," he retorted, referring to the sex pot bait and trap agents.

"Yes, Sir. He's one hot hunk of 6'2" eyes of blue when he is not tamped down."

"Any sign of his esper?"

"No. Not one whiff. It's dormant, the anomaly is still in his brain, has neither grown nor shrunk. The ganglia are exactly the same."

"Still on his meds?"

"Administered time release under the skin before he leaves my clinic."

"Is Mitch going to be a problem, doctor?" The Colonel demanded.

"If he is, he'll just revert back to his HS persona. He'll be confused, he'll remember the scene in your office and that he's been working undercover for the NSA all this time. Shouldn't pose any risk as long as he doesn't travel east or have contact with acquaintances from his previous life."

"What about Daniel?"



Doctor Cohen laughed. "There is no more Dantan De Rosier, Colonel. We destroyed that person once and for all. What we have now is an eighteen-year-old French adopted American with the memories, emotions and attitude we programmed onto his blank slate. There's nothing for him to remember."

"I want him ready to go as soon as possible. Rickover's second term is coming up and I need to know what's going on inside the Oval Office."

"I can start backing off the esperine," she offered. "I'm curious to see if it still works, his Espermeld."

"Espermeld?"

"We had to give what he can do a name, that was the closest Everett and I came up with."

"God rest his soul," the Colonel laughed and she was quiet. Offered a choice of switch sides or lose the project, she'd gone over. Hawthorne had not and she'd not seen or heard from him since. Now, in the Colonel's few words, she knew the programmer's fate.

"You're up for another raise, Doctor Cohen. How does another 45K sound?"

She swallowed, calculated that allowed her to balloon her escape fund offshore and afford a new condo on Mustang Island. "Great," she enthused. "I'll up Daniel's sessions to two a week."

"Thank you, doctor." The Colonel hung up.

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Jasmine and Mitchell flew out to California to check out the college. Both of them had wanted Daniel to go closer, the University of Houston or UT at Austin. Both schools had accepted him, but his choice was CalPoly, a full scholarship with living expenses and all he had to do was participate in a trial study partnered with Rand and a company out of Cyberdynamics, a division out of Mitch's work. Rumor had it was a think tank for DARPA.

He was awkward around the dorms, both Gaines could see that sharing a room upset him, and they offered to get him his own apartment and pay the difference. He said that Doctor Cohen had suggested he learn to deal with the concept of close living quarters. He'd come back from the last session with the therapist exhausted and drained, smelling of sweat and sex.

Mitch questioned him and Daniel had stared blankly at him denying any inappropriate behavior on her part or his. The only genuine emotion he expressed was when he said goodbye to Sassy. He kissed both of them goodbye, promised to call at least once a week and disappeared into the massive dorm building on the campus. Named for the famous World War II General Hiram Rickover, it housed nearly 10,000 students, the cream of American intellectual society.

Daniel reached his room and sat on the bed. Doctor Cohen had given him specific instructions and he could no more disobey them than he could cease breathing.

His new roommate entered the room, threw the two suitcases on the bed and studied his charge. He was there solely to babysit, a twenty-six-year-old freshly minted agent, who still looked young enough to blend in on campus and protect the teenager. He noted the teen's lack of affect, and triggered the conditioning code.

"Daniel, winter's ice has broken the ice jam."

Daniel's eyes blinked and slowly, his body relaxed as a major change came over his entire personality. His face lightened, he smiled, his shoulders relaxed as he sat straight and his eyes brightened.

"Hey," he said, turning to the bodyguard/roommate. He stood up, extended his hand. "I'm Daniel Gaines. Freshman. I'm majoring in languages."

"Parker Ames. Chemistry major, bio-sciences. Sophomore but I'm skipping a year, did some clinicals the Board gave me credit for."

"Cool. Which bunk you want?" The room was big enough for two beds, two desks and two bookshelves, one large closet and their own private bath with shower, commode and sink. A dorm sized fridge, and an equally tiny kitchen.

"You cook?" Parker asked casually.

"I'm French," Daniel laughed. "Of course I cook. I'll take the bed near the window. You smoke?"

He eyed Parker's fingers stained dark.

"No. Iodine from my last lab experiment. Takes forever to wear off."

"You got any allergies?"

"Like what?"

"Peanuts, shellfish, MSG?"

"Nope."

"Cool. I'm going out for dinner with my parents, say goodbye," Daniel said easily. "Want to come?"

"They won't mind?"

"No. They'll be glad to meet you."

When he called them, they'd already caught the flight back as it had been pushed forward so Parker took him to the local hangout for pizza and wings.

## Chapter 19

"Hey, Danny," Parker, called from a corner booth surrounded by heavily muscled men drinking beers from long necked bottles.

Daniel was flirting with a pretty brunette and if his parents had seen him working the girl, would have been amazed. She was practically melting in his arms and had already invited him to her rooms where he was perfectly willing to go.

“He isn’t wasting any time,” the NSA operative grinned. “She’s practically screwing him on the dance floor.”

“Yeah, well, the Doc said he’d be easier to direct after he gets it out of the system, his testosterone levels are extremely high after being held back all these years,” Parker said. “He’s got to be carrying a load my balls would explode from.”

The man laughed crudely. “She hired a hooker for him last month to teach him the ropes. I heard he passed with flying colors.”

“So, why are we here?” The lead agent demanded.

“The Colonel wants to test him. When we leave here you’re to follow and...” He described the Colonel’s plan and the man agreed, leaving Daniel with Parker.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don’t know what triggered my awakening in the vault, one Moment I was deep in lost memories, the next I was vaguely aware that years had passed without my knowledge, yet my body had aged and carried on as if someone else had cared for it. I could see the part of me that was real and moving yet I couldn’t influence it. I was in prison inside my vault and no longer knew how to escape, wasn’t even sure why I needed to hide, nor what I was hiding from.

My body was laughing, dancing, running those hands all over a pretty girl, and from the little moans she was making, she clearly enjoyed what I was doing to her. I stuck my tongue in her ear and rubbed lazy circles on her wet panties under her short skirt. I could feel the deep trembling as her belly muscles clenched. My own prick throbbed and swelled until I couldn’t stand it anymore. Pushed her into a dark corner just outside the back door and pulled her panties down, opened my jeans and impaled her. She came instantly, her walls sucking greedily on my prick and I lunged twice shoving her up the wall as I followed. She screamed into my mouth and I swallowed her breath as I gasped for my own. Heard my voice asked her name, as I tucked myself back into my pants. My balls throbbed and her pulse raced under my hand.

“Sit me down,” she breathed hard, her eyes dazed. I brought her back to her table where she joined her friends. Tucked her underwear into my pocket. She gave me her phone number, dorm room and hall, begged me to call her.

I smiled, promised I would, and promptly forgot her as I returned to the corner booth with Parker. His three companions had left and we were alone.

“You work fast,” he commented. “Feel better?”

“My balls ache.” I shifted, my jockeys were uncomfortably tight still.

“You still got a boner? That chick was hot.”

“Lots of hot chicks here,” I returned. Spoke French.

“You ready to go? Orientation starts at 6 AM tomorrow.”

I shrugged. Plenty of pussy in the dorms, too. Wondered where that thought came from as Parker led me out into the dark alley between the bar and the parking lot. Stopped near

the big pickup on the corner near the burnt out light pole. Heard his voice coming from far away as my senses dwindled in the outer persona and sharpened to the inner one, the one I knew was the real 'I'. Saw an image of the surrounding area through a strange lens, a strange greenish glow like night vision. Yet when I turned my/our head, it was to a 260° angle. I heard unnaturally clearly, looked down from the roof tops of the bar where I perched on an overhang. Screech owl. I was in a screech owl, and could see everything, down to the glint of a gold ring on the dark-haired man's pinky, the black high tops on my feet, the three men waiting in the darkness. Mice skittering and squealing under the dumpster as their hearts raced sensing the presence of danger.

I swooped down on my wings making no noise, no subtle movement of the air, yet I/me heard me/bird.

My head swiveled and I/owl flew into the waiting group of men; hitting them with my/our outstretched talons. Slashed, saw bright greenish black blood spurt in the darkness. Heard their cries of pain and terror. One of them tried to snag me, but I opened my wings wide to stop, twisted and slipped to the left on two strong wing beats. Saw the glint of a gun and dodged as a soft pfft! broke the air near my tail feathers.

"Don't shoot!" Parker yelled and shoved my body down to the disgusting pavement covering me. Above, I banked keeping to the darkness where they could not see me. The men ran off. Parker waited. Asked breathlessly, "you okay, Daniel?"

The body that was me pushed him off, jumped up and tried to go after them sputtering in rage. "Those were the dudes that were sitting with you, Parker! They shot at me!"

"No, Daniel. At some kind of bird."

"Screech owl," I corrected. "It was a screech owl. They don't attack humans."

I stared into darkness straight at me. It felt weird, looking at my own eyes and knowing I wasn't in there. "Who?" I asked and the bird's voice echoed, 'Hoo. Hoo.'

Parker did something, he slipped a loaded syringe into my neck and I collapsed onto the pavement at his feet. Parker pulled out an expensive phone and dialed. As soon as my awareness shut off, I was drawn out of the owl before I could blink. Found myself back in my vault with my own consciousness bleeding away.

## Chapter 20

Mitchell Gaines was troubled. He sat at his desk in his office, looking out the window of a high-rise on the Dallas skyline and wondered again why he had a sinking sensation in his belly over his son. He called the dorm twice already and both times, Danny's roommate said Danny was out, and would call back. He hadn't. The two weekly calls they had received had been on the house's answering machine, it was as if Danny only called when he knew both of them were out of range or out of the house.

On impulse, he left the office and told his PA he was going for pizza and he descended the building to walk across the street to the local pizza parlor, a real brick oven, family-owned jewel that was part of the eclectic downtown Dallas.

Ordered a New York style with extra cheese and mushrooms and dialed on a throwaway generic phone he'd kept from the old days when he was in HS and still paranoid. He'd dug it out of the attic where it had waited since his accident.

Dialed a number from memory. It rang ten times and belatedly, he remembered the time difference on the East Coast. Apologized when a sleepy voice answered grumpily. "Who the hell is this?"

"Mitchell Gaines," he said.

"Gaines! Jesus, I thought you were dead or something! Where are you? What are you doing? Why are you calling me?" Jake James bitched.

"What you mean, you thought I was dead?"

"Well, hell, man. We heard you were killed in a car accident right after a major lab fire in that fancy building you worked in. Your house was sold, your wife moved away. Nobody saw or heard from you in years. Till now. Where are you?"

"Dallas," Mitchell said slowly. Out of the blue, "you ever solve the Senator's son's murder? Or find his body?"

"No. Poor guy, he was devastated. The only thing they kept him going was his crusade against crime. You can walk downtown DC today and be safe. He's cleaned up the city. He's going after terrorists next."

"Can you fax me the files on the case?"

"Why? You got a tip? Call the FBI and MPD," James returned. "What have you got?"

"A hunch," Gaines replied his head suddenly aching. "Oh, never mind, James. I'm acting stupid, picking at straws. Bye." He hung up and stared at the pizza, his stomach churning in waves of nausea. Frantically, he dialed Danny's number and it went straight to voice mail. Next, he called Jasmine's phone and reached her.

"Hey, babe," she chirped. "How are you? You hear from Danny? Funny, I tried to call him and got no answer, just his roommate and his voice mail.

"Jazz, what's the name of that social worker we met Danny through?"

"Why?" She sounded instantly suspicious.

"Someone was asking me if they knew where they could adopt a kid. Special needs, one no one else wanted. I thought of her."

"Horowitz, Hemowitz, something like that. Jane. Her first name was Jane. I might have the number of the agency. The name of the agency will be on the adoption papers."

"Where are they?"

"In the safety deposit box."

"Thanks, Jazzy. I'll be home early. Bye." He called his PA, told her he was taking the rest of the day off and walked the six blocks to his bank.

When he breached the safety deposit box, he found the papers, his and Jazzy's wills, birth certificates and a digital copy of Daniel's. He unfolded it and scrutinized the French paperwork, was able to read and translate. Danielle Defreaux was born March 25, 1997 to a Camille Angelou and Jean-Pierre Rochefort. The adoption agency was called The Society for a Better Life out of Lucerne, Switzerland. The adoption decree looked official, was signed and witnessed by a Jane Hemowitz and Doctor Martin Mendoz, Esq., notarized on heavyweight papers, some four in all with the clauses he'd only skimmed over when he'd signed below Jasmine's name.

He read it again, carefully noting the line about continuing Daniel's therapy with Doctor Cohen and only Doctor Cohen, that Daniel was not to be taken out of state without express written permission by Doctor Cohen, and that he was not to be given any drugs except on her okay, no piercings, or tattoos. If he was to be injured in any way requiring hospital, or medical care, she was to be notified immediately before 911 was called even in a life threatening situation. Some of them seemed downright silly and others vaguely threatening.

Mitch folded up the papers, stuck them in his breast pocket and closed up the box. He exited the vault room, thanked the teller and left the bank, walking slowly back to the overhead garage and his pickup truck. Wasn't surprised when he saw the neatly attired man standing next to his truck and knew instantly who he was.

"Colonel," he said flatly, wishing he was armed. He looked around for backup. Saw no one. "No uniform?"

"I was curious to see what you remembered?"

"You. You offered me a job. Undercover."

"Deep undercover. So deep you didn't even know it. What triggered your memories?" He asked curious.

"Call it a father's intuition. Only, I'm not his father, am I?"

"To all intents and purposes, you are. You raised him for the last four years."

"And Senator De Rosier had him for fourteen."

"Dantan De Rosier died in that lab at Spook-Land, Mitchell. Two scientists named Everett Hawthorne and Marian Cohen killed his personality through a...brainwashing technique using electroencephalogram waves, biofeedback and drugs. Then, they programmed in a whole new persona. Two, in fact. One for you to raise and the other that Doctor Cohen slowly and carefully nurtured in her therapy sessions until he was grown up enough to activate."

"He was right," Mitchell said. "He said she was bad, she scared him. I went to confront her."

"You were breaking your programming. She went in and the tweaked you so she'd be more comfortable with her, and the therapy. And she gave you something else to focus on, Daniel's sexual maturing. What a time she had keeping that in check!" He breathed out.

“Whoa! We had to hire a hooker for him so his hormones wouldn’t jeopardize the downloads.”

“You’re going to use him to spy on the White House,” Gaines remembered.

“That and other things. Question is, what are you going to do?”

“I am, as I seem to recall, an NSA agent. What’s my assignment now?”

“Are you two close to him, Mitchell? We need a control officer. He’ll be going to the farm for training in covert skills.”

“He’ll recognize me.”

“You’ll be operating him out of NSA headquarters. You’ll never see each other. You’ll just be a voice directing him. Our first missions will be test to see how far his control is.

“You know, last night, he managed to scare off three of my men. With an owl.”

“And afterwards? I seem to recall after, he collapses.”

“Not this time. He was ready to get up and go after them. Quite the foolhardy hero, this program. He can be anything we program him to be,” the Colonel admired. “We’ll just forget about your little research mission, shall we? No more phone calls to Agent James, no more lying to your luscious wife and no more poking into Daniel’s adoption. We both know it’s all an agency run operation. Quite expensive, so don’t fuck around with it, Gaines. You in or out?”

“In, sir,” he said.

“Good boy. I’d hate to have to shoot you.” The Colonel made an obscene gesture and across the parking structure on the same rooftop height of the next high-rise, Gaines saw the sniper stand up, pull down his rifle and salute before he disappeared. The Colonel took his hand out of his pockets and Gaines saw the shoulder holster. Empty.

“Start carrying again,” he said curtly and left the NSA agent leaning against the pickup door.

Mitch peered under the chassis, opened the hood slowly and checked for anything obvious. Then, he backed up behind a concrete wall and pressed the self-starter button on his key ring and flinched.

The beeping and throaty hum of his Triton V-8 greeted him and only then did he sink his clenched butt cheeks onto the plush leather cushions. When he arrived home, even then he wore caution like a Kevlar vest.

## Chapter 21

I was vaguely aware of Parker, dragging me into a car I didn’t know he had, and belting me in. He pulled my eyelids up and stared. “You out, kid?” I felt like two people. Part of me remembered the girl in the bar and part of me was the one in the owl. “Dude, you weren’t supposed to take out the guys. Just go to sleep till we get there.”

“Where?” I managed to ask.

He put the clutch in and peeled out to the road into traffic. I heard the sounds of Dallas highways, the humming of tires and reached for the door handles, but fumbled without feeling much of anything.

He and the interior became a kaleidoscope of dark and light, movements up and sideways until I felt myself being lifted into an air-conditioned box and floated up towards the ceiling and bright lights. Saw Cohen. She stuck me with her needles and it all went away.

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*Danny. Danny, wake up now.*

I opened my eyes. Was in a room, with big commercial windows that looked out over the prairie. No mountains, no horizon lines just rolling hills that stretched forever. Grass all around in green and golden tones. Big blue skies with puffy fat clouds. My head felt as fat and soft as they looked.

Parker was in this room with a generic couch, chairs, and a coffee table. It looked like a waiting room.

My sleeve was rolled up and a fresh needle mark was on the elbow crease. Black and blue around it. Another was on my neck near my collar. I was in Dockers, and a blue dress shirt, my windbreaker on the couch. My feet were up on the cushions.

Marian Cohen and another man were standing behind Parker, who was seated opposite me.

“What’s going on?” My throat was tight, sore as if someone had gagged me or I’d been screaming.

“What do you remember, Daniel?” She asked.

“Doctor Cohen. Parker. The bar, fucking the girl, going outside. Three guys waiting to attack me,” I said flatly.

“How did you know they were there, Daniel?” The man asked. I’d never seen him before, he looked military, a jar head with razor cut, gray hair. Electric blue eyes, trim, neat build and ramrod straight. He chilled me.

“I went somewhere else. In something else, his eyes. Saw them hiding in the dark,” I answered.

“Was it an owl, Daniel?”

“Yes. Screech owl. It was hunting for mice behind the dumpsters.”

“Good, Daniel,” he said and held up a picture of a yellow Labrador retriever. I knew her name was Sassy.

“Go to her and tell me what she’s seeing, Danny,” he ordered.

I felt them retreating from the other me that stood behind a locked door, waiting to take over. ‘Sassy’, he thought and suddenly, I *was* him, *was* in the Labrador as she padded to the house, an old country house in the middle of 40 acres of pasture.



A woman's neat legs in shorts passed my head and stroked me. "Sass, want to go out?" We heard the far-off rumble of a familiar vehicle, barked and loped painfully to the door to await arrival of our master.

"Mitch coming home, Sassy?" The woman asked, and flung the door open as the 4 x 4 F 250 drove up to park behind the Audi SUV.

The man who exited the vehicle was 6'2", broad and handsome, with dark hair and just a glint of gray at the temples, blue eyes. He looked grim as he strode down the graveled, flagstone path to the house.

"You're home early, Mitch," she called and we loped out to weave around his legs.

He stopped, regarded us, and pulled the woman by the arm into the house, leaving us outside.

We barked and scratched at the door but no one opened it. Went around to the porch window where the kitchen was, and looked in. Dropped, trotted around to the back sneaking for the yard and the sliding doors which were nearly always open. Mitch closed it in our nose and stared through it at us. Herded the protesting woman into the interior of the house. We sat down, laid with our head on our paws.

Searched the skies. A crow sat nearby in the old live oak, the bedroom window was open to let the slight breeze cool the upstairs.

I shifted, was momentarily distracted by the thrill of flight, dive bombing and doing aerial acrobatics before I aimed my beak for the window. Was abruptly startled as I saw another crow in front of me and banked until I realized I was seeing myself in a mirror.

Flying inside the house was tricky, sharp corners and walls, depth perception was different. I landed on the top railing of the stairs and heard their voices. Couldn't quite make out the words even with my acute hearing.

Slipped off the railing to glide closer and reached a hallway where out of the corner of my gold rimmed eye, I saw a broom come swinging. It hit me, knocked me out of the air to land on the floor where I fluttered my wings feebly. My head wouldn't straighten, my heart raced over two hundred beats a minute and I felt no pain, save for that initial shock when the broom hit. Heard him say, "Its neck is broken."

Warm hands picked me up, my head hung limp, bent backwards in a pose not conducive to living. His voice became a blur as death crept up the bird's nervous system. I let go.

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"Holy Christ, Daniel? Daniel, can you hear me? You have a heartbeat, doctor? Shall I call the infirmary? This is Colonel Pierce, I need a complete medical team in the auxiliary lounge, room 2206 immediately. Cardiac arrest." Daniel lay slumped, half on the couch, and half on the floor, his face, gray, fingers and lips turning blue. Parker pulled him off to lay flat on the floor, ripped open his shirt as he went around to the head and shoulders of the unconscious teen. "No pulse, no, respirations," he said and breathed two quick breaths into

the upturned mouth, pinching off the nostrils. Doctor Cohen thrust and counted to thirty. Within two or three minutes, she was sweating as they exchanged places.

“Colonel, is there a de-fib device nearby?” She gasped between breaths. Five minutes brought the med team in, who took over with equipment and drugs. She’d stepped back and let the corpsman handle it as Daniel was hooked up to a cardiac monitor and blood pressure cuff.

“No pulse, no respirations,” the medic announced. “Adrenaline in, charging 300 joules. Clear.” They hit him with the paddles and his body lifted as a small jolt as electricity flooded his heart. “BP is coming up, 40/20, pulse weak and thready,” he said. “80/40 sinus rhythm is back to normal. Let’s get him to the infirmary. What’s his name?”

“Daniel. Daniel Atkinson,” Cohen said as they lifted him onto the gurney.

## Chapter 22

Confusion ranged through me. My chest felt like I’d been rammed by an SUV, I wasn’t sure if I was in a hospital or clinic. Remembered the bar, the girl, the owl. Attacking the three men. Gasp. Flew up from the bed in a panic and met the restraining arms of a nurse, doctor, or orderly. Cohen was there and the man she’d called the Colonel.

“Take it easy, Daniel,” he said and I twisted to look around the room. It looked like a doctor’s office and a hospital room.

“Where am I?” I glanced at the BP cuff on my arm as the cardiac monitor beeped busily away in a normal rhythm. My BP was 110/60, pulse sixty-five and respirations, thirty-two. I was hyperventilating.

“Calm down, Daniel, you’re okay,” the Colonel returned.

“What happened, Daniel?” Marian asked.

“I was there. In the dog, Sassy,” I shuddered. “He locked me out of the house so I went into a crow. Flew through the upstairs window. Down into the hallway. Someone whacked me with a broom. Broke my neck.” My hands raised to feel, but the bones were intact. “The crow died. Me, too. I felt what it felt.”

“Gaines house is over 2000 miles from here,” the Colonel murmured. “Daniel, could you hear and see them clearly?”

“I couldn’t hear them outside and only caught a few words inside before he killed me,” I said wearily. My head was splitting and my entire body felt the aftereffects of being shocked. All I wanted to do was roll over and sleep.

“What did Gaines say?” The Colonel insisted.

“Something about Puerto Rico and second honeymoon,” I mumbled. I don’t know why I lied but the voice in my head that was the other me, smiled and gave me a high five. I’d meant to say Washington, DC and Jake James but those words never made it past my lips.

She slapped me lightly, but I was sinking so deep I barely felt it. “Let him sleep,” she said. “His body needs it. In the morning, we can...”

\*\*\*\*\*

The smell of bacon woke me. I rolled over and pulled at an IV line in my arm. It burned. I was in a hospital bed in the infirmary of some government installation. I saw armed guards outside the glass fronted door. A private in BDUs had brought in a tray, laying it on the swing out table.

“Breakfast,” he said and before I even thought about anything, I was diving in cramming my mouth full before he could take it back. Although I didn’t know where that thought came from. “Hey, dude,” he laughed. “Slow down. Plenty more where that came from.”

Eggs Benedict, Maple bacon, hash browns. Coffee, juice, buttered toast with jam. No calorie counting here. Ate all of it, the voice in my head telling me I should be wary of drugged food.

“Shut up,” I said. “I’m too hungry to care.”

“What?” The soldier asked.

“Not you.”

He looked around. “Just you and me here, kid. No one else.”

*Careful, he warned. They’ll think you’re crazy if you talk to me.*

“Just who are you, anyway? I asked and the airman replied.

“AFC Billy Steinglass.”

“No. Great, hiya,” I dismissed him, waiting for the other dude to answer.

*Dunno, he said. Seems like I’ve always been here but asleep. Woke up when you called the owl down.*

“You got a name?”

“Billy,” he repeated. I ignored him.

*Same as yours. You’re me but not me.*

Oh man. I was creeped out. “You were watching when I fucked that chick?”

Now, Billy AFC stared at me. “Dude, you aren’t talking to me, are you?”

*No, the other, Danny said. But I can sometimes see your memories. The strong ones. I had some. They faded. I can’t remember anything. He sounded lost and sad. I just know I came in here to escape bad things. I want to go home!*

“How old are you?” I asked him and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the AFC head for the door. Heard it lock behind him.

*Fourteen, he told me. I closed the vault door on fourteen. I’m still fourteen I think. Did you like what you did to that girl? Did it feel good?*

“Didn’t you ever jerk off, kid?” I asked him, feeling the urge to piss. Climbing out of bed, I dragged my IV lines and found they reached the toilet. Did my business, washed my face and opened the new toothbrush and paste as I stared at my face in the silvered mirror.

My contacts were out and I felt vaguely naked, since both my eyes were exposed to the world as one blue and one brown. Cohen had stressed that I was never to go out when my blue contact lens wasn’t in. Touched my reflection.

*My eyes are like that, too, he said sadly.*

“Are you me?”

*No. I think... you’re a part of me.*

“No way, dude. I’m not rolling over and giving a voice in my head the steering wheel!” I protested. Turned around as the door opened. Cohen and a doctor stood there, eyeballing me. I looked for the Colonel, and he was just outside the door waiting.

“Daniel, who are you talking to?” She asked calmly.

“Myself.” I leaned against the porcelain sink, my insides clenching as adrenaline flooded my system.

“You’re hearing voices, Daniel?” she questioned, and made a gesture with her hand.

*Danny, he said. She’s going to say three words. The winter ice. It’s the trigger. Come with me. He held out his hand just as she said them. My fingers brushed his as my mind fractured. I’ve got you, he said calmly.*

I stared at the vault we were in filled with light and impregnable, images so faded and blurred you could only tell they were vaguely human, mostly just blobs of color. He was nearly as tall as I was, pretty in a soft boyish way, sweet faced and scared. I wanted to reassure him, but in truth, I was scared, too.

*What’s happening? I asked and he shook his head. Dunno. Without your eyes open, your ears hearing, I’m blind in here.*

*Can’t you do your animal mind meld thing?*

*He laughed softly. That was you Danny.*

*What are we doing now, if not reading minds?*

*Internal dialogue.*

*What do you think she’s doing to me? To us?*

*I don’t like her. She made me hide in here. She’s a bad person. I tried to warn you about her. You listened twice, but it made you want to do bad things.*

*The barn and the rope?*

*You thought maybe if you killed us, the pain would go away. Who is Mitch?*

*My dad. Adoptive dad. It’s weird, like I have two sets of memories, me and some French kid who was abused.*

*That's another construct she made. Neither of you are real, Danny.*

*And you are? I sneered. You're just a voice in my crazy head.*

*If you think that, go back out there! He snapped and he pushed me out.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Cohen was staring into my eyes as the two orderlies manhandled my body onto an exam table strapping me in. By the time I was back and started to struggle, I was already restrained. She and the doc hooked my IV up to a drip and injected the port. In seconds I was floating in the remembered haze of Thorazine.

“Daniel.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled.

“Do you hear voices?”

“Just... one,” I returned.

“Whose voice, Daniel?”

“Mine.”

“Is it the same thing as Hutton?” The Colonel demanded. I tried to spot where he was standing but couldn't turn my head. My mouth filled with saliva and she wiped the drool from the corner of my lips.

“What do they tell you, Daniel?” Her tone was patient.

“Lies. He tells me lies. His eyes are so pretty. Like mine. But sad. Did I try to hang myself, Mary, Mary, Marian. Maid Marian.” I looked at her, brought up images of her doing things to me I thoroughly enjoyed at the time, but knew were totally unethical and illegal. All the more titillating. “Was my Robin Wood performance adequate, Maid Marian?” And snickered, although it came out as a soft snore.

She flushed and tried to divert my attention with another question.

The Colonel asked, “Were you fucking him, Doctor Cohen? That's what the paid hooker was for. Or did you add that cash to your escape fund? Was that part of his therapy, too?”

“Yes,” she returned. “It bonded him even further to me. Made him eager to come back every time and reinforce the programming.”

“Did you wait till he was sixteen, doctor? Seventeen? Or did you start molesting him at fourteen?” The Colonel yelled.

“She likes it doggy style,” I added helpfully as she flushed a deep, angry red.

“You can't listen to him, Colonel. He's displaying all the signs of the schizoid break. He's confusing reality with fantasy!”

“She has a birthmark on her pussy shaped like a rose. She shaves her pussy bare so she can show it to me,” I mumbled. She went for my face and they hauled her off me, but not

before she smashed her hand into my nuts. I barely felt it, the Thorazine muted everything. Last I saw and heard was her shrieking as they carted her away.

## Chapter 23

I wandered in a padded room. In a one-piece coverall of pale blue and slip on sneakers. There wasn't a piece of furniture in the box so when I was tired, I just lay on the floor. I was always tired. Being tired kept me from reaching out to the voice in my head. I couldn't concentrate long enough to find the vault or him.

Didn't know how long I was in the box. They brought me food, sandwiches and little cartons of milk and chocolate shakes. I ate them because I was hungry even when after, I felt even dopier. I knew that meant something, couldn't pierce together what, though.

Sometimes, the door (it was padded too) opened and people came in and asked me questions, asked about the voices, and did I know who I was. I told them the voices were silent, gone. But I knew they were still in my head. I told them I thought I was Danny, but I wasn't sure. Sometimes, I was everyone and no one. They asked me if I remembered Townsley Hutton or my dad, Mitchell Gaines. They said they were names I knew, but I didn't remember who or why.

The Doctor I didn't know looked in my eyes, took my vitals, pulled blood, and told me the winter ice had broken the ice jam. I told him that was not my problem because I didn't skate on the ice and he asked me what I meant. I shrugged, said I didn't know.

"That's Doctor Cohen trigger," he said to the Colonel.

"Marian, where's Marian?" I asked and pulled at my dick. "I got something for you, Marian."

"Doctor Cohen is no longer your therapist, Daniel. I am," the new man said. "I'm Doctor Andrews."

"Do you want to fuck me, too?" I had a mild interest in that, Doctor Cohen said it was okay to have sex with men if it would get me what she wanted. She always wanted something she called Power. I liked sex with Doctor Cohen, it was like scratching an itch.

"No, Daniel. Tell me what Doctor Cohen told you, in your sessions?"

"Sleepy. Want to sleep. Lemme alone. Too hard to think," I slurred. I lay over my side.

"Let off on the Thorazine. We can't get far with him if he's this doped up. He may be schizoid, but he's still cognitive enough to reach and reason. I don't know why the trigger phrase isn't working. Is there any way I can discuss this with Doctor Cohen?"

"Do you need her?"

"He is her creation. I'm afraid without her, I won't be able to direct the subject."

"The doctor will be available for your use," the Colonel said.

I laughed. "She was available for my use, too." They left me on the floor. Seemed like a waste of energy to get up so I stayed there.

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The pig faced man in green scrubs brought me a PB&J sandwich and a carton of chocolate milk. Left them on the floor near my hand. Smelled them. Slowly, picked up the pasty white bread off the paper plate and chewed. Grape jelly. Sweet. Instant rush of sugar. The carton took longer to open, the ends of my fingers didn't seem to belong to me. Finally, I used my teeth to tear a hole in the flap. Guzzled it down and then remembered to shake the chocolate syrup in the bottom. No cookies. I was still hungry so I slowly climbed to my feet and went to the door banging on the thick padding. I yelled. Asked for more. Heard the locks disengaged and the orderly stood just outside in the hallway. Long hallway white with bright overhead lights and cinder block walls. Only two doors like mine. Halfway up was a cart with covered plates and paper plates wrapped in plastic. I saw cookies. Oreos. Pointed.

“Please. Hungry.”

He shoved me back in and I fell onto my butt. Stayed there. Watched as he placed two plates, two milks and two packages of Oreos on the floor. Slammed it shut and locked it.

I scooted over on my butt and heels, ate everything and piled the trash near the door. I felt more alert, more myself after the food. This batch wasn't drugged. Time passed slowly, excruciatingly slow. Without the drugs to pacify me, boredom became my enemy. I couldn't amuse myself with memories, all of them seemed to be cardboard cut outs with as much meaning to me as those pictures that came with a new wallet or photo frame.

After lunch, I had to go to the bathroom. Thought about that for a while. Got up and banged on the door again hollering.

Different orderly this time. “Whaddya want?” He yelled through the peep hole slot. It was square. I'd not noticed it before.

“Gotta take a piss. And a dump.”

“Stand back from the door,” he ordered and I did. When it opened, four dudes stood there, armed with Tasers and those whippy batons cops used.

I laughed. “Think I'm some kind of ninja assassin? I wish. Where's the toilet?”

Boxed in by 800 pounds of raw muscle, I shuffled down the hallway to a communal bath with concrete brick stalls, showers, a whirlpool and chain restraints hanging in one empty shower stall. Hand held nozzles, the chain one had only a cold water spigot. None of them looked wet. I took the closest commode, dropped the elastic waistband and sat. No boxers or jockeys. They kept my view down to their chest and abdomens, blocking any other sights but them, and the concrete walls.

No toilet paper, but the orderly who'd opened my door handed me a wad of sheets.

“His eyes look more alert. You feeling better, Daniel?”

“Better than what?” I quipped. I waited for his voice to kick in, but he was quiet. Tilted my head and listened.

“Back to your room. The Colonel wants you nice and rested before we test you.”

“What kind of tests?” I wiped, flushed, pulled up my bottoms. They let me wash my hands in the sink with that liquid soap and hand sanitizer. I looked longingly at the shower but muscle mass steered me back down the hallway. I stopped at my door but they guided me past, turned around a corner I didn’t know was there. Double doors that one of them unlocked with the key card and we entered a world of high tech offices and government research.

I goggled at the plush leather couches, fancy desk and personnel dressed in high end clothing looking like they had just stepped out of Brooks Brothers and DKNY. The women gave me flirty smiles and I returned them, and the men stared as if I were a turd stuck on the bottom of their shoe.

They brought me to the corner office where an older, mature dragon woman guarded the gates. She wore a captain’s uniform, Air Force and her hair was pulled back in a tight bun. It made her eyes narrow and pinched.

“The Colonel is waiting,” she announced. “Go right in.”

She pointed to the door on her left and the orderly stayed behind as the first meet blocker knocked, opened the door and escorted us into the room. Massive. Thick carpeting, windows that looked out over the top of the complex, a sprawling campus on the prairie. Helicopters and Lear jets were parked on their own runway. I recognized a Black Hawk helicopter.

“Military base?” I asked, flopping onto the leather couch. My guards stayed behind me.

“How are you feeling, Daniel?” The Colonel asked.

“You care?”

“Of course we care,” he said mildly. “You’re a million dollar project. Your health and sanity are our first priority.”

“I’m not nuts,” I returned.

“You had an uncle, Daniel. He had the same talent you have. Unfortunately, it drove him insane and then into dementia. He died two years ago. In an institution. Unless you learn how to control your...problem, it’ll take you, also.”

“What problem?” I turned to look out the windows. Twenty feet to the first floor.

He tapped my head. “There are programs in here that Doctor Cohen downloaded, Daniel. Programs you should be following, yet you’re not. Why is that?”

“Because you’re nuts,” I retorted. “I’m not a... program. I’m a person... me.”

“No, you’re not.” He spoke the phrase in French and my whole body froze up. I couldn’t move, speak, and the boy in the vault wasn’t there to help me.

“You hear me now, Danny?” He sounded like her. “You may answer.”

“Yes.”

“You will obey the programming?”



“Yes, Marian.”

“Which Danny are you, Marian’s Daniel, who came from a Nice whorehouse or the Danny who wants to play at being a real teenage college boy?”

“I am whoever you want me to be, Marian.”

“Good. Doctor Andrews, download your tape. When he’s done, place him in the cell and do your tests. We’ll put him into the center to begin the experiments.”

Pressure on my temples. Voices whispering in my head, stealing, Danny. I screamed for him to take me, to save me, but he didn’t hear. Slowly, piece by piece, the voices stripped away who I was and right before I ceased to exist, I knew I wasn’t real, anyway. I gave up to the oblivion.

## Chapter 24

“Rohan, sit here.” I pulled up my pants leg, made sure the crease was perfect and smoothed the line of my silk jacket with a casual stroke I knew looked elegant. The man behind the fancy office door had asked to see me specifically and my handler wanted me to pull as much information from him as I could.

“Your boss has told me nothing but fantasy stories about you,” the Arab billionaire said smoothly. “He swears you can walk on water.”

“He exaggerates a little,” I returned, smiling. I saw genuine masterworks on the walls.

“So, what can I do for you, Rohan de Chevalier?”

“Mister Sufi would like to inquire into the Salt Water Reclamation Project you are financing in Sadik al Tofi. He is interested in investing.”

“Really? It is a nonprofit enterprise. What is in it for him?”

“An adjustment in his world reputation,” I returned.

“He’s an arms dealer,” the Saudi Prince smiled to take the sting out of it.

“He has turned to humanitarian interests, Sir.”

The prince snorted. “I’m not saying I wouldn’t be interested in a cash endowment.”

“To sweeten the pot, my employer has sent you a thank you gift for seeing me,” I added.

“Really?” His eyes searched me and the room.

“It’s waiting in the lobby, Sir.”

He rose and gestured for me to precede him back out to the spacious waiting room where my PA held a satin covered cage from which came an interesting rustling. I nodded and the PA slowly pulled the sheet off to reveal a magnificent peregrine falcon, hooded and in jesses.

“It’s a three-year-old Tiercel, Canadian raised and trained by Simone Robespoint,” I said, naming the top falconry expert in the world. His eyes lit up at the sight. I handed him

a hawking glove and he took the bird out of the cage, opening its wings to admire the 6 foot wingspan. Quietly, I jerked my head and the PA and I left him to his new toy.

My chauffeur was waiting out front for both of us, he held the door open as I slipped into the backseat. Twenty minutes later, we were at the airport boarding the Lear for the States. I slept the whole trip back, only waking up when my PA nudged me as the wheels touched down at Dulles. Looking out the windows, I recognize the terminal. "Why Dulles?"

"Socked in and everything's been rerouted. Big storm front, twisters and winds in excess of 100 mph out West. The Colonel suggested Dallas, but that's being hit by Hurricane Ethan."

"How long will we be stuck here?" The Rohan cover was good only as long as this evening, they had programmed it thinking I was going to be back at the Zoo by 5 PM.

"Colonel says to shut down and sleep."

"He doesn't want me to eavesdrop and report?" I could feel the falcon tugging at my awareness, the faint shimmer of air under my wings as we flew alongside a galloping Arab horse.

"No. Too soon. Shut down as soon as we reach the hotel."

"Yes, I understand," I said. I let him take charge of everything. Unloading the luggage, calling the limo service, the hotel that we were coming, the arrival where armed agents met and escorted us to the penthouse suites reserved for NSA agents. Sat where he told me, ate the light meal he put in front of me, bathed, dressed in robe and shorts sitting in front of a blank TV screen until he would tell me to go to bed and sleep.

"Creepy, isn't he?" My PA asked, grinning. "Just like a robot. I can get him to do almost anything."

"Almost anything?" The agent with the blonde hair asked. "Can you get him to suck your dick?"

"Why? You want to watch?" Parker asked with a shrug. "I'm not into that. Besides, if the Colonel asks, he'll tell him everything."

"Tell him not to."

"Won't work. You can't make him break the program responses. Lying to the Colonel is one of them." He stared at me. "Danny, you like sex?"

"I like what you tell me to like," I said flatly.

"Peter's here thinks you're sexy. Wants to fuck you."

"Is that what you want me to do, Parker?"

My PA laughed. "No, Danny. Go to bed. Sleep. Wake up at 0600."

I stood up, detoured around them, and laid down on the bed. Was asleep in minutes.

I dreamed. That troubled me. I never remembered dreaming; it wasn't one of those things either Parker, the Colonel or Doctor Andrews had told me to do. Once, a woman had asked me if I'd dreamed of her but now, she seemed more dream than real.

I dreamed I was in the room, a cell. But not a prison. More like a refuge. Full of light and no shadows everywhere. A plush red recliner in which a lanky teenager lay, all arms and legs. He looked sad until he saw me. When he did, he leaped from the chair and grabbed my hand, pulling me forward.

*Danny! You're back!*

"I was gone?" He looked like me, but younger.

*I don't know how long it's been, Daniel, but it's been a long time. You look older.*

"I'm dreaming," I said. "I never dream."

*I've tried to reach you before, Daniel. I know what we have to do. We have to escape, he seemed excited and eager.*

"Escape from what?"

*They're trying to use us, Danny, to make us someone were not.*

"I don't know who I am," I told him. "I'm a program they've downloaded. I'm not real."

*I know, he said sadly. I think I'm all that's left of the real us. We're dying. All my memories are fading. If you don't run away and let me out, we'll both die.*

"You're a dream," I said and turned over in bed. Heard Parker, snoring next to me. He wouldn't leave me alone and actually succeeded in waking me up. I looked over at Parker and quietly slid out of bed. "Now what?" I asked and he told me.

## Chapter 25

I let the voice in my head make my decisions, he got me as far as the airport taxi lines and told me to ask for Chase Nursing Home. The driver looked at me. "Where is it? What city?"

"I don't know," I said helplessly and waited for his revelation. The driver sighed and Googled it.

"Chase Nursing and Rehab in DuPont on DuPont Circle?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Okay." He pulled out eliciting a chorus of beeps and I opened Parker's wallet to inspect the contents. My own wallet, passport, birth certificate were locked up in his aluminum briefcase. Parker had a platinum American Express, a black see-through card with a chip in it, driver's license from Nebraska and a scan key that said US Department of Agriculture. Oh, and a thousand bucks cash. All hundreds.

Danny and the driver were silent the trip out there and I kept myself entertained by watching the meter rack up the dollars. None of the way look familiar. Expressway,

Beltway gave way to a two-lane country highway out in the sticks with big trees, forests, up and down hills and vistas I should have found exhilarating. He pulled into a gated driveway in front of a two-story fancy building designed like a southern plantation of rose red brick. Ivy climbed up the white columns and portico. I opened the car door, and gave him a hundred.

“You want me to wait?” The boy in my head hesitated. *No*, he said and I echoed him. “Okay.” He peeled out keeping the change, a hefty forty dollar tip.

“Now what?”

*Someone I know lives here*, he said I could see him squinting, rubbing his head as if he could pull it out. The front door opened and several people walked out saying hello. One asked me if they could help me. I realized they were wearing scrubs with pretty print tops. Must be employees.

“I used to know someone here,” I said slowly.

“Used to? Did they pass?”

“Never mind,” I turned on my heel and headed for the driveway, seeing the parking lot out back. It was full of cars.

*He was frantic. Please, he begged. Don't go yet! My uncle. My uncle lives here! Uncle Town! I remember him, he told me about the vault!*

“Uncle Town,” I said, and the girl's face brightened.

“Townesley. Townesley Hutton. He was so nice. He was your uncle?”

“Was?” My mouth dried instantly.

“I'm sorry,” she said, and laid her hand on my arm. “He passed away two years ago. He was eighty-eight. In his sleep.”

“Oh.” I waited, felt his crushing disappointment. “Will you call me a cab?”

“What's your name? We would have notified you as next of kin, but only Senator De Rosier was listed.”

At that name, he shrieked in my head. *I know! I know! That's my name!* His emotion was so great that it felled me. They carted me inside the home, gave me water and wanted to call someone. Instead, they had the head RN, the Director of Nursing check me out. She seemed puzzled when she discovered Parker Ames ID in my pocket. He looked nothing like me.

Pushing her away, I managed to get up, asked again for her to call me a taxi. I didn't know where I could go, my inner voice told me it was n't safe to linger, especially with him in such a state of euphoria. I was afraid Parker would track me down and put me back into my prison cell.

“Wait here, Mister Ames,” the DON said. “I'll call you a cab. You should rest, you've had a shock.”

She left me on the couch in her office and almost without thinking, I followed her in the mind of a Greyhound that slunk after her, from where it had been hiding under her desk. She didn't travel far, just two doors down to what I saw was the Social Worker's office and once inside, she made a beeline for the phone.

I heard her call as clearly as if I were standing next to her, she had her hand on the greyhound's sleek, bony skull.

"Hello? Is this Agent James? You told me to call if anyone came making inquiries about Townsley. Yes, a young man. His papers say his name is Parker Ames, but the license doesn't match. No, 6'2", blue eyes, brown hair. Very good looking. Dimples in both cheeks, slim, but well-muscled. 20s. He looks tired, dazed, and not well. Bit of a French accent. He seemed stunned when I told him about Townsley. Shall I hold him here?"

I got up and made my way back to the front door in the lobby and found it locked with one of those electronic key code boxes, but my luck was in as the CNAs came back from cigarette breaks. She let me out and I hurried down the drive, ignoring both my exhaustion, Danny's frantic shouts in my head and the conversation going on in the room with the greyhounds.

I found a crow and it showed me a way through the woods, bypassing the road. Of course, he could fly and I could not. The woods didn't seem to be my natural element. I tripped over my own feet, slipped on mossy rocks, fell into icy streams until I was soaked, scraped and a bloody mess of ineptitude. I sat down finally, too tired and disheartened to go another step, when a big buck stepped out of the underbrush to regard me. Then Danny spoke to me. *Wow. What a rack! He must be a twenty pointer!* The deer coughed. An eerie sound I'd never heard before as he lowered his head to the ground and knelt at my feet. *Get on, Daniel, Danny said. He'll carry you.*

I protested, I was too big.

*He's strong. Mule deer. He can carry your weight for a little while. Get on. There are people after you.*

"Who? What people?" Alarm woke me from my stupor. I would not go back into slavery now that I knew I was enslaved.

*Parker Ames. The Colonel. The man she called. Her security staff. They're all at the home. I'm tracking your footprints, you're very tired and left a trail a blind man could follow.*

Laboriously, I climbed to my feet and gingerly slid my legs over the deer's back, holding onto its rack for balance. It climbed to its feet, shook as if to adjust my weight and took off at a bone jarring trot that made my balls ache. I grimaced and tried to find a less pulverizing position, only to hear Danny's groans of laughter.

Even carrying me, the buck moved like a graceful shadow, eating up miles through the woods until he dropped me on the outskirts of a small town named Pine Tree. He left me in their city park.

I found a bench and stretched out, letting the sun warm me. Thought about a nap. What a wonderful idea it was and leaned on my arm, watching the inside of my eyelids.

Woke to the tapping of a police baton on the bench and the blue uniformed officer who told me I couldn't sleep in the park. Asked for ID and I couldn't hand over the license. For one thing, it was clearly not me and the other was the DON had the entire wallet in her possession, save for the cash I'd stuck in my pants pocket.

Danny told me to run. I told him to shut up, eliciting some nasty words from the cop. Within minutes, he was convinced I was crazy when he heard me talking to someone who wasn't there.

He hauled me up by my elbow. I reacted instantly, dropping him with two well-placed blows. Stared helplessly at the unconscious officer. "Now what, Brainiac?" I asked Danny. He told me to run.

A man running through the park posed no problem. There were a dozen of us doing so, even though my attire wasn't quite up to jogging gear, I only elicited a few stares. The path wound through the trees, paved and with good footing. Was even clean of dog poop. Every hundred feet was one of those dispensers with plastic bags and paper towels that read 'Please Scoop Your Pet's Poop.' Boy, it took a real genius to come up with that one.

I ran only a few hundred yards, the nap I'd acquired on the bench had only teased me. I was still exhausted and I think Danny hadn't woken up yet, he was curiously quiet since he'd told me his last name.

I found curiosity was my second strongest emotion, fear being the first. Curiosity brought me into town where I found a small Starbucks on the corner where crepe myrtles and Spanish oak trees made a sort of cathedral whose cloisters I marveled at. The streets were cobble stoned with real gaslights and I almost expected to see ladies in long gowns and mob caps.

The door had an old-fashioned bell on it that tinkled as I entered. The smell of coffee got my eyes functioning. I shuffled up to the counter, ordered a double shot of espresso Mocha Grande, chocolate croissant and snagged a computer terminal at the Wi-Fi bar. Googled Townsley Hutton. Senator De Rosier. None of it seemed relevant to me. No matter how the little guy in my head thought.

"My name is Daniel Atkinson," I mumbled and licked my fingers. He didn't deny it in my head. "Danny boy? Are you there?" I asked. "Can you hear me?" I tried to reach him. Felt hot stares on the back of my neck. Turned slowly and saw the counter staff staring at me. Cleared my throat, picked up my coffee cup and left quietly for downtown where I'd Googled the directions to the bus station.

## Chapter 26

Staring through the bars at the most famous home in the nation, I admired the beautiful façade of the White House, the South lawn and the graceful columns. Fall was inching its way towards me, the air had a crispness that I could feel under the thin jacket I'd picked up at the bus station. Stolen from a fat teenager with a guitar strapped to his back and headed for Nashville.

There were security everywhere, Secret Service agents with holstered weapons and ear-buds. As I watched, a convoy of black Cadillac Escalades approached the gates, showed their credentials and were let inside. I didn't know why I was here at the White House, only that I was drawn here by some compulsion.

Warm breath on my neck. I froze, hugging the steel bars of the fence. Freshly painted black. "Daniel," Parker Ames said. He sounded pissed. He punched me twice, short hooking blows to the kidneys that smashed my face into the steel. I cried out, but the pain took my breath away. He supported me so I didn't fall and half carried me off towards a small car parked down the street.

"Where's my cash, you fucker?" He growled, which I took to mean he'd found his wallet at the home. He searched my pockets, found the cash and replaced it in the expensive titanium case. Threw me in the backseat of a small rental car. I drew my legs up and kicked at him, pushing him onto the curb. He slipped, his leg went under and was jammed beneath the curb and the undercarriage. He was crying out in pain.

I leaped over him, felt him grab at my thigh and a sharp stick into the deep muscle. Ran down the sidewalk and my legs didn't want to work. I felt drunk, reached for my thigh, and felt a hard lump under the sting, dislodging a needle. I threw the syringe to the cement. Heard shouts behind me. More men were coming, men in suits and uniforms. Police. Soldiers. I sobbed. "Danny? Where are you? I need help! "

Fell onto my hands. Got up and ran like one of those stumbling idiots in horror movies. Did I even see horror movies? My mind was not my own, I was inside a thousand lies all it once and it terrified me.

They screamed at me. Back at the fence, I vaguely understood it was a barrier I needed to get over. Tried to climb it and heard them, shouting to stop. People running everywhere. Things hitting me, sharp blows to the arms, legs, body. I fell, curled up in a ball and covered my head, crying while they argued over me.

Heard another car pull up and a sharp voice order the cluster fuck to break up. A man's voice, deep with an authoritative tone and a vaguely Northern accent. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing we can't handle, Agent James," the man I knew as Parker spoke up. "Here's my credentials, he's one of ours. He's a vet just had a PTSD episode."

"And that required a brawl with Metro PD, men and agents?"

"He's been on the loose since last night. Assaulted an officer in Bradley Park, robbed a Starbucks and scared the customers. Stole my wallet."

"Tell your boss he needs to keep better control of his people. This isn't going to make the President happy."

A woman's voice interrupted, "Jake, see if he's okay. They hit him pretty hard."

I peeked between my clenched hands and saw a neat pair of feminine legs emerge from the driver side rear seat. She was in nylons with lime green heels, a knee length skirt in a soft butter yellow with a pale green blouse under a stunning hand knit Scottish Isle sweater

cowled up to her delicate chin. Above that, two piercing green eyes with arching black brows. Felice Rickover, the President's daughter tried to see me.

My face was swelling, several blows from fists and batons had hit my cheek, I could taste blood in my mouth. Vision was diminished down to one eye. Most of the pain was ebbing away. I didn't know if it was because I was dying or because of what Parker had stuck me with. I could barely see her. Danny took that Moment to awaken. He stiffened in my head as he stared at the tall man restraining Parker.

*Jake, he whispered. His eyes, my eyes turned to the woman. Girl.*

*Felice, he shouted and I winced.*

"Danny, shut up," I pleaded. "Too loud. In my head. You're too loud."

Parker kicked me. Full in the face, caught the tip of my chin. I felt my neck snap back, my contacts pop out of my eyes. Light, sound, and sparks exploded in my head and drowned out Danny's screams. Ground out everything in white noise. Velvet blackness.

## Chapter 27

"What's your name, son?" The man asked me. I looked up at him. He looked weird, like a cubist portrait of a man. Or I was looking out of one eye, the other obscured by something cold and white. An ice pack.

I was in an...office. When I should clearly be in a hospital room. Thought about his question. What was my name? Asked the voice in my head. "Danny?"

"Your name is Danny?"

I groaned. Pain was coming back. I didn't know so many parts could hurt so badly, so... individually.

"Tell us your name, Danny. The Doctor will give you some morphine and you can sleep."

"Fingerprints? Did you take his fingerprints? If he's been in the services, his fingerprints will come up."

"If this kid's old enough to have served, he can't have been over for more than a few months. He looks like he's barely 18. Why is Parker Ames so set on getting you back, Danny? He's NSA, one of their top agents. Why is he babysitting a PTSD vet?"

"He's making some big noises to the agency about getting him back."

"My head," I said faintly, raising my hands and surprised to find them unrestrained. This room was a small one, me on a couch, a table between us, three chairs and three big men standing in front of the door. Ajar. I could see out into the hallway and knew I was in the security offices of the White House basement.

"Secret Service? You're Secret Service. Great. Danny, what have you got me into? Now what? How am I supposed to get out of this?"

"He is nuts," the agent called James admitted.



“I am not! There are two of us in here!” I yelled. “In my head.”

“You have a concussion on top of everything else,” he said and moved aside. “Let’s get him out of here, let Ames have his nutcase back.”

“Felice. Let me take talk to Felice,” I begged and it was Danny’s voice that spoke. I let him take over, I was curiously distant and didn’t seem to care much, not even when he said he was going to give me back to Parker and the Colonel.

“The President’s daughter isn’t interested in a nutcase. Why would she want to see you?”

It was Danny’s voice that answered him, Danny’s crackling high-pitched fourteen-year-old kid voice who begged, “Tell Lisi, it’s me, Danny. Downtown. Tell her Downtown said that I have to talk to her.” Before he could answer me, I felt my senses shutting down and I let go, even as Danny tried to get me to stay.

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“Dad, he’s not any threat to me or to you,” the girl’s voice argued. “Look at him. He’s beaten to an inch of his life. He can’t even open his eyes. I saw that man kick him in the face.”

No wonder my face hurt. My neck, too. I strained to open my eyes, and saw those green ones as I reached out to her face. She let me touch her soft skin and the shock was electric. Danny said, “Felice, you are so grown up. So pretty. Beautiful.”

“Who are you and why did you tell Jake that you know Dantan?”

“Downtown,” Danny said softly. “You used to call me, Downtown.”

“Dantan’s dead,” she said harshly. “He died over four years ago. What are you trying to pull?”

I heard the chuffing of an old dog, and saw the eyes of the Golden retriever whose face was silver gray and moved stiffly as if her joints ached.

“Dusty,” I said and she came into the room, pushing aside the agents to stick her nose into my face and licked me to the astonishment of both police and the Secret Service agents. Dusty reserved her affections only for close family and definitely not strangers. She laid her head on my lap and now, Felice, gently pulled up my swollen eyelid to peer into my eye.

“His eye is blue, she whispered. “And brown. Danny, tell me, what did I want for my fourteenth birthday?”

“Space camp,” I murmured. “I remember that, Lisi. Don’t remember much.”

“The fingerprints don’t match,” James argued. “I checked. His prints come back to a Daniel Atkinson, works out of Gen-dynamics, Nebraska, a division of AgroChem. He’s twenty-four.”

“Don’t know why I came here,” I said in a faint voice.

“Listen to him,” she argued. “His voice goes back and forth from a kid to an adult. Who are you now, Danny?”

“Daniel. Sometimes, I let Danny out. Right now, Danny is letting me talk.”

“Crazy,” one of the muttered.

She said, “I have a letter from Danny that he sent me and sealed with a kiss. I’ll bet you it matches this man’s DNA. I don’t care what your lab tests show, Jake. And Dusty knows him, too. Danny, what did they do to you?”

“Felice, we need to get him to a hospital, the doc thinks he has a concussion, severe whiplash at the least, maybe even a fractured neck.”

“I’m going with him,” she said, and over their protests sat next to me in the Escalade. I didn’t remember leaving the office, the ride up in the freight elevator or the ride in. Just a few images of her leaning over my face in her lap. And someone warning her not to move my head or neck. Something stiff around it. She smelled like lilacs.

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*Daniel, can you hear me?*

“Danny? Is that you?” I asked, wondering why I hurt so badly.

*Daniel, I’m afraid. I’m not in the vault anymore. I can’t hide. You hurt so badly, and I can feel it, too. Daniel, why did they beat us?*

“To keep from remembering, Danny,” I told him.

*Remembering me, Daniel?*

“I think so. Is it safe to wake up, Danny?”

*I don’t know, Daniel. I’m stuck in this dark with you.*

We heard the muted noises of a hospital, the beeping of machines and voices calling for doctors, respiratory techs over an intercom system and the squeaking of nurses’ shoes. We smelled iodine and alcohol, someone’s aftershave, the rustling of clothes, and the rasp as nylon brushed against nylon.

Coffee. Flowers. Faint odor of urine and sour sickness. Opened our eyes on the diminished slice of vision. Saw the same faces that I’d seen in the basement. “Who are you people?” I asked and it came out a gurgle. My head and neck were encased in a stiff collar. I groaned as the pain made itself known. My face hurt. My belly, back, all throbbed in the same rhythm as my hands, biceps and thighs.

“We’ll give you some more morphine, Danny,” the doctor said. I could barely read his name on his white coat. Doctor Christopher Soroka, M.D. Neurology. That James guy. Felice and a man I knew well from TV and briefings. Jason Rickover, the president. No sign of Parker or the Colonel.

“Just lay still, Danny. You have a concussion, you cracked several ribs, black and blues on nearly every inch of your body. Fractured cheek bone, broken eye orbit, two black eyes, your nose is fractured and your neck. How are your hands and feet?”

“Hurts, I managed.

“Good. That means you have feeling in them. Was he trying to kill you?”

“Parker?” I asked, feeling the slow tide of a drug going in.

“Agent Ames. Yes.”

“I stole his wallet. Ditched him. Pissed him off.” I paused for breath. “Don’t think he wanted to kill me. Too valuable.”

“To the Colonel? Who are you, Daniel? Your paper trail starts four years ago, to a Daniel Atkinson, adopted son of a Mitchell Gaines. Took some digging to find that out.”

“Mitchell,” I said slowly. “He was my dad?”

“What’s wrong with you? Are you mentally ill?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure who or what I am. Sometimes, I’m Daniel. Sometimes I’m Danny. Sometimes, I’m whoever you tell me to be.”

“Who made you this way, Daniel?”

“Doctor Cohen. Doctor Cohen and Doctor Everett. The Colonel. They tore me apart and remade me. So I could spy on people for the Colonel.”

“Spy on people? How, Daniel?”

I quoted the Colonel’s favorite saying, “*I will give you dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth* and through their eyes and yours, Daniel, and I will dominate this world.”

## Chapter 28

I was awake, the misery of my abused muscles keeping me from resting, I ached feverishly yet cold shivers occasionally troubled me. It was deep in the bowels of the night and my room was dark, only the dim light in the hallway illuminated anything, just enough to show me the guard posted outside my door, a uniformed policeman that wore Navy blue of the DC police. He didn’t bother to come in my room to check on me, just peered through the glass to see if I was still in bed. I wasn’t moving, too much hurt when I tried with sharp pains that went down my back and up my neck to explode in my head.

I heard the door open and a body slipped into the room to stand over me. I could see the form, but not clearly enough to identify the face. I did know the voice.

“Daniel, the Colonel is not happy with you. Not happy at all,” Parker threatened. “In fact, if you don’t come with me out of here, I have orders to terminate you.”

“I’d rather be dead, Parker, then go back with you,” I said painfully. “How did you get in here?”

“Waved my credentials to the cop. Homeland Security trumps Metro PD.”

“Homeland Security? You’re NSA.”

“Get up. Let’s go.” He spoke the trigger phrase, and all the pain disappeared though the weakness remained. He had to help me out of bed and hooked a wheelchair with his foot placing me in it. Covered me with the blanket from the bed. Sent the cop down the hallway on some errand. “Keep quiet, Daniel. Don’t speak unless I tell you to.”

“Yes,” I said flatly. Danny was protesting but he couldn’t access me. He was yelling in my head, distracting me from Parker’s commands.

Danny got through in the elevator, setting me gently aside, just as the doors closed and he yelled so loud he startled Ames and the people coming down the hallway. They started running and Ames pulled out his pistol, pushing it into my forehead, forcing my head back, even in the stiff collar.

“Shut up, Daniel, or I’ll make it permanent,” he threatened.

“You’re a dick,” Danny sobbed. “You won’t kill me. I’m too important, too valuable and unique. The Colonel will kill you if you hurt me.”

“The Colonel told me to bring you back, dead or alive, Daniel.” He pushed the button for the lowest floor, the parking garage.

“You can destroy Daniel,” I said, “but you can’t touch me.”

He stopped dead, his hands rolling me around to face him between two parked cars. Hybrids. I wondered what a hybrid was.

“Daniel, who are you?”

“I’m not Daniel,” I said bravely. “I’m Danny.”

“There is no Danny,” he laughed. “No, Daniel, either. You’re just a program downloaded onto a blank slate, programmed by Doctor Cohen and Doctor Andrews. You’re not real. The Colonel had you created so he could use your talent for the NSA and his Black Ops.”

I was silent, Daniel protested feebly; his fear making him nearly comatose. They had taken so much from me, I no longer knew what was real or lies.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked in a whisper.

“Fort Wyvern, Nebraska. What we call the zoo. Where the Colonel will reprogram you.”

“Please,” I begged. “Let me go! I’ve done nothing to you. Why do you want to do this to me?”

“Because you can read minds,” he said. “Even if you are crazy. I’ve seen proof. You can read minds of people you aren’t even near.”

“No, I can’t,” I sobbed. “The Colonel lied to you. I can’t read people’s minds. Only Daniel’s.”

“Daniel, Danny. Whoever you are, you belong to the Colonel,” he hit his key-chain and an agency SUV beeped in the parking structure. I struggled, and because Daniel had

given over control to me, I was able to ignore his programmed response and make a break for it, while he was opening the car door.

He screamed at me to stop. I couldn't believe how bad my body felt, I was surprised I was moving it all. This body was taller and heavier than I was used to.

I ran between parked cars heading for the stair well. I knew Parker was close behind, and I'd never have time to reach an elevator. Shouts followed us. A bevy of other male agents came out of the cage and stairwells above us. I skidded around a retaining wall and dropped down onto another level with Parker close enough to see his flaring nostrils. More of the Colonel's men joined him, trying to cut me off.

"Daniel!" I gasped, "What do I do?" My eyes searched frantically for a way out and he told me to head for the wall of the orange level, O-6 and jump.

"Jump? Are you crazy?" I gasped even as I saw it. Hit the half wall and leaped, my legs tucked under me in a move reminiscent of a Parkour jump or skateboard airs. Sailed over the Annex and down onto a dumpster piled with garbage bags that cushioned my fall. Saw he had seen it through the eyes of a dozen long tailed cats clustered in and around the dumpster. Climbing out took an impressive bit of upper body strength. My ribs shrieked in protest and every ache tripled as I slipped to the floor. I turned around and saw Parker on the wall, his face a furious darkened mask of rage, his gun out and pointing straight at me.

Birds burst out of the rafters, rats ran from the maintenance tunnels, cats hissed and arched their backs. I turned and ran.

Tripped. Fell down in slow motion as a bee buzzed past my ear. Hit the concrete as a tidal wave of fur and feathers covered me.

A Maine Coon licked my face. It felt curiously warm, wet. I coughed. Saw sprays of red touch its coat.

"Daniel?" I asked and knew it was only in my head. So red, spreading on the cement under me, thick, viscous. Warm bodies covered me, nuzzled me so I wasn't alone. I couldn't breathe. My chest wouldn't rise. I gagged. Fought for breath.

"Daniel," I whispered. "Are we dying?" I heard the faintest whisper from him. *I'm not real, Danny. So how can I die?* Silence.

## Chapter 29

Jake James saw the NSA agent in the parking garage, pushing Daniel in a wheelchair, his hand gripping the boy's shoulder in a manner clearly not friendly. He yelled and bolted down the ramp, his fellow agents, cops, and guards from the boy's protection detail following close behind.

"Ames! Stop, or we'll take you down!"

Ames shoved the chair forward into the open door of an SUV, and James saw Daniel kick with both feet in a move that must have been agony. Saw Parker Ames fall and the boy get up and stagger. He ran like a drunk yet his 38 inch long legs were a miracle to watch, he was as fast as an Olympic sprinter.

More agents joined the chase and the White House Secret Service men cornered all but Ames, who managed to escape them.

“Jesus!” James cursed as Daniel leaped onto the wall and dove off in what was surely a lethal fall. Ames stood and fired just as Jake reached a clear shot when the NSA agent fired again. Both guns went off and Ames fell forward, not even screaming as he disappeared over the wall. Behind James, the rest of his men caught up and he was stunned when he saw who was in the lead. “Holy Christ! Mitchell Gaines!”

“Call an ambulance!” Gaines yelled, looking over the wall. What he saw caused him to rear back in astonishment. The boy’s body was surrounded by and covered with every beast of the earth and air, yet he could clearly see a growing pool of blood. “He’s bleeding, James!” Gaines shouted and leaped. The Secret Service agent followed seconds later, both of them rolling out of the dumpster. The animals hissed, beat their wings, and attacked, driving them both back.

“Danny,” Mitch begged. “Danny, it’s Dad. Let me help you, Danny.”

The boy turned his head and sent the animals away in a cloud that dimmed the sun and Gaines was able to search his body, finding two separate wounds in his back. He looked helplessly at the Secret Service agent who pulled off his jacket and shirt to wad them up against the bubbling blood. Turned the boy over to wince as he saw the larger exit wounds to the chest.

“Danny,” Mitch cried and drew the boy into his arms as they heard the wail of ambulances and helicopters. James spoke into his mike to order the medi-flight to come down and get the boy, telling them he had two gunshot wounds to the chest. He turned to Gaines, “who is he, Mitch?”

“Daniel Gaines, my son,” he cried, tears running down his cheeks. “I raised him from the time he was fourteen until Colonel Pierce took him away from me. I’ve been looking for him since. Nearly a year, James.”

“Who is he, Mitchell?”

Paramedics reached them and took the boy from Mitch’s arms. Had him intubated, lines in and shock pants on him. Rushed him up to the helicopter in less than a minute. They watched it fly off standing on the roof as the rest of his detail joined them. He asked again. “Who is he, Mitchell?”

“The Colonel stole him. From Oliver Sustain’s R&D lab in Fairfax. Two scientists had him, Doctor Everett Hawthorne and Doctor Marian Cohen. Behavioral psychiatrists and neurobiologist. Working on behavior modification. What we used to call brainwashing.” He paused. “They’re both dead. The Colonel had them eliminated. I think, I think he used to be Dantan De Rosier.”

“Used to be?”

“The program destroys the original personality and then programs in a new one. Whatever the Colonel wanted. He had to wait four years for him to mature, no one would let a fourteen-year-old in the places the Colonel wanted to send him. He downloaded Danny, as Daniel, a French orphan who was abused and traumatized almost to a level of

mental retardation. Jasmine and I adopted him. Pierce used his little techniques on us, also. When Daniel turned eighteen, he was accepted to CalPoly. We flew him out there. His roommate was Parker Ames. Jazz, and I never heard from him in person, always emails and recorded messages. I got suspicious and started checking up, Pierce found out and threatened me. I've been shadowing Ames, using old contacts, heard he flew in to Dulles. I've been two steps behind him since. What hospital will go to, Jake?"

"Walter Reed. Same doctors the President uses. Best Cardiac guys on the East Coast."

"Get me there," he begged.

"Why, Mitch? Why did the Colonel want this kid so bad, he'd kill for him?"

"Because he reads minds, James," and such was his conviction that James believed him. He ordered an FBI chopper to pick them up, gave orders to his men to have a word with the President, Felice and to bring Senator De Rosier to Walter Reed but not reveal any of the situation to him. He notified the FBI about Ames and the Colonel, while Gaines fretted anxiously beside him.

The flight took five minutes and deposited the two on the helipad where they were met by more Secret Service and officers who escorted them to the waiting room outside of the OR.

The agent named Jimmy Peterson greeted James. "The ER surgeon came out, said he's in surgery. Two bullets through the chest, one exited. He lost a lot of blood. They don't know if he'll make it. Who is he, Mitch?"

"President Rickover, his daughter and Senator De Rosier will be here soon, Pete. See to the security arrangements."

"Who is this kid? Do we treat him with kid gloves or as a fugitive?"

"You treat him like he's President Rickover's son, got that? And his name is Danny. Let me know when the senior FBI SAIC gets here. I believe it's Todd Dunne."

"Yes, Sir. Senator De Rosier is in Virginia. He says if it's important, he can fly in tomorrow."

"It's important enough to send a chopper for him, Pete, it's important enough for him to be here now. See to it with an armed escort."

"Yes, Sir," he hesitated, curiosity winning out. "The police and EMTs said this kid was shot attempting to escape custody."

"He was shot escaping from the NSA who kidnapped him four years ago. He's Dantan Townsley De Rosier," said Gaines flatly.

"No shit?"

"We took him from Homeland Security to the NSA facility in Nebraska and then on to Dallas." Gaines told them. Everyone straightened up as Felice Rickover ran into the waiting room and made a beeline for James.

“Jake, is it true? They shot him? They shot Danny?” She was crying, her makeup a runny mess on her cheeks. The President came striding in, surrounded by his agents. He faced Gaines and James, his face a study in surprise.

“Games? I thought you’d died?”

“Long story, Mister President. I was involved with Danny and the Colonel.”

“Colonel Pierce of the NSA?” Rickover asked.

“Yes. He’s responsible for this mess. Although Oliver Sustain started it,” Gaines said with venom.

“Sustain?” Rickover snapped.

“Yes, Mister President. Director Sustain had the boy kidnapped from an abandoned boat yard on the Potomac. Set it up to look like he was murdered. The Colonel found out and raided HS R&D section, took the boy and the scientists in charge of the project.”

“You went along with this?”

“He used the same techniques on me, Mister President. Wiped my memories of HS. I thought I’d been in a car accident on the way back from Sustain’s office. I had the injuries to prove it. Found myself retired on disability and was offered a job at General Dynamics Fiber-optics in Dallas.

“The Colonel set up an adoption for my wife and me, Daniel, a French orphan, who went faithfully to therapy every week with Doctor Cohen, the same Doctor Cohen, who worked for Sustain, and Pierce. I took Danny, and when my doubts rose, she treated me, also.”

“How did you break free?”

Gaines smile was grim, “a father’s intuition. I knew Danny was in trouble. Tried to contact him and couldn’t find him at college. I followed his roommate, called in favors and found out Ames was flying back from Dubai to Dulles. I flew in and followed him.”

The surgical Nurse came out, all they could see of her was her eyes and brows, big blue eyes that radiated warmth and concern. They widened when she recognized Rickover.

“Mister President?”

“Nurse? Doctor?” Rickover asked.

“Nurse Phillips, Sir. Doctor Abrams sent me out to tell Agent James he has removed the bullet and are working on his lung. We have his pressure back up. He’s fighting to stay with us. The bullet that exited tore a hole through the pericardium, he lost quite a bit of blood. The doctors should be closing him up in a few hours, they’ll come out and talk to you then. We’re cautiously optimistic, he’s made it through surgery this far. Was he in an accident? He’s terribly bruised, shows sign of fractures and his neck x-rays show a fractured C-3.”

“You do whatever you need to keep him alive,” the President swore.

“Yes, Sir. What’s his name? The paramedics who brought him in didn’t know it.”



“Dantan,” Foley said. “Dantan Townsley De Rosier.”

“Dant---the Senator’s dead son?” The nurse gaped.

“You keep him alive,” Felice growled. “You keep him alive or I’ll---” She trailed off and buried her face in her dad’s chest. The nurse flew back through the OR doors and they all heard the surgeon’s shout as she relayed the news.

## Chapter 30

Michael Patrick De Rosier stared at the solemn faces of Secret Service and FBI special agents as they held out their hands gesturing for him to mount the chopper. He was dressed in jeans, dress shirt with a heavy winter jacket over that, but nothing on his head. Deep lines of grief had marked his face, he looked much older yet still handsome and distinguished. Ms. Penny stood near him, holding his briefcase of notes on the land issue he was investigating.

“Senator!” The senior FBI agent called. “We need you to come immediately.”

He looked around, the chopper had set down on the lawn of the preserve’s gatehouse expressly for him.

“What for?” He shouted over the noise of the turbines.

“President Rickover will explain when you arrive, Senator. Please, step inside.”

“May my PA come with me?”

“Certainly, sir. We’ll make your apologies to the Director of the preserve.”

The Senator climbed inside and offered Ms. Penny a hand. Both belted themselves in, and the SA shut the copter’s hatch, standing well back from the blades as the pilot lifted off, turned sharply and headed back to Washington.

“Senator,” Ms. Penny asked nervously through the earphones. “What can this be about?” Although she had been with the Senator for over ten years and knew the important crusades he was on, she also knew he wasn’t senior enough to rate a Presidential pick up, nor deny the President’s request.

The SA came back and sat opposite the Senator. “Is there anything that I can get you, sir? Water, coffee? This trip will take about twenty-five minutes, total.”

“Why?” De Rosier asked simply, looking at the FBI logos on the interior and the man’s coat.

“The President will explain sir,” the agent said carefully. “Agent James is there, also.”

“Jake James? My former bodyguard? Where exactly are we going? The White House?”

“I believe he is the same agent once assigned to you, Senator. No, we have orders to land at Walter Reed.”

“Walter Reed? Is Rickover injured or sick?”

“No, sir. The President will explain. I don’t know much, just that it involved a shooting near the White House.”

“Felice? Felice is okay?”

“The President’s daughter is with him, and as far as I know, both are fine.”

“Thank God for that. May I have a large coffee, extra light and sweet?” He asked. “Penny?”

“Black.”

The special agent went forward and brought back two thermoses and two covered mugs that had the FBI logo on them. He poured black coffee into both mugs and from the other, milk into the Senator’s, offering him a choice of sweeteners in colored packages.

“Sorry,” he grinned. “No Dunkin Donuts, or Keurigs on board. Budget cuts, you know.”

De Rosier grinned, pulled out a handful of his own yellow packets and added them to the stash. He drank the cup down and held it out for more.

“His blood is half Colombian supreme,” Ms. Penny grinned nervously.

“Is not,” De Rosier came back. “It’s 100% American.” He fell silent, wondering why he was heading for Walter Reed hospital.

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The surgeon came out two and a half hours later, looking tired and frustrated. His hands were very clean and cold as he shook the President’s hand.

“Mister President, I’m Doctor Abrams, cardiac surgeon. Doctor Sisson is still in surgery, closing up for me. We repaired the damage to the heart and his lungs, have the blood loss replaced. The bullets hit somewhat high through his back, the first one through his lung, hit his sternum and bounced back into his spine. The second is the one that exited. That one tore a hole in his pericardium, the sac around his heart. The stitches are holding, he’s come through surgery and is still maintaining his blood pressure. His heart is weak, traumatized. He is a 40% chance of surviving the night.”

Felice sobbed in a breath and Rickover hugged her. “Still, I gave him only a 20% chance of surviving open-heart surgery. The oddest thing, I looked under a microscope at the damage when I was stitching and I swear I could see the marks of up of a... birds foot holding the wound closed.” He held out his hand and in them were four the tiny talons with just a hint of blood on them. “They kept the blood from his heart from drowning it until I opened him up. Now tell me, how could a bird get its claws inside a man’s chest and do what it did to try and save his life?”

“You believe in miracles, Doctor Abrams?” The President asked. “Because I do.”

“He’ll be in recovery, then, ICU. Probably won’t wake up for quite a few hours.”

“When can we see him?” Gaines asked, his face white. “I’m his dad.”

“His name is Daniel Gaines? We were told. –.”

“You said the bullet bounced off his chest and hit his spine?” Felice asked, wiping at fresh tears.

“Ms. Rickover. Yes.”

“How bad?” Her eyes were huge in her face.

“If he lives, he’ll be paralyzed for life. From the waist down.”

“No. No, no, no!” Felice screamed and turning, she pummeled the wall, the chair until her father restrained her. “It’s not fair!” She cried. “It’s not fair to Danny! God, I hate you!”

“Felice,” her father hugged her in a bear hug that shut out the world. “Felice, you have to be strong. For Danny and for his dad.” He took her into a corner, and whispered to her, slowly getting control of her breathing and emotions. Waiting.

## Chapter 32

An eagle’s talons held me together. Hundreds of hairy rat bodies sat on my chest and crawled down my throat gagging me with the taste of naked tails.

It hurt. Tears trickled out of my eyes and pooled around the taste of plastic and rubber. A faint hiss and dry puffs of air. Oh God. My chest hurt so badly. My hands wouldn’t move and I couldn’t feel anything below my knees. Couldn’t feel my thighs or having to go pee. I always had to pee when I woke up.

I tried to open my eyes and saw only a sliver through them. They burned. My face felt huge, my cheeks puffed up into the bottom of my eyelids. I ran my tongue over my teeth, and felt all of them still in there. I ran it around the outside of my mouth and touched the rim of something stuck to the sides of my face. It tasted like plastic.

A lady in a face mask leaned over and looked at me. “Danny?” She turned to speak over her shoulder to someone. “His eyes are flickering. He’s trying to come back. It’s okay, Danny. You’re safe. At Walter Reed hospital. You’re recovering from surgery, Danny. Some people want to see you.”

Dad. Felice. Her dad. I mumbled something. Felice kissed me on the cheek and my face felt hot. She looked years older, dressed in a sober suit of navy blue, her hair cut short and styled. She had a huge basket of chocolates which she set down on the bed tray. The whole room was crammed full of goodies and flowers and people.

Dad kissed me next and tried to find a spot he could hug. I blinked before President Rickover could do the same. He picked up my hand and held it instead. “Danny. How do you feel?”

“Like a Republican won the Presidential election,” I whispered. Somehow, they heard me.

Tremulous smiles appeared on their faces. I was suddenly tired and closed my eyes. I heard Dad jump on the doctor.

“It’s okay, Senator. His vitals are stable. I think he’s just exhausted. He’s probably hurting, too. He’ll wake up later for longer periods. You can stay if you wish, but don’t tire him.”

*Dad, I thought. Never too old for hugs, Dad.* So he carefully squeezed me around the shoulders and I fell back into the darkness with a ray of light holding my way.

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I woke up groggy, crying as the pain moved through me like pins and needles, only they were a hundred times worse. Throbbing, sharp stabs that took my breath away. My toes burned. I cried out, I was on fire.

Dad came to my side. “Danny? Are you in pain? Shall I call the doctor?”

“Dad,” I wailed and he flew out the door yelling for help and scores of people came in the room. All jockeying for position around me like I was the main course at a buffet line.

“His pulse, respiration, and pressure are all up,” the nurse reported. “Are you hurting, honey?” I nodded in millimeters, my neck brace prevented me from more than that. “How about some morphine, Danny?”

Efficiently, she popped a syringe into my IV and the pain receded. It made everything fuzzy and gave me that ‘I don’t care’ attitude. Hey, I thought sleepily. That thing’s off my face. A jolt hit my stomach and I recognized it not as hunger, but as fear. “Parker,” I moaned. “Parker will get me!”

Mitchell was waiting with them this time, and he found my hand. “Danny, Parker’s dead. Agent James, ‘Matt Dillon’, shot him.” He smiled.

I looked over at Felice and her dad. “You’ve been here all this time?”

She nodded. “Yes, Danny. Did you forget, you saved my dad’s life?”

“I did?” I tried to open my eyes but they were still swollen nearly shut. I could at least talk, even if it was through fat lips.

“Yes, you did, Dantan,” President Rickover smiled. “I’m going to award you with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Dantan. Not just for saving my life, but for putting yours in danger to protect the morals and laws of this country.”

“Wasn’t me, sir. It was Daniel.” My eyes kept straying to Felice. “You’re all grown up, Lisi,” I mumbled, and saw my Dad motion to everyone in the room.

President Rickover said, “Felice—.”

“I know, Dad. Senator D. I won’t tire him out.”

They rose and left her alone with me in an awkward silence which I broke first nervously. “Felice, how old are you now?”

“Nineteen, Danny. You?”

“Fourteen, Felice. In my head I’m still fourteen even if my body says otherwise. Do you have a boyfriend, Felice?”

“No, Danny. You have a girlfriend?”

I waved my hand at the bed and the plastic shell around my belly, waist and hips that kept me from moving. “Who would want me, Felice,” I said in disgust. “I can’t go to the bathroom or even wipe my own butt. I might as well be dead.”

“Don’t you say that, Dantan,” she snapped. “You deserve to live.”

“I didn’t deserve this, Felice,” I said, and stared off into the distance. I felt someone take my hand, and nudge me, we were standing in a room lit by brilliant sunshine and she was gloriously naked so that she looked like she was bathed in fire.

*Felice*, I breathed and she heard me. In my head. She was there.

Danny, she took my hands and placed them on her amazing breasts and kissed me, open mouth, and she tasted like strawberries and orange dreamsicles and cherry Kool-Aid. Then, her hands moved down my face to my hands and placed them lower, let me explore all those crevices and hollows I’d only dreamed about, but would never admit to. Let me come up for air and I whispered into her neck, *can I do this, Felice?*

*And she smiled. You are doing this, Danny in our minds. I lost you once, and I don’t care how old you think you are in your mind now. And yes, that’s how you do that Ahh God that feels good Danny, I love you I love your eyes. I’ve waited for this since I was ten years old—.*

I blinked and she was standing there in my hospital room, her hand at her waist, her eyes heavy lidded and breathing fast. She smiled at me, a deliciously sated smile, leaned over me and kissed me in the flesh, it was every bit as good as being in her head. I groaned and she smothered it with her mouth, pulled down my sheets and regarded the plastic carapace that held my shattered spine and pelvis together.

Washed me off with warm wash cloths and scented lotion and I felt nothing, and yet everything. Felt my eyes closing slowly in a gentle sleep with a smile on my face.

### Chapter 33

They woke me up in the morning. The Doctor came in and checked the incision in my chest. He was careful not to hurt me while he did it, and was all smiles. “Your EKG looks great, Dantan,” he said. “I have you scheduled for a dye test to see if the sutures inside are holding. How do you feel?”

“Tired. Pain comes and goes. The medicine makes me sleepy.”

“Morphine does that. We can cut back, but it will hurt worse. How’s your eyes?” He flicked a penlight in my brown one, which was the one with the most swelling.

“Did you see that man’s body?” I asked in a low voice.

“You mean the man who shot you, Danny?”

“Yes. He’s dead?”

“Yes, Danny. Your friend Jake James shot him through the heart, and he fell three stories to the concrete. Broke every bone in his body.”

“Good.” I closed my eyes. “How bad am I broken?” I didn’t want to see his face when he answered. His voice was kind, matter of fact.

“The bullet that hit you in the back, Danny. The first one – it hit your breastbone and ricocheted off to smash into your L3, right above your hips and destroyed your spine, fracturing your pelvis. If one hadn’t crippled you, the other would have. You won’t walk, you’ll likely be unable to control your bowel or urinary systems.” He hesitated. “You might be able to have sex. Sometimes, that still works if your partner helps... stimulate you.”

I laughed, and he thought I was being sarcastic. “Danny, have you had sex, yet?”

“Doc, I’m just fourteen. That’s a little young, isn’t it?”

“Your body is nineteen, Danny. You’re telling me you’ve never had a girl, or masturbated?”

“Maybe Daniel did but not me,” I shrugged my face turning red. “I mean, I kissed girls, but I never went any farther.”

“Felice?”

I looked shocked. “She’s the President’s daughter! You think I want to be hanged?”

“Well, I’m just saying, there’s no reason you can’t try.”

I snickered. “I think my Dad gave me this talk when I was twelve, Doc. I’m hungry. Any chance of a meal?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he smiled. “In the meantime, do what the nurses and therapists tell you. Ask for pain medicine when it hurts. Rest. Take it easy. I just stitched you back together only four days ago.” I waved my one good hand at him and never heard him leave my room.

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The physical therapist came in my room while I was sleeping and woke me up as I started to scream. I don’t remember why I was screaming, I only knew it was horrible. It brought more people in to find out what was going on, that the only one I wanted was my dad. I reached up to him, dragged his body close to mine and shuddered against his broad chest. He smelled so familiar that I started crying. He rubbed my head and the back of my shoulders, murmuring words I had listened to many times before when I was little.

“Dad,” I shivered, and he kissed me on the forehead.

“Danny boy, God, how I missed you.”

“Dad, Uncle Townsley?”

“He passed away two years ago, Danny. He was as with it as a thirty-five-year-old man in an eighty-eight-year-old body. He told me never to give up on you, you’d always be alive as long as one of us still believed in you. His last words were of you, ‘the birds of the air, the beasts of the fields, the creatures that swim in the sea.’ He mourned you, Danny boy. He blamed himself. So did I. I thought if you’d trusted me, if you hadn’t run off, you’d still be alive.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Dad. It was mine. I should never have run away. I’m sorry.”

“What kind of bad dream was it, Danny?”

“I was being chased by big black suited soldiers. They caught me, had no faces just black swords that ate my memories until all that was left of me was a faded photograph. Dad, will they come after me again?”

“Both Director Sustain and the Colonel have been arrested, Danny. The President has ordered the Secret Service to protect you the same as Felice. When you’re better, we’ll get you out of here and go out west somewhere where you can recover completely. Then you can decide what you want to do.”

I didn’t answer him. In truth, I had no answer to that question. I had been a track star, I had wanted to go into training for the triathlon and was now reduced to being a paraplegic for the rest of my life. “Will I be able to sit in a wheelchair?” I wasn’t sure how bad the extent of my injuries were.

“I think so, Danny. The therapist can explain it better than I.”

He introduced himself and told me the only person I would hate worse than he was the person who’d put me in the wheelchair and I told him that wouldn’t do me any good as he was dead. We did passive exercises with my legs, nothing strenuous as my bones were still healing. I couldn’t feel his hands on me below the waist. I could see his resting on the carapace. Asked if that line was in me.

“You mean the catheter?”

“Yeah. Is that why don’t feel like I have to pee?”

“Yes, Danny. Shall we try your arms?”

“Why? I can move those.” I could feel the pain creeping back up and my stomach hurt. Looking around the room at all the baskets and flowers, I pointed asking Dad if he could get me something to eat. He brought me a Dove chocolate bar and opened it for me. I chewed, let it melt in my mouth, and felt an odd jolt as someone’s thoughts intruded in my skull.

“Dad!”

“What, Danny? He looked up from watching the therapist’s hands on my calves.

“There’s someone out there who knows about me, Dad. He’s planning to steal me away,” I said in horror.

“Who, Danny? Tell me who?” He bolted up and headed for the door and the agent just outside. It was Mitchell and he came in like a charging rhino.

“I can’t sense him anymore,” I said in dismay. “Dad, you have to get me out of here. They’ll take me away, and I’ll never see you again. Or Felice. I’ll die if they lock me up in that cage!”

“Calm down, Danny. Tell us who. Who did you see?” Mitchell asked.

“I don’t know. He hid his mind from me just now. I caught traces of his thoughts. Curare, a body bag from the morgue. My name. A million dollars. Someone paid him a million dollars to acquire me.”

My blood pressure skyrocketed, an alarm sounded bringing in more personnel and the doctors scolded me for getting upset but my father quickly got them to see why I was so frantic. They decided to move me, bed and all to a private room in the VIP ward where past Presidents stayed when in need of rest or recovering. Every one of the guards were handpicked by Gaines and James, placed there by President Rickover.

“What should we do, Senator?” Gaines asked.

“Are Sustain, and Pierce still in custody?” My Dad asked in a low voice, but I heard him.

Mitchell’s answer made my blood pressure spike again, and I shrieked, loud enough to sound like a girl.

“Danny. Quiet!” My Dad’s voice was sharp and the tone cut through my hysteria like I was a ten-year-old caught with my hand in his wallet.

“Danny, I won’t let anything happen to you. You’re safe, I promise. Mitchell, called Jake and the President. Find out if I can bring Danny to the White House with his nurses. You’ll be safe there, Danny. Safer there than anywhere else. Call the doctor, see if Danny can be airlifted.”

“Yes, Senator.”

Dad came over to me and calmed me down. I felt so helpless, I couldn’t even lift myself up in bed. “Dad, I can’t get away if he comes for me.”

“We won’t let that happen, Danny,” he promised. The Doctor came in and Dad took him aside warning me not to listen in.

## Chapter 34

They drugged me so I wouldn’t move around in the helicopter. I protested, saying I wanted to be able to see what a cool trip in a flight ambulance was, but the Doctor told me I wouldn’t have been able to sit up anyway, it would separate the bones in my spine and pelvis if I moved the wrong way. So I woke up only when I was ensconced in my new room. When I was aware enough to really see, it was a girl’s room with pretty blue flowers, frilly curtains, posters of current heartthrobs. Felice’s room. Her bed was pushed over to make room for mine and my hospital equipment.

She was sitting in a rocker, her legs tucked under her bottom and reading on her Kindle.

“Lisi,” I said wearily. She unfolded, put down her Kindle and came over to me smiling.

“Welcome to the White House, Danny boy. How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Tired. Where is everyone?”



“Checking up on things. Are you hungry? The chef is making your favorite things. Or at least, what I remember of your favorites.”

“Is it breakfast time?”

“Almost dinner.”

“Any chocolate around here?” I couldn’t see the corners of the room, just directly in front of me, wherever my eyes could see without turning my head. “Are you going to take care of me, Felice?”

“Some of it, Danny. Most the nurses will do. Your dad hired them from the hospital so they vetted clean.”

“He escaped. He’s after me, Felice,” I said softly. She took my hand and held it to her lips.

“Danny, he has to go through the entire Secret Service to get to you. And me, he has to get through me, Danny.”

I remembered how well she could shoot. “Danny, can you... do that thing again? In my head?”

I smiled. “Maybe later, Felice. I’m tired now. Think I’ll sleep. Eat, later.”

I dreamed. Wandered in my dreams looking for Daniel but he was gone. Dreamed of my Mom and Uncle Townsley, he came with her and told me they loved me. He told me he was sorry for what happened to me, that it wasn’t what they’d seen was my destiny. I asked if he thought my legs would come back, that I could still feel what it was like to run on two strong legs. Mom cradled me in her arms and rocked me like she’d done when I was little.

“You have a great girl, Danny,” she kissed me. “Let her take care of you.”

“I know, Mom. Dad, too. He still loves you, Mom.”

“I watch over you two always, Danny.”

“Are you the light I saw when I was in the vault, Mom?” I asked snuggling against her chest.

“The light is always in you, Danny. You’re a child of light. Now, Felice is waiting for you. Make her happy. Wake up, Danny. Be happy. I watch over you always and forever.”

Soft kisses woke me and a warm body was lying next to me in my bed. I reached out with my hand and stroked her from her chin to as far as my hand could stretch, felt soft T-shirt and silky pants, her softly rounded belly and hard hip bones. She let me explore and I chuckled, remembering back when my hand cupped a soft breast and been punched for it. Not so now. Her breath quickened and her hands moved, but I couldn’t feel where.

“On your penis,” she murmured, and we were there. Inside her glorious mind and then my own where I could feel her hand on me, stroking, widening as I grew under her touch.

She kissed me. In my head, and for real. Tingles fluttered in my belly and I could feel her own tidal surge of desire, her nipples hardened, her pulse racing as the wave

crescendoe and spilled over, taking me with it. A slow, lingering flush of pleasure that started at the back of my head, and to my toes.

She kissed me on the corner of my eyes and whispered. “Danny, that was intense. I never imagined it could be like that.” She smiled. “Again?” We spent the whole evening lost in pleasure until she cried hunger, slipping out of bed to dress in sweats, promising to return with a feast for a king. She came back with the chef himself pushing a trolley loaded with covered dishes from which enticing smells emanated.

“Hello, young man,” he grinned. “I’ve made you all your favorites. Lasagna, garlic bread, French fries. Black forest cake. Crab cakes, sourdough bread and pound cake.”

My mouth watered and Felice carefully raised the bed up enough so I could eat, but not enough to put any strain on my back. She fed me, little bites in between her own and made a game out of it with the chef egging her on, and before I knew it, I had cleaned my plate.

Thanked the chef with a full belly and asked his name. “Chef Marcel Proust at your service, sir,” he smiled. “For breakfast tomorrow – crepe Suzette’s?”

“Those little pancakes stuffed with goodies?” I asked and he grinned.

“Let me guess, you like chocolate, oui?”

I answered him in French and astonished, he rattled off a whole line of pleased conversation to which I actually responded. “He speaks French! And with a pure Parisian accent!”

“Danny, when did you learn French?” Felice questioned. I shrugged.

“Dunno. I think Daniel spoke French. Rohan spoke Arabic and Farsi.”

“Rohan?”

“Rohan de Chevalier. He was the dude that the Colonel sent to Dubai,” I told them.

“Why?”

I looked at Chef Proust and he smiled, bowed and excused himself, taking the empties with him, but leaving the pound cake.

“Danny, the nurse will be in later to check your incision and toilet you. And then, the therapist will be in to do your exercises. Now, tell me about Rohan.”

“I think Doctor Andrews invented him. He was French from Paris, one of the lesser noble families because the Saudi I was sent to bribe wouldn’t even grant an interview unless one was of the same social status. Rohan brought him a tiercel.”

“A tiercel?”

“A female Peregrine falcon. He was into falconry. The bird was worth fifty K and only a special few with the right permits and clout could purchase one.”

“Why, Danny? Why did the Colonel send you, send this Rohan?”

I hesitated, said slowly, “Felice, that thing we do, where you go into my mind, I can do that to almost anyone. And anything.”

“God, I hope not,” she laughed. “That’s kinky.”

*Felice, I said into her mind. I can read your thoughts. No, you’re not crazy, and I’m not talking out loud.*

“Danny.” Her mouth hung open.

*I can go into Dusty’s mind, or a bird, a cat, even mice. The only thing I haven’t been able to ‘read’ were bugs.*

“Fish?” She asked out loud.

“Well, no. Not fish.” Her face darkened as she thought back to all those times when Dusty was with her in the bathroom and her bedroom.

*No, Felice, I told her. I never peeped on you when you were...private.*

“Can you do lottery numbers, too?”

I laughed. “No, Felice,” I said, switching it off. “All you have to do is hang up a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign in your head, and I won’t go in.”

“Like this?” It was as if she slammed the door in my nose.

I winced. “Yeah.”

“Don’t go in there unless I ask,” she threatened. I nodded, crossed my fingers and swore. She kissed me and let the nurse in who did all those things I couldn’t. She put me to bed and I fell asleep before Felice came back.

## Chapter 35

It was nearly Thanksgiving, several weeks after my surgery and my staples and stitches were long gone but not the after effects of what had been major open heart surgery. I was very weak, depressed from both my physical condition and mental status. You could see my face without the bumps, swellings and bruises. I could see out of both eyes and was astonished how much like my Mom I looked. I couldn’t judge how tall I was anymore but the PT torture people had me working on my upper body trying to build back my strength. I could sit up, bend over, and hurl myself out of bed into a wheelchair. I was tortured by phantom pains down my legs that I howled over during the night, waking up Felice, my nurses and half the White House staff.

Dad had bought me a really cool racing chair, light weight, fire engine red with yellow flames. Even better, he brought over a sleek, well fed Blue Heeler cross he’d found outside our house the day after I’d been kidnapped. I was astonished when I recognized her as the dog that had brought me to the boatyard.

“I adopted her, Danny,” Dad said. “She came to me after I lost you. Skinny, starved and scared but she let me touch her, feed her. Every time I thought about you, she was there. Like she was comforting me.”

“What did you name her?”

“Vange.”

I called her over and she put her head on my lap. I stroked her as she stared into my eyes. Hers were blue and brown, her skull bony under my fingers. I put my hand on her collar and she pulled me forward, chuffed as if it was a game she enjoyed. We went down the corridor and back while Dad watched in delight.

“Someone trained her, Danny. I took her to the vet, she’s about five years old, mostly Heeler and in good health. She’s had all her shots and spayed. Knows a dozen commands. She’s yours.”

“Dad.” I wanted to say thanks but couldn’t seem to get the words out.

“Oh, and Dusty likes her.” He walked alongside me as I pushed my chair along, Vange staying on my right. I had already scoped out the entire White House and even those places most staff weren’t allowed entry.

“Where’s Felice?” he asked.

“School. Finals are coming up for Midterms before Thanksgiving.”

“About Thanksgiving. Jason wants to know if you want to spend it here or at home.” His tone was casual.

I froze instantly. The White House was my cocoon and I was afraid to leave it. “They find the Colonel yet?”

“No,” Dad was terse.

“Any more trace of that dude that wants to take me?”

“You ever ‘hear’ him again?”

“No,” I said shortly. Not for lack of trying.

“Then, I guess we’ll celebrate it here.”

We rounded the corner of the family quarters off limits to all but the First Family and Secret Service. I waved to the agents on duty and the Staff. “Hi, Dantan,” they greeted me with smiles and my Dad with respect. “Senator De Rosier.”

“Mary, Tony, Mr. Kenyon.” He was the White House Butler.

“How are you feeling, Danny?”

“Okay,” I popped a wheelie under the portrait of Thomas Jefferson. President Rickover’s Chief of Staff came out of the Briefing Room and looked harried.

“Senator, just the man I was looking for. Is Friday night at 8 pm okay?”

Dad nodded. “I’ll make sure it’s on.”

“Good,” he said. “Blue, I think. Haircut, too.”

“That’s like pulling teeth,” he rolled his eyes.

“Hey, if you’re saying I need a haircut,” I complained, “try being bald.”

Dad gave me a little cuff on the back of the head but carefully. I'd fractured it when Parker had kicked me in the face. I was surprised my face had healed without scarring but Dad had told me that top Plastic Surgeons had worked on it while I'd been unconscious. I rubbed my eyebrow, teasing Dad about wanting a piercing. This time, he didn't say anything.

"If you want one, Danny, try an ear."

"Really? Really, I can pierce an ear?"

"No eyebrow, tongue, nipple or other."

"Naw, Dad. I'm not into pain," I grinned. "I think I've had my lifetime share of it."

"Where are you off to now?"

I turned in a circle and found the ornate Ormolu clock brought over from France by one of the former Presidents. It still kept good time as long as you wound it. "Felice will be home in a few hours. I think I'll go hang out at the library and check out the books."

"You have any therapy planned for this afternoon?"

I did, but I'd been dodging the PT people, I didn't see the point when my legs were never going to come back. Not until I grew a new spine. Literally. "Jake said something about meeting me in the gym for some arm wrestling but I dunno. He cheats," I laughed to cover up the depression that thinking about it brought me. Sometimes, I could go almost the whole day without thinking about my legs.

"Make sure you're back by seven. I have a tailor coming to fit you for a suit."

"What for?" I asked. "I don't need a suit. I never go anywhere. Besides, I don't know him. Is he safe?"

"Yes, he's been my tailor for years. Thanksgiving is coming up, Dantan," he smiled. "The President will expect you to dress for it. The Press will be there. We've kept you out of the media but they've been hounding me and the White House Press Corps since your return. Whether you like it or not, you've been a headline. All over the Internet, TV and papers."

I didn't say anything. The thought of going back out in public frightened me. I wanted to stay inside my safe little bubble surrounded by Secret Service and Security.

"Danny, you've got to return to the world. Don't you want to go to school, college, pick up your life and go on?" he asked gently. "I'm not going to force you, you can stay home as long as you want but the White House isn't home. Jason has already served one term and is a year into his second so even he has to leave in three more."

"When he's caught, Dad."

"What if he's not?"

"Not now, Dad. I can't deal with this now." I turned the chair around and pushed off leaving him standing in the hallway staring after me. Vange came with me. I found my way

to the massive library and the staff on duty held the door open letting Vange and me in. I hesitated, seeing several strangers in the stacks and Mrs. Compton whispered reassurances.

“It’s okay, Dantan. They are graduate students from Senator D’Arcy’s office. Their papers and passes checked out.”

I nodded and she pointed to a table where lay a stack of hardcovers. “The newest Koontz, Tannenbaum, Woods, Connolly and Feist, Dantan. I set them aside for you. Even before the President saw them.”

“Like he has time to read fiction,” I scoffed and rolled over to the corner. My recliner was waiting, electric with a pivot so I could slide out of the chair and redistribute my weight on different pressure points but I opted for the wheelchair. Decided I needed to use the restroom and instead of retracing my route to Family Quarters, opted to use the semi-public ones just down the hall from the Library.

Three out of the nine stalls were wheelchair accessible. Pushing open the stall door, I maneuvered the chair into position with Vange guarding the entrance. I shut the door and lifted myself up, pulling down my sweats and boxers with one hand, one side at a time. At least I never had to worry about a cold seat, I couldn’t feel it.

I couldn’t feel when I needed to go but I heard when I did. Sometimes, I had to sit on the throne up to a half hour before I had satisfactory results but it was better than diapers or asking for help. I could even manage the washing up part. Luckily, the White House was equipped with and was wheelchair accessible.

I finished, didn’t flush because these were sensor and did it on their own but I did look: only because the visiting nurses and on-call doc checked on my bowel movements every day. I’d been warned that the dreaded constipation could actually kill me, I couldn’t feel it if I developed a blockage. All too common in Paraplegics. It was just another shitty thing I had to deal with.

I washed my hands not looking in the mirror but daydreaming until two other visitors wearing badges entered the washroom. I hurried past them towards the door and the woman held it open for me and the Heeler. She didn’t say anything but smiled.

I didn’t stop until I was back at my chair in the library and Vange settled herself at my feet with a wag of her tail. I started reading and was lost in the world of Dean Koontz as the time flew by.

## **Chapter 36**

I was late for Dad’s appointment and didn’t make it back to the room set aside for me next to Felice’s but the one set aside for Dad with the extra bed when he wanted to stay over. In the sitting room, a fussy little man was laying out suit jackets in various colors and styles while Dad made noises instead of comments.

“You’re late,” he complained. “This is Mr. Selliers.” I apologized, saying I’d been lost in a book. The little man with the improbable blonde hair, narrow shoulders and feminine hands studied me from behind retro 50’s glasses. He wore a wide lapel blue suit, purple shirt with white cuffs and a wild tie reminiscent of a Hawaiian Luau shirt. Silk socks and hand sewn Italian designer shoes. I eyed them. Classy.

“Definitely blue,” he announced, nodded and before I could voice a protest, I was bundled into a dozen jackets until both he and Dad decided on ‘the one’. Which turned out to be four. When he measured me for the pants, I was embarrassed as my tiny white sticks were exposed.

I hadn’t seen them, didn’t look at them at all if I could help it. They looked like they belonged to an anorexic eleven year old.

“Inseam is 38”,” he announced. “Waist 32”. Chest 42”.” He seemed surprised and squeezed my biceps and shoulders. “How tall are you, Mr. De Rosier?”

“I was 6’2”,” I answered briefly. “Now, I’m four one.” That was the height I hit in the chair.

Dad said firmly, “You’re still 6-2, Dantan. Your heart is ten feet tall.”

“Too bad I can’t stand on it,” I muttered.

“The blue one will be ready on Thursday. I’ll bring it over and do the final fitting. Shirts?”

“Extra tall, his arms are long like mine, Mr. Selliers. Ties for each suit and four extra shirts. Socks and shoes. Size 9D. Laced, I think. Black leather and brown cordovan. Please send a selection of cuff links, 18 karat.”

“Excellent, Senator.”

I sat there wondering why I needed such an extensive wardrobe for, when I was perfectly happy with sweats. Jeans were too hard to pull up and zip, never mind button fly.

“By Thanksgiving,” he promised the rest. “The President told me to tell you he’s taken care of the bill, Senator,” the Gay little man smiled. “And a pleasure it was to meet you, Dantan, sir.” He shook my hand twice and departed with his stuff and staff.

“Dad, what’s going on?” I demanded but he only smiled and told me Felice was waiting in the dining room. He pushed me along where we met up with the President, Dusty and Felice. Vange was with me.

Dad sat next to me and Felice, the President on the one end and opposite the First Lady. She was a beautiful woman who stayed out of the limelight and kept busy with her charities, preferring to stay at the family ranch when she had the choice.

Felice had two older brothers and sister, lawyers who practiced in California, well out of the political arena. I’d never met them.

Chef Proust came out of the kitchen to say hello and the Staff served us a culinary delight. Fried frog legs as an appetizer with a spicy dill cucumber dip, turtle gumbo and rack of lamb, baby purple potatoes in butter and parsley. Champagne, wine and sparkling cider made the rounds. I didn’t touch the liquor, I was still on medication that didn’t mix.

Dessert was my favorite, a beautiful three story Black Forest Cake with real whipped cream and dark chocolate. I went back for seconds and no one complained. In fact, Chef Proust brought me a third piece in a cake box to take back to my room.

Conversation went on around me and over my head but I was used to that. Eating was serious business that I took seriously, no one garnered my attention when food was in front of me.

“You keep eating like this, Danny and you’re going to get fat,” Felice warned.

“I can’t say I have hollow legs,” I said sourly, pushing my plate away. In the sudden silence, Mrs. Rickover touched Felice’s hand and hushed her.

“I suppose I can’t work it off like I used to,” I agreed. “It’s not like I can get up and run, now is it?” It came out sullen and sarcastic, just like I meant it to. I pushed back from the table, spun the chair and excused myself.

“Dantan!” Dad’s voice was a whiplash but I ignored him as I flew towards my refuge from parental anger, Felice’s comment and her mother’s pity. I’d caught the strong surface thoughts she was suppressing whenever she looked at me.

*‘Such a pity. A young man stuck in that chair forever. No prospects, even if the Senator is rich. No chance of grandkids there. Felice will get tired of taking care of him. Better sooner than later. Besides, she’ll meet someone in College that’s not crippled. Too bad, he’s really good looking and wealthy. I wonder what he’s like in bed? Could Felice-, no, he’s paralyzed from the waist down. I asked but she told me to mind my own business. She did ask for birth control. I don’t like that he slept in her room all those months.’*

I shut her out, behind her kind facade she was a mass of bias and contradictions. She’d die if she knew Felice and I had an active and satisfying love life. Even did it in the Lincoln Bedroom right under his nose.

“Hey, Danny, watch out!” Mark Anderson warned doing a quick two step as I barreled around the corner. “Where are you headed?”

“Rose Garden,” I called over my shoulder.

“Don’t go out without a coat, Danny! It’s in the teens!”

“I don’t care,” I muttered and slipped through the doorway that opened into the most famous Gardens in the Americas. Except maybe Busch Gardens. The roses were all dead, cut back and mulched. D.C. was even being threatened by snow. I shivered but pushed the chair through the graveled paths to the gazebo and huddled into the corner where the JFK white rose stalk was hibernating. The brass plaque under the stems told me its name.

I knew if I stayed out there too long, Dad or the President would send someone to haul me in before I could hurt myself and the drugs they had me on prevented me from giving in to despair although some days it weighed heavy on me. Especially when I thought about living the rest of my life in fear. Most of the time, I could fake it enough to keep Dad off my back.

I caught a whisper of menace and bolted upright in my chair, sent out my mind trying to trace the thought back to its owner but there were literally thousands of people in and around the White House. Before I could zero in on it, the thoughts were gone. I tried to pick them up again but now, I was so cold, I could barely push the wheels and when I finally made it back to the French doors, it was to find them locked. My breath puffed out to



reinforce how cold it was. I banged on the glass, there was no one in the room to hear me. I was too stubborn to call Dad or Felice so I headed out of the Gardens to the South Lawn knowing that the security cameras would pick me up.

Sure enough, when I reached the South entrance, Jake and Roy opened the door, dragged me inside and covered me with a heated blanket.

“Stubborn idiot,” he scolded. “Trying to give yourself frostbite? You know there’s a below wind chill out tonight? Where’s your coat?” He checked my fingers and especially my toes. Forced hot cocoa down me and personally delivered me to my room where the nurse was already prepping for my evening hygiene. I growled at Jake once I stopped shivering, slammed the bathroom door in their faces and locked it.

“Danny, I’m going to tell your father,” she threatened. “Your behavior is unacceptable.”

“Go away, bitch!” I yelled and in the sudden silence, felt bad but not enough to open the door to come out or apologize.

I put my head between my hands and cried. Soft, quiet sobs that no one but I heard. I blamed God, I told him I hated him, I begged for a miracle and failing that, I begged him to let me die or give me the means to do it myself. I saw myself through the eyes of people like Felice’s mom, worth much less than a man with two good legs. I wished that second bullet had torn through my heart, and that the doctors had let me die on that operating table, I wished that Daniel was still alive to take back this body and let me go.

Felice came and cajoled me. I told her to go bitch to her mother and leave me alone. In the end, they picked the lock on the bathroom door and forced me to bed, giving me a shot in the ass when I fought them, smacked at their grasping hands. We were screaming and I degenerated into crying. They were tears of anger, I had a target to focus on and it overrode the sadness. Dad asked the nurse to stay with me through the night and in the morning had a doctor brought in.

## **Chapter 37**

I was lying on the recliner with my legs spread out and covered with an afghan that had the Presidential seal on it. I think it came off Air Force One. I was awake and feeling the after effects of the shot. Grumpy, head-achy and lethargic. I wasn’t hungry, breakfast was still on the tray untouched. My secret stash of chocolate was there if I got put on bread and water. Felice hadn’t risen yet, I could hear her moving in bed next door, heard her unconscious mind seeking for me but I ignored her. It was Saturday, and she usually didn’t wake up until 10 AM.

Someone’s hand knocked on my door even though I said go away, Kenyan opened it and said good morning. The White House staff Butler was always polite, no matter the circumstances. He escorted in Doctor Anderson and a lady dressed in a severe suit of a decidedly odd color, a deep cranberry with heels that were every bit of 8 inches and shiny black patent leather shoes. Very expensive. She carried an equally expensive briefcase of soft leather.

“What do you want and who are you?” I snapped.

Kenyon said mildly. "Sir, please behave, or I'll have to call your father." He softly shut the doors. We stared at each other. I put the recliner's foot down and sat up so I could hide my legs.

"This is Doctor Lena Torres, Dantan," he said finally. "How do you feel?"

"Like you stuck a needle in my ass and drugged me without my consent," I returned.

"I had your father's written permission, and it was medically necessary," Anderson said.

"I don't need my father's permission," I retorted. "I'm nineteen."

"You're fourteen in a nineteen-year-old body, Danton. You've been kidnapped, abused, shot and paralyzed. Don't you think we need to address your mental wounds as well as your physical ones?"

"So you're a shrink?"

"I'm a psychiatrist, yes, Dantan. I treat children exposed to trauma, both mental and physical."

"I don't want to talk to you."

"You don't have to, Dantan. You know, you look like Vange."

"Vange—you mean my mother? How did you know my mother?"

"We went to school together. Brown. You have her eyes."

"My mother's dead."

"Hit and killed by a drunk driver."

I didn't say anything. Anderson knew I wouldn't move from the chair until they were both gone, I didn't let anyone see me or my legs uncovered exposed to their pitying stares. We sat in a stoic silence which I won because I could go away for hours amusing myself in the minds of the animals. My favorite lately, was a big black Morgan/TB cross named Really? Ridden by a Washington DC police officer in the city. Four strong legs under me, lungs bursting as he trotted on the cobblestones, the air crisp and cold. It felt weird to know a man had his legs wrapped around us, but the bond between those two was a living, breathing thing that I could appreciate. Besides, it got me out of the house, the White House.

He was trotting through the Park, riding the trails keeping an eye out for vagrants and joggers; this Park had once been the site of a serial rapist and several murders, so the Sergeant took an unofficial detour to patrol once a shift before merging in the downtown square, where they stood and helped direct traffic giving directions and providing a bit more glamour to the Capitol.

Really? danced under him, pulling at the bit and the Sergeant laughed, gave him a nudge and let him canter on the path. He wanted to throw in a good-natured buck or two but was too well trained for that. By the time we reached the street corner, we were down to a sedate walk and the Sergeant patted our neck.

Just across the intersection was the bank, a rare coin store, and a jewelry shop with customers coming and going. Two men stood outside the bank and caught his attention, as did the third man waiting at the curb in an idling van.

“Central,” he spoke into his collar mike. “Any silent alarms reported in from Chase on Constitution?”

“No, MP-12. What have you got?” The dispatcher’s voice asked even as the lookouts saw him standing there on the sidewalk like the Cavalry coming to the rescue. He steered the black gelding across the street and they panicked. The driver hit the gas and aimed his 2 tons of metal at horse and rider.

I took over Really?’s mind, controlling his body, ignoring his rider’s frantic sawing on the reins. Turned my half ton body and hit the van on the rear end, sending it crashing into a parked car where it teetered and fell over onto its side. The driver wasn’t wearing a seat belt and hit the windshield. Dead or unconscious.

Now, I heard guns going off, and felt bullets whizzing by. The two outside were shooting at the cop and missing both of us. I dropped to my knees and shook, clearly indicating he was to dismount. He did, hiding behind a van with his weapon drawn. Checked myself. No bullet holes in smooth, black hide, just a sore shoulder where I’d made impact with the van.

He was calling it in. Sirens came from all over. In the bank, I sensed another mind and dropped most of my awareness out of Really? into the seeing-eye dog of a customer huddled on the floor asking in bewilderment what was going on.

Eight tellers, eight gunmen in suits and face masks quietly robbing the drawers and the vault, which was wide open. The terrified bank guard lay face down under the muzzle of an AK assault rifle.

“Police coming,” one reported in a calm tone. The two outside bolted inside, voices frantic as they related their getaway vehicle was toast. I didn’t know what to do, there were too many of them, and if I tried, they just shoot me and the hostages. Frantic, I vacillated between the horse and the black lab.

Finally, I forced myself awake, and split into three places at the same time. I felt nauseous and very weak, splintered.

Anderson and the shrink were slapping my face, taking my blood pressure and preparing to shoot me with something to wake me up.

“Danny.”

“Get Jake,” I rasped. “My Dad, hurry. It’s important.”

“Your father is on the Senate floor,” he said. “Danny, you had another spell. I want you to go to Walter Reed.”

“No! Get Jake. Or Mitchell Gaines,” I struggled to get out of the chair, but I felt like a fish in an inch of water. “Please, Doctor Anderson! There are people’s lives at stake!”

To humor me, he sent for Jake to come as quick as he could. I told him the situation and in minutes, he had the DC police on the line relaying the information as I saw it through the black Labrador's eyes. Which gave the police snipers a clear advantage.

"Twenty-three hostages," I counted. "Including Rosie. The dog."

I check outside, the Sergeant had approached the bank close enough to observe the front doors but not see it. Really? was ground tied to the sidewalk out of the line of fire. I hesitated, knowing what I intended to do might kill me, and most likely Really?. His own consciousness told me he was a trained police horse and it was his duty to go as his officer pointed him, to die in battle, such as his kind had done for ages.

*I'll protect you as best I can*, I vowed and he gave me control. I bolted forward vaguely hearing the Sergeant shout as he tried to grab my flailing reins. Behind me, emergency vehicles bracketed both ends of the street.

I hit the glass front of the bank, and exploded through it, legs tucked under me, neck and head curled close to my body to make as small a target as I could. Missed the bodies of the hostages because I was also in Rosie and saw them in groups huddled together out of the way. The thieves might have been expecting gas grenades or flash bangs, but the sight of a 1500 pound riderless horse through the front lobby stunned them long enough for me to charge the nearest one, and tear the gun from their hand, kick three more hard enough to fracture, legs, chest and head, and stomp two more into red hamburger.

Then, the snipers took over as the rest of them fired. The feel of bullets punching into me was a massive shock. I felt my awareness retreat as the pain overwhelmed both horse and human mind. Falling shook the lobby floor and screaming, I pulled back just before the last one fired a bullet into Really?'s brain.

I screamed and went for the rest, blew into their heads and twisted. Lit their brains up until they were mosh. Didn't see them suddenly stop, sit down, like mindless zombies. Woke up in bed crying as if my heart had broken. Didn't know where I was. Didn't care.

## Chapter 38

"Hello?" I looked around. This didn't look like a hospital room, more like a hotel. No call button, but my wheelchair was close by the bed. I sat up and winced. My whole body ached. Or at least the parts I could feel. "Anybody there?"

The door opened and Jake, Mitchell and a cop I recognized came in. Jake carried a tray loaded with food, lunch stuff. He set it down on the table next to the bed, opened the blinds and pushed me up on the pillows. They were dressed in suits and formal uniform, complete with white gloves.

"How do you feel?"

I looked at the Sarge. "I'm sorry about Really? He gave his life to save the hostages."

"I know. He save mine, too. I'm Sergeant Jeff Bilberry."

"He didn't tell me your name."

"He and the perps were the only casualty, Dantan. You saved twenty-four lives."

“Are you hungry?”

“No. I just want to sleep.”

“You slept for three days, Danny. Any longer and we would have to put you on exhibit as Rip Van Winkle.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. You can Google it. Doctor’s orders. Eat, bathe. Dress. You have some people that want to thank you,” Jake announced.

“No. Leave me alone.” In the end it was easier just to do what he wanted. I ate a sandwich. It tasted good enough that I took another, fried soft shelled crab on sourdough with romaine hearts and spicy cocktail sauce. He helped me into the shower chair and made sure he scrubbed my hair, cleaned under my nails and was squeaky clean. Helped dress me. I widened my eyes at the new fancy blue silk suit, at the aqua shirt with French cuffs that matched my blue eye exactly. The tie was a sedate blue and pink stripe. He adjusted my slacks making sure the requisite inch above my heels were correct. The shoes were nice, hand sewn lace up cordovans in shiny, buttery soft black leather. He held my feet up so I could see them. Rolled me over to the mirror and showed me a young man that didn’t match the picture I saw in my head. This one was tall with broad shoulders, a lean aristocratic face topped by dark blonde and brown hair, dark eyebrows and eyes that didn’t match. A face you would look at twice and think, intriguing, classically handsome yet more than just pretty. The hair was a lot shorter than I remembered. I touched my collar and felt where a razor had trimmed my neck.

“You were out,” he grinned. “No fuss, no muss, no fighting or arguing about it.”

“I look... nice.” I looked at him. “Is this in regards to Friday at 8 PM?” I sneaked a peek at his mind, but his thoughts were tightly closed.

“No, no, no,” he shook his finger at me. “No peeking. Felice taught us how to shut you out.”

“No fair, Jake,” I complained and Sergeant Bilberry took my chair and wheeled me out of the room. It was a hotel, the Watergate and we went down the elevator to the lobby where a mass of reporters waited and peppered us with questions.

“Where are we going? I asked in a whisper afraid of all these bodies and strangers.

“To a Memorial service for Officer Really?.” I was quiet as we rode in a limo towards the White House.

Mitchell said only one thing to me, “Dantan, this isn’t for you, it’s for Sergeant Bilberry, so behave yourself, and be gracious.”

I nodded, and when we drove through the gates up to the Reception area, goggled at the crowd that was there. Reporters, my Dad, resplendent in a new suit, the President, First Lady and Felice in a gown like a confectionery’s dream. This looked more like a dress ball than a Memorial.

Jake pulled out my chair, opened it and allowed me the dignity of hauling myself out, waiting patiently for me to get settled. I let them push me inside, stunned when the rows of smartly uniformed guards saluted me. Dad stepped next to me, grinning like a fool as we rolled up the red carpet towards the Reception room where President Rickover waited. There were chairs lined up in rows, filled with reporters and senators, congressmen and police.

“Dad,” I mumbled, my hands tight in my lap.

“Relax, Danny, it’ll be okay,” he promised. Now, the others dropped back behind us and dad took hold of my chair handles to push me the rest of the way. We stopped in front of President Rickover. He held the box out, opened it and began speaking.

“It is my great honor and privilege,” he announced to the snapping of flashes, “to present this Presidential Medal of Freedom with Distinction to Dantan Townsley De Rosier for an especially meritorious contribution to the security and national interest of the United States in a public and private endeavor, one of which was saving my life from an assassin’s bullet.”

He pinned the blue-and-white ribbon with gold eagle, red, white and blue star to my lapel, shook my hand and gave me a hug. Felice stepped forward and kissed me on the lips, closing my sagging mouth, letting the next person step close. I recognized him as the Chief of DC Metro police, and he whispered, “I can’t top that pretty bauble, sir, but we have one for you, too.”

“On behalf of the Washington Metro Police Department, for his invaluable aid, Dantan Townsley De Rosier, we award you the Police Badge of Honor for Bravery under Fire. Even though a civilian. We also honor here today, the memory of Really?, Sergeant Bilberry’s mount, who gave his life in performance of his duties.”

He handed me a closed case, and a small medal he pinned to my left chest under the PMOF, shook my hand and the Sergeant’s.

Felice laughed lightly, and said to Dad, “I think he’s speechless. He looks cute with his mouth open, doesn’t he?”

President Rickover raised his voice over the yelling reporters. “One more announcement, my daughter has informed me that she is engaged. To Senator Michael Patrick De Rosier’s son, Dantan Townsley De Rosier. God help us, a Democrat!”

Amid the laughter, I heard Felice say, “Get out of that one, Downtown. You’re mine for the rest of our lives, just like the vows say, in sickness and health, till death do us part.”

## **Chapter 39**

I wore my second best new suit to the formal turkey dinner and sat next to Felice. China with gold accents, sterling silverware, linen napkins and tablecloths, the table was a work of art and the Chef had gone all out with the menu. Roast turkey stuffed with cornmeal and chestnut stuffing, cranberry sauce, candied carrots and yams, green beans, green beans Almandine, potato soufflé, acorn squash with maple syrup and pecans. Enough food for an Army. Jake, Mitchell and several of the President’s favorites were seated with us, along with Dad and Ms. Penny. They bowed their heads and said grace which surprised me, I hadn’t thought any of Felice’s family were that religious. My Dad proposed a toast.

After that, he congratulated me on my engagement and said he was thankful for good friends and my safe return, was excited to see what the New Year would bring.

They went round the table and came back to me. I sat there with my fork in my lap, my eyes down, feeling that sucking well of despair take hold of my ankles and pull. Felt Felice reach under the table and put her hand on my belly, the lowest part of me that I could still feel human touch as both a warning and comfort. Those things I wanted to say that I would've been more thankful had I died than be in this chair, that I was sick of someone having to do things for me, that I hated the stares of pity from people who knew me, that the thought of 50+ more years in this chair terrified me. That I was even more scared of how the world would treat me if they knew what my mind could do.

Instead, I said, "I'm grateful I can eat a lot." Everyone laughed and I shoveled in the food, so I didn't have to talk; I could ignore the conversation that went on around me until I caught the tail end of Agent Gaines words. "What?" I froze with my knife up halfway through buttering a flaky homemade croissant. "What about Colonel Pierce?"

"CIA found traces of him in South America. São Paulo," he answered.

"He's out of the country? Good." I put down the pastry. "He can't do much harm, then."

"Don't be so sure, Danny," he chided. "He was head of the NSA, he'll have contacts and Black op operatives everywhere. Informants and mercenaries he can hire. Slush funds he has access to."

"Slush funds?" I asked.

"Black Market accounts for clandestine operations," Dad answered. "Millions. He can operate for years on what he stockpiled. And if he follows true, he'll have his own offshore accounts."

"So I have to spend the rest of my life hiding?" I was bitter.

"No. Too many people know who you are now, Danny. The boy who saved the President and bank hostages. You're famous. Be a lot harder to steal and hide you."

"No one knows how I did it, right? Knows about the dog and cat thing?"

"No. Just us here," Dad and the President said at the same time.

"What kind of engagement ring are you going to give Felice?" Dad asked into the sudden quiet.

I flushed. I hadn't even asked her yet but then, the way she fit into my thoughts, there wasn't any need to ask. "A blue sapphire or an emerald like her eyes," I said, knowing that she wanted either or, instead of a diamond.

"Are you sure, Felice?" Her mom asked and she turned those blazing green eyes on her.

"More than I've ever been sure of anything in my life," Felice returned with total conviction. The wait staff came in, began to remove our empty plates and Chef Proust himself pushed in the dessert tray. I had eyes only for the Black Forest cake. Although I

managed a piece of chocolate pecan pie and pumpkin. The world might end, but my stomach wouldn't care. After dessert, the men who were men retired to the den to watch the game. Felice and I went to the library. Everyone was somewhere else, the public part of the joint was closed because of the holidays. Senate and Congress were on hiatus till after New Year's.

"Danny, about the engagement and the ring," Felice started, and I pulled her down to kiss her.

"I know your mind," I whispered. "Like my own. I would've gotten around to asking. I love you. I'm a very grown up fourteen, you know."

She giggled at that. "What was my mom thinking to set you off the other night?"

"You don't want to know, Lisi."

"Can you afford a ring, Danny?"

"I think so. I don't know if I was paid when I was Daniel, but I'm sure I had a savings account." I seemed to remember a few stock options I had capitalized on.

"Well, when are you taking me to look?"

I almost asked her why we didn't go online or have her pick one out herself, but throwing my courage to the wind, I said, "pick a day and I'll go with you."

"Really? Really, you'll go out? To the city?"

"Wherever you want, Felice," I swallowed. "The Mall will be fine, Felice." Although thought of crowds of strangers made my heart race and my hands break out in a cold sweat.

"A smaller place, like the Galleria?"

"Whatever you want," I repeated and dropped my head. She raised it by a finger under my chin.

"I know this is hard for you, Danny. I know how much you've given and lost. Your legs aren't what made you 10 feet tall or why I love you."

I buried my head into her stomach and held her around the waist, sniffing back the tears and letting her feel what I lived with, letting her in so she could heal me. I felt it again, that thin edge of menace that tickled my thoughts.

I felt myself spiraling out as I eagerly searched for him, leap frogging from Vange to Sassy, to an eagle high above the Potomac looking for fish, a buck standing in the woods near the Beltway and finally a dog hunched under a desk in a sleazy motel off the Interstate. I couldn't see the dog's owner, but I could see the tall brick floors of the building outside the room's windows. Recognized it as a hospital I had been in and saw the man's hand reach down to pat the dog. Heard him say, "Jellybean, shall we go play with our little hero?"

The dog, a black and white Border collie stood up and stared towards his face, so I could see who it was. The voice wasn't the Colonel's or Doctor Cohen's replacement. It was no one's voice I knew. Long legs in jeans, wide hands with hair on the knuckles, dark



reddish skin. A belt made of wide leather with a silver and turquoise buckle, ordinary dress shirt with the cuffs folded back, slim waist and broad shoulders. The coldest eyes I'd ever seen. I took a step backwards. He was dark haired and black-eyed like either a Mexican or Native American. I delicately extended a probe into his thoughts, and found a lazy swirl of inanities as he stared at the black and white Border collie.

"Well, hello, little hero," he smiled and I froze. How the hell did he know I was in the dog? I willed myself back out, but something held me inside with a grip I couldn't break. Twisting and turning, I pushed, but nothing worked. I could hold him out of my mind, but I couldn't get loose from him. His hand came up and in it was a gun, huge black automatic, a forty caliber twenty shot Glock. The end of the barrel was huge.

"Colonel says hi, Danny," he smiled and shot. I felt the dog die, her death throes were brief as the heavy bullet smashed her head into pieces. Heard myself scream and fall out of the chair, yet my mind, my essence was ripped free from my body to snap into a formless darkness.

## Chapter 40

I was pure thought. The concept of 'me', 'I' was meaningless. I drifted, cut loose from my moorings. I knew I had a name, but 'name' was a word I found useless. I floated in a void so empty that I wasn't even aware that I or the void existed. Gradually, a light appeared. A diffuse glow that I followed to its source. I could hear nothing, see nothing but dark and light. When the light overpowered the darkness, a vibration disturbed the light, so that it pulsed in time with the vibes.

I identified it as a heartbeat and immediately words began to have meaning. Light became images. I opened eyes I didn't know I had and looked down at a body laid out on an exam table, hooked up to machines that breathed, recorded the heartbeat, pressure and respirations, a body that was on was life-support. The readings from the EEG machine were flat line, the other graphs slowly declining.

Me. It was me I recognized on the table. Stretched out, both arms flat with IVs, poor shrunken legs covered with a sheet and thin blanket.

I looked down at myself, saw the room was crowded with people still wearing fancy suits and dresses. Thanksgiving decorations were on the walls and windows. I could not hear their words, only see their faces and tried to touch them as my feet floated to the floor.

Felice, her face a hollow cheeked mask of fear, her parents around her. My father looked like he'd had a heart attack. The Secret Service men who were like family expressed that same fear. I would've thought it was anger.

I saw the monitors go flat and medical personnel fly into the room, pushing my family aside as they brought the crash cart to my bed. Zapped me, worked on me for thirty minutes before they gave up and walked resolutely out to break the bad news.

Drew the sheet up and brought my family in one by one to kiss me goodbye. I watched it all curiously, it's hard to be concerned with your own death when you're still alive in your mind.

They left me there until the last person said goodbye, and when they were all gone, two orderlies came in, checked my wrist band, covered my face as they slid me onto a gurney and took me down the hallway to the morgue. Curious, I followed them, passing through the doors without needing to open them until we descended to the basement where the morgue lay hidden. I saw no other newly dead spirits. In truth, I didn't feel like a spirit but more as if I were dreaming. They left my body outside in the hallway in a line of other gurneys and other bodies as one of them went to open the doors to the outside ambulance bay.

I touched myself. Felt my cool skin, but felt no connection to this form other than that I knew it was mine.

As the doors slid overhead, I saw an ambulance back up and from behind that a black SUV with blackened windows. Three men exited, climbed the dock with stretchers and walked down a short hallway towards the two orderlies. I watched as the strangers pulled silenced weapons, and shot the orderlies in cold blood, point-blank, picked them up and threw them into the SUV. Next, they examined and rejected everybody, but mine.

One man removed his hood and I saw his red skinned face. He closed his eyes, his body went very still, and I could hear, feel and see again.

"Hello, little kachina," he whispered. "Keith, Turtle. This will be violent. As soon as I release him, hit him with the adrenaline." He let me go and I felt the snapping, rushing sensation as my mind was sucked back inside my body at the same time as a huge needle punctured my flaccid heart. It felt like I'd been zapped by the mother of all lightning bolts. My heart galloped like a mad horse with its tail on fire. I gasped in air and my face turned beet red. The Indian put an oxygen mask on me, his fingers on my pulse.

"Heart's over two hundred. Hit him with that vasodilator." Another needle into my elbow vein. "Welcome back, Danny. We've learned a few things about you since the Colonel had you. Now, since you are officially dead, no one will miss you. Whoops, the morgue attendants sent your body to the crematorium by mistake. When you wake up, I'll explain how I trapped your mind out of your body." He gave me a third shot, and before he even pulled the needle out, I was asleep.

## Chapter 41

"We don't need to send him out anywhere," the Indian's voice said over my head. "He's able to enter an unwary mind and read their thoughts."

"What's his range?"

I froze. That voice belonged to the man I hated. I peered between my lids, and saw through a slice of windows, blue sky and not much else. The air smelled dry and hot. A faint breeze stirred over my head.

"He's awake," he said and pried my eyes open. I tried to punch him, he pushed my arms down without any effort. I tried to yell for help and my voice made only a squeak.

"Danny. Or is it, Daniel?" The Colonel came over to block my view.

"You bastard. Why don't you die?" I spat.

“Why don’t you get up and kill me, boy? He smiled. “Oh, too bad. You’re a cripple now. Aren’t going anywhere, are you?”

I lunged for him and the red man easily kept me from the Colonel’s face.

“Feel a little peckish, Dantan?” He grinned. “We have you on a mild dose of an experimental drug called tetradex. Made from the puffer fish. It paralyzes the muscles so every movement is like lifting a car. Except for breathing, it doesn’t affect that like curare. Of course, you won’t be going anywhere on your own without legs or a wheelchair.”

“Where are we? Who is the shit head who shot his own dog?” I snarled. I cast my thoughts out and before I could even blink, he had me tight in his net. I couldn’t even squirm. “You’re like me!” I gasped.

“No, I’m not. I’m trained as a shaman. I can latch onto spirit and hold it, I can’t read your mind,” he said. “My name is Sam Kolachi, I’m Shoshone.”

“You work for the NSA?”

“I work for whoever pays me. Colonel Pierce is only one of my employers.”

“Where are we?”

“Just over the border in Mexico,” he answered carelessly. “On a ranch, 100 miles from anywhere. No dogs, cats or birds around.”

“Doesn’t matter how far away I am,” I said. “I can still reach one.”

“No, you can’t. Not as long as I have you bound by my witchcraft,” Kolachi said. “I hold your spirit in my web. Until I release you or break the web, you can do nothing.”

I tried again, splitting myself into a dozen spears, the most I’d ever attempted. Like an arrow, I flew through the distance only to hit a barrier of glass and bounce off. I fell stunned and I looked up at his face. I felt as if a ton of books had landed on my chest, I could barely lift my ribs to breathe. He waited until I could speak. “What are you going to do to me? What do you want from me? How are you going to make me work for you?”

“Danny, with one little needle, I can make you a complete quadriplegic. I can blind you, deafen you and leave you only your voice, but you’d still be able to travel in your head, still tell us what we want to know. I can go after your father and your girlfriend, your friends and the agents. Everyone you love.”

I screamed in defiance, futility, and despair. “I’ll kill myself first chance I get!” I promised. “They already think I’m dead!”

“We won’t let you, Danny. Now, tell me. Is there anyone else that can do what you can do?”

“I’ve never found anyone else, except my uncle and he’s dead.” I said. Not that I’d looked. The only one who even came close was Felice.

“Your first task is to search the world for others like you,” he said. “Then, the Colonel wants you to reach these people. He’s looking for something called the Orion Project.”

“Right now?”

“You have somewhere else to go?”

“I’m hungry. I need the restroom.”

“You’re wearing adult diapers. You can eat when you’ve worked.”

“What time is it?” There wasn’t a clock in the room, just the bed I was on, two chairs and the window. A fan overhead. No TV, phone, or even electrical outlets. The walls were rough white plaster – adobe.

“11 AM.”

“What day?”

“Wednesday.”

“Wed – Wednesday after Thanksgiving?” Holy crap, I’d lost nearly a week.

“December 2, Danny. You should have seen the furor over your unfortunate cremation incident. Your funeral was... impressive. The Presidential Medal of Honor. Care to tell us how you did that?”

“You’ll both rot in hell for what you did to my father and Felice,” I said wearily. “How do I search if you’ve blocked me?”

“I’ll go with you, point you in certain directions where there are rumors.”

I felt him pick me up in his head and I was able to fly as he hitchhiked on my back. It wasn’t like when Felice came with me, he couldn’t reach inside my thoughts, more like he held my head in his hands and pointed me like a gun. Distance meant nothing until we reached halfway across the world, touching lightly on the minds of wolf, bear, snow owl and snow leopard. I sensed surprise, and he felt it too, pointed me at the glowing beacon of blue light I found in the darkness of the city. A bright spark that was stunted somehow yet he could hear me.

“Hello, Keegan,” I said to the mind that resonated almost like mine. The images were in Russian, and although I didn’t understand the words, I could see the pictures. Yet, this mind was infantile, developmentally delayed. Great portions of it were devoid of function, retarded and unable to compete in the everyday world. I couldn’t access it, or see through his eyes or hear, he was just too badly brain-damaged. Left him, and continued on. Could reach no further, was stopped by distance, and the vast expanse of the Siberian plains.

Came back to the bedroom to find hours had passed. I was exhausted. My chest hurt, my jaws ached and I had a migraine. No one was in the room with me. I slipped into my own thoughts and searched for Felice to see if I could sneak a thought to her. Slammed into a brick wall and my head burst into flames. Thought I was burning to ash. Cried out. Begged for relief, and he was there in the flames laughing at me. Slowly, the fires died, popped out and I looked down at myself to see perfectly normal skin, not blackened flesh.

“Care to try again, Dantan? The thing about pain in your mind is that you feel it exquisitely but it does no physical damage to your body. So I can do it endlessly, until your mind breaks.

“We know brainwashing didn’t work on you so this is what’s left. You can make it easier on yourself by cooperating. Now, let’s try the other side of the continent. When I’m satisfied, we’ll stop.”

“Then I can eat?”

“No. For your foolish attempt to contact who ever, you’ll forgo lunch and dinner.”

He made me search until midnight. By then, I was so exhausted I was barely coherent. I think I soiled and wet myself. I couldn’t feel it but from the smell, I was pretty sure of it. My stomach hurt so bad I wanted to throw up, but there wasn’t anything in it to throw up. He left me lying in my own filth and in minutes, I cried myself into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 42

Days went by. Weeks. Maybe even months. I wasn’t sure and was so lost in my head. I searched through so many minds, I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. Found traces of only two minds like mine besides the young dude in Russia. One was in India and belonged to a holy man. He felt my ham-handed probing and politely but firmly blocked me so I couldn’t get any images of him or his identity. The other was a teenager in Brazil, and he was lost in the throes of a coke addiction, even crazier than I was.

Still, I reported all to the witch doctor and he made notes, forcing me to keep going. We found out my range was close to 5000 miles and water affected that more than mountains. Even if I leapfrogged into a bird, distance mattered. It was easier if I knew the area, had seen it or been in that particular animal before. The Colonel had me visit both Sassy, Dusty and the falcon at least every other day. Even Vange, the Blue Heeler. Strangely, only the falcon was still with the owner, the dogs were never in the same room as their masters but relegated to empty bedroom, kitchen, or kennel.

Frustrated, the Colonel had hit me, accused me of hiding things from him. Kolachi let him. I blinked back tears of pain and rage. His Air Force ring had opened a gash on my cheek under my eye and blood splattered on my chin, down onto my sweat shorts. They made me wear shorts so they could mock my shrunken legs. At least they’d gotten tanned. One of his favorite punishments was to push me out into the front yard, tip my chair over and watch me crawl through the blistering sand by my arms so I could reach the shade of the porch. Sometimes, I made it. Other times it was so far, I lacked the strength and laid there as the sun roasted me. I burned and the sunburn was worse on my legs. Great strips of skin peeled off and made me sick for days.

I had to take care of my own body functions and knew I wasn’t doing a good job by the smell. Sweat, crap, pee and something sickly sweet filled my nostrils. I complained to the Colonel, and begged him to look, afraid of pressure sores turning to gangrenous ulcers. When he did examine me, his face turned green. The next day a quiet dark-haired and dark eyed woman appeared and doctored me. She understood my Spanish but wouldn’t answer my questions. Treated me with antibiotics, ointments and changed my mattress to an air filled one. Put me on an IV of fluids, and something in it that made me float.

I asked her name and she made no reply but only lifted her mouth to show me a stump of a tongue. Cut out. I wanted to search her thoughts, but hesitated, afraid of the fire. So I stayed out.

She took over cooking, too. Preparing easy to eat food like tacos, fried plantain and goat. She told me in written Spanish her name was Magdalena and she had been a nurse in Mexico City fired for stealing drugs. Her tongue was pulled out by Federales with pliers and she lost her job, but she kept her life. She wouldn't tell me where we were or if there was a phone outside. I was grateful that she took care of me at all.

The Colonel was gone most of the time, I never heard him leave or arrive. I didn't know if he came in by vehicle or plane. Most of the time, I spent in the room, staring at the walls until the day she put me on IVs. The next four days I lay in the dark, suffering from a fever and diarrhea, which made my sores worse. At least I couldn't feel them. He came in and watched me as she rolled me on my stomach, cleaned me up and treated the wounds. His voice was quiet. "How bad is it, Lena?"

She turned her head away from me and made a gesture I couldn't see. I was shivering even in the heat of the room. She left me on my stomach.

"Dantan, how do you feel?" My answer made no sense to him or me. I think I said locomotive, trains were rushing through my head, steam engines, coal-fired, the bullet train and Mag lev. Casey Jones and HO scale. Mini tracks to Silverton. Train trestles. The runaway engine in that movie. Where the two tracks meet, East Coast and West. Golden spike. Gateway to the West. Missouri, Union Pacific. Spoke, "access is limited to the General Director. Orion is now functioning. Online and scanning. Four hours should bring in a dozen variables. Have a team on standby.

"I don't care what General Salinkov said. We are not increasing the forces in Chechnya.

"The American economy is staggering. We must lower our cost per barrel to under one hundred dollars US, especially if they start buying from Iran.

"Our two men have reached Pakistan with enough cash to purchase the stock of US defense chips out of Amphenol.

"I took her out yesterday, she got two hares and killed a dozen doves. Isn't she marvelous?"

"Dantan, stop," the red-skinned man stilled my wandering thoughts. He made the noises in my head go away. "Danny, sleep. You're sick. Feverish, jumping from mind to mind."

I had a headache. Bit my pillow and worried it. Whispered, "water. Please."

The man lifted me in his arms, and fed me sip by sip until I finished the cup. "More?"

"Why don't you let me die?" I asked, my eyes closed. I slipped back into my fevered dreams.

## Chapter 43

I dreamed I was walking with Felice through the rose gardens in full bloom. The smell was heady, almost overpowering and bees buzzed overhead, pollinating the flowers. The air was slightly muggy, a faint breeze carrying the scent of the river over the flowers. She was wearing shorts and a skimpy T-shirt that barely covered her belly. My hand was in

hers, I brought it around to look at her right ring finger. She wore an engagement ring with two one-carat stones, a deep blue sapphire and a chocolate diamond. Both matched my eyes and were surrounded by small stones that looked like white diamonds.

"It's pretty," I admired. She held it out. "You designed it to match my eyes?"

"So I could remember you, Danny," she said sadly. "I remember you every day."

"I'm right here, Felice. Walking with you."

"You're in my dreams, Danny. In my heart. I'll never forget you." She let go of my hand and patted the head of the dog, Vange as she came to the fish pond and sat on the bench. I stood in front of her, touched her knee and it was the dog's nose that reached her, not my hand.

"Felice, I'm here. Me. Dantan. Why can't you see me or hear me? I'm not dead, Felice. Come and get me. I need your help."

She hugged the Heeler and her sadness was so palpable, I could feel it. I wanted to hug her and comfort her, but I couldn't even reach the dog. Slowly, they faded and my awareness increased to see that I was waking up in my room to early morning.

The sun came in the window bright enough to make the dust motes glimmer like diamonds and heat the room beyond the ability of the fan to cool it. I was thirsty and sweating. Called out and both of them came in after a while.

She pulled me up, checked my disposable and emptied the urine bag. I hadn't realized she'd put a catheter in me and was worried about my kidneys and dehydration. She gave me two glasses of water. He asked me if I remembered the last three days and I shook my head. "Dreams. I had weird dreams."

"You were rambling. In Arabic, Russian, French and Farsi. I recorded it for the Colonel. You mentioned Orion."

"I did? What's Orion?"

"I don't know. Just that he's interested in it."

"He must be paying you very well, Witch Doctor," I said wearily. "For you to be stuck here with me in this hellhole for weeks."

"Months, Dantan. You've been here for seven months."

My cry was of pain and despair. After seven months and no one was even looking for me.

"You have no concept of time when you're under. The longest I've had you travel was a week. We don't do that anymore, that's when your skin broke down and you got really ill. Ms. Rojas has been battling the fever and infection since. I told the Colonel, he said to continue, but I made him lay off for the last two weeks."

"What day is this?"

"June 30, Tuesday."

“Do I get July 4 off?”

“No fireworks here, Danny.”

“I missed my birthday. I turned twenty. You think I’ll make it to twenty-one, Witch Doctor?”

“Are you hungry?” He asked instead.

“Peanut butter and jelly. On white bread.”

“Sorry. None here. I can ask the Colonel to bring some next time he’s here.”

“He’s gone?”

“He flew to Rio. Looking for that other one you mentioned. “

“He’s a crackhead. Won’t get you anywhere.” I looked at Magdalena. Asked her in Spanish if she had food ready for me. She nodded, went out and returned with a bowl of soup, beans with chunks of meat, peppers and tortillas. Fed me slowly, carefully until I ate the whole thing.

I winced as pain stabbed me in the back and chest. Leaned back against the headboard, looked at the IVs and lines in me. He let me sleep.

The Colonel came back that night and I heard them discussing me. The Witch Doctor was arguing vehemently, and Pierce’s replies were equally hot, the end result was that the Witch Doctor put me in my chair, wheeled me outside in the cool of the evening and out back where I saw a four-wheel-drive Jeep. He loaded me into the back seat and drove off with Magdalena in the passenger seat. I was stiff with fear and relief. I thought they’d finally decided to get rid of me.

“Are you going to shoot me, Witch Doctor or leave me out here to burn? Starve to death or die of thirst?” I asked in a tiny voice leaning into the shoulder belt.

“None of the above, Dantan. Now, shut up.”

“Where’s the Colonel?”

“It’s a long drive, Dantan, go to sleep.” He was brusque and she turned around to smile at me. I’d never seen her smile, the sight filled me with trepidation. After two hours of sun, sand and bouncing, I fell asleep.

## Chapter 44

She woke me with a gentle slap on the cheek, he carried me out of the car and held me up so I could pee. I watched the urine hit the sand and drain instantly. She opened wet wipes and after a few minutes of straining, wiped me off. Pulled up my shorts and sat me in the Jeep.

“Thirsty?”

“Where’s the Colonel?”

“At the ranch.”



“Where are we going?”

“You’re full of questions.”

“Well, I’d like to know what my life expectancy is, Witch Doctor. I might want to write my autobiography. It’d be nice to know how many pages I need. Minutes? Hours?”

“If I was going to off you, Danny,” he said irritably. “I would’ve done it at the ranch. There’s a nice graveyard outback.”

I shut up. He got back in and continued. The sand became gravel, gravel turned to caliche and paved roads. Signs pointing to Mexico City. My eyes widened, but I kept silent.

He drove through town and let her off in the barrio. She kissed me, held my ears and patted my face. Said *Bueno Suerta* in gurgles that I barely understood. He drove off and left her standing there, waving back at me. We drove to the airport. He parked in front of the terminals by the taxis and pulled the wheelchair out of the back, opened it and carried me to it. He gave me a handful of pesos tucking them into my waistband. I stared at him with wondering eyes.

“Dammit,” he said roughly. “Get the hell out of here.” I spun my chair around and pushed for all I was worth heading inside the terminal. Looking around, I tried to find some sign of American help. Saw the red, white and blue of immigration and headed for it, my mouth dry and my insides churning.

The woman behind the counter had weary eyes and stared at me. “Can I help you?” She asked in Spanish.

I broke down sobbing. She came around the counter with a man in uniform and knelt at my side. “It’ll be all right,” she murmured in Spanish and I heaved for breath finally getting words out she could understand.

“I’m American,” I sobbed. “American! I was kidnapped! Please, help me get home.”

“What’s your name, honey?” She switched to English.

“Danny. Danny De Rosier. My Dad is Senator Michael Patrick De Rosier. My Social Security number is 639 – 52 – 8291. His phone number is 222 – 555 – 1505.”

“Who kidnapped you? How did you get here? Do you need medical attention?”

“Yes. Please, call my Dad. He thinks I’m dead.” I grabbed her hands. “I’m not lying. Please, please. Help me please.”

She regarded me from dark brown eyes and something in my desperation got through. She handed me a cell phone. With trembling fingers, I dialed. Heard the call go through and my Dad’s infinitely weary, sad voice say, “hello? Who is this? I don’t know anyone from Mexico City.”

“Dad? It’s me,” I shouted. There was dead silence. “Dad, don’t hang up. Listen, when I was five years old, you and mom brought me a bow and arrow set. I still have it. My Nook has five hundred and sixty-seven books in it. One of them was *Unbroken*. Dad, I’m me. I’m broken. Come get me, please.” I was crying again and dropped the phone.

The lady caught it. Spoke. “Yes, Sir. About late teens. One blue and one brown eye. In a wheelchair. Very thin, unhealthy. Gray and sunburned. Said his social is 639 – 52 – 8291. Danny De Rosier. He wants to know your name.”

“Dantan Townsley De Rosier. Felice calls me Downtown,” I cried. I couldn’t stop crying.

“Mexico City, Senator. Yes, Sir. I will call the Embassy and have them send a car and Marines, arrange for medical attention. Yes, Sir. At once, Sir.” She pushed END and dialed another number. Twenty minutes later, four big Marines in BDUs and a senior Attaché from the American Embassy were lifting me gently and carefully into a big black Denali. I didn’t relax until we were behind the gated compound inside the Embassy walls.

I collapsed in complete exhaustion and slept through the medical exam, dinner and didn’t wake up until the next morning. When I opened my eyes, my Dad stood there next to the doctor with the rest of my loved ones. Felice, Ms. Penny and Mitch.

I poked myself. Made sure I was awake. Said, “I want to go home.” Burst into tears and didn’t care. Was hugged so hard I thought I would break. On the way to the airport, told them everything I could remember. Told them I thought my one captor had killed the Colonel and let me go.

Told Dad when we reach Dulles to bring me home. To my bedroom, to our house and not back to my self-imposed prison at the White House.

He put me to bed and Felice came with me. In fact, every one of them stayed with me, so that every time I opened my eyes, they were there. I knew that they would always be there for me, that I was never alone.

Tentatively, I opened my mind to Felice and she drew me in without fear, fire, or contact from him. When I searched for his traces, I found none. Curled up inside my love and my family and was finally free.

## **The End**

### **Dominion 2: Courage**

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### **Chapter One**

I wasn’t bored, just very tired. I’d been up nearly the entire night on the computer with Felice. Long distance relationships sucked but we’d promised both of our parents we wouldn’t jump into marriage immediately; both sets wanted a long engagement to make sure we were sure. Felice rolled her eyes this time, we were positive in a way that no one else in the world could be surer of than we were. Still, I could see their point, she was the

daughter of the outgoing President and I was the paraplegic Senator's son.

My bodyguard poked me and I jerked up, grumbling that I was awake even though the droning voice of the lecturer was enough to put most of the class into a coma. Then again, economics wasn't a thrilling class by any means.

Howard asked quietly, "late night with Ms. Rickover again, Danny?"

I yawned, nearly cracked my jaws and tried to stretch myself awake. I made it through the endless two-hour lecture and let Howard push me to the cafeteria where he bought two extra large coffees. He made mine light and sweet, drinking his black. "You didn't take any notes, Danny?" he questioned as I stared about the large room filled with tables, chairs and the supper line. Vending machines took up one wall; the other was a row of windows.

"You going to eat anything, Danny?" the Secret Service agent asked. I laid my head down on the table and sighed.

"Just let me sleep for a half hour, Howard," I begged.

"What's your next class?"

"Study period," I lied when I knew he knew I had PT and had already blown off the last two weeks of it.

"Danny---" he started and I raised my head to stare at him. What he saw made him swallow his remonstrations and stand up. He grabbed my wheelchair handles and rolled me out of the Dining Hall down to Campus Security. He knocked on the glass, admitted and wheeled me into a back room with a cot.

"Okay, Dantan," he said quietly. "You can catch up on two hours. After that, we're going to blow off your next two classes for the Nurse's office."

I didn't protest but lifted myself onto the cot, hauling my legs up by the loose slacks, and turned on my side facing the wall. I was asleep in minutes knowing he was guarding me and I was safe.

I slept for three hours, waking only when Howard shook me. Groggy and disoriented, I panicked when I didn't recognize the strange faces leaning over me. Dark hair, dark eyes in a police uniform with the words 'Security' and 'Campus Police' on the breast pocket.

"Take it easy, Dantan," Howard soothed. "Here's your cell phone. Your father has called twice."

He handed me my backpack and I sat up, rubbing my eyes and pushing my hair out of my face. My mouth was dry and tasted awful, my heart hammered away in my chest and I rubbed on my breastbone where the ten-inch scar from major heart surgery reminded me occasionally I had nearly died from an overzealous NSA agent's bullets.

"You okay?"

I nodded. "Give me a minute." I sat there while I fumbled for my wheelchair. "I need to use the restroom, Howard."

The other man in the Security uniform pointed to the door and the hallway behind him.

"Restroom is down this hall. You're welcome to use it."

"Is it Wheelchair accessible?" I asked with a touch of humor and he flushed.

"Well, no."

"Where's the nearest campus toilet?"

"Can you wait?" Howard asked.

I shrugged. "Probably." Since the bullet that had severed my spine, I couldn't feel the sensation of full bladder or bowel; I had trained myself to go at certain times and rarely had an accident. I refused to use a catheter or wear adult diapers preferring a few accidents to

independence. “Did Dad say what he wanted?” I asked as I locked my brakes and planted myself back into the chair, lifting my legs onto the pedals. They backed out of the room so I had space to maneuver. The security dude’s name was Millis, Andre Millis and he showed us a quicker way to the restrooms, cutting through the delivery halls to the front lobby and the bathrooms. He stayed out front with Howard, bullshitting while I went through the process of lifting my dead bottom half onto the toilet in the wheelchair stall.

There were other bodies in there, I heard the mutter of voices, the spurt of piss hitting the urinals, water in the sink as I sat and waited patiently for my own body to void. Heard the sound of urine hitting the bowl, reached down and grabbed my dick so I could feel it when I’d drained my bladder. Shook the last few drops off and flushed. Pulling my pants up was the only part of the job that was a pain, I needed both arms to hoist myself off the commode and a third hand to pull up my clothes. Most of the time, I struggled to do it myself unless I was really exhausted or late for something. The entire procedure took nearly 30 minutes and Howard was beginning to get agitated, calling out my name through the door. I came out, washing my hands at the sink and staring into the mirror. My face was thin, my eyes shadowed under dark eyebrows and my normally blonde hair had darkened to a light brown. I looked tired and my mouth drooped. Howard stood behind me, a tall, young man with broad shoulders, black hair and blue eyes. Handsome in the way that all of the Secret Service agents resembled each other save for the fleeting grin hovering always at the corner of his mouth and the twinkle in his eye.

“You call the Senator yet?” he asked and I fished in my pockets for my cell phone, finding it tucked into my backpack. I’d missed several calls but only one had left me a voice message. Dad. I didn’t bother to listen but dialed his home phone. It rang only twice before he picked it up.

“Danny. How are you?” he asked and he sounded worried.

“Hi, Dad. What’s up?” I let Howard push my chair down the hallway not paying much attention to our destination.

“I need your help with something, Danny. Can you take time off and visit me?”

“Spring break’s coming up, Dad. Can it wait until then? I was coming home, anyway. To see Felice and you.”

“That’s in two weeks? I really need you sooner, Danny. I can get you a special dispensation from the Dean; it won’t affect your grades or attendance.”

“Can you tell me what?” I asked cautiously.

“Not over an open line,” he returned so I knew it was important and secret.

“You want me to fly?” It was a 5-hour flight from UT to Washington, D.C. even if I could find a flight.

“Yes, fly. Bring Coakes and Terence with you.” He named both of my bodyguards. “Flight 7229 on Wednesday. Delta to Chicago with a connecting flight to Dulles. Mitchell will meet you at the American counter. Let me talk to Howard.”

“Howard,” I handed him the cell and all I heard was ‘yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, Senator. See you then.’ grim lipped; he pushed me the rest of the way to the nurses’ infirmary in spite of my protestations to be examined thoroughly and scolded for my evident tiredness. “Take him to his dorm and make sure he takes his pills and the sleeping pill,” she ordered. “He needs to have eight hours uninterrupted sleep. Your blood pressure sucks, Dantan.”

“Is that a professional diagnosis?” I retorted.

“You look like crap,” she returned. “Your pulse is erratic, your temp borderline and

blood pressure is high for someone your age. Go to bed, sleep or I'll have you admitted to Cardinal Glennon for an overnight. You have a bowel movement today?" She was always on me about that, lack of could result in a stroke, a common problem in paraplegics.

"I take my laxatives," I snarled.

Wisely, neither of them said anything to me so I couldn't fight them. I pushed myself out of her office, down the hallway and out to the Commons heading for the huge, and expressly ugly dorm buildings on the UT campus. Modernized in the 90's, I had a small wheelchair accessible unit with no roommate, just room for my live in bodyguard, one of two--Howard Coakes and Patrick Terence. They were the Secret Service agents who alternated between my weeklong assignments. Usually, they took turns, one doing 3 days on, and then four, which gave them two weekends off a month. I didn't usually go anywhere on the weekends, I wasn't a drinker and I didn't care for the party scene. Didn't do any sports any longer and certainly didn't swim. Mostly, I spent my weekends in the library reading or on line with Felice. She was out of college and working at her new job as a veterinary assistant doing credit for her Vet medicine residency. She was planning to finish her DVM at Cornell.

I threw myself on my bed in a petulant huff while Howard took it on himself to pull out my pajamas, my pills, sandwich and soup. Bullied me into eating, changing and swallowing my medicine. Watched as I fought the sleeping pill with heavy eyelids.

"Stubborn kid," he muttered. "Just like your old man."

"Howie," I mumbled. "You're a tight puckered a-hole."

"Danny, I told you not to call me Howie," he said patiently. "Now, go to sleep. I'll wake you early so we can pack for your trip."

I fell under the pull of the sleeping pill without too much struggle. I was tired and needed it; the drugs let me sleep without dreams or nightmares. I especially didn't want the nightmares of losing my mind inside someone else's, hadn't gone delving anywhere in the last few months. Every time I'd even thought about it, paranoia kicked in and I'd had a panic attack that kept me from merging in anyone or thing's mind.

Book 2: available at [Smashwords.com](http://Smashwords.com).